

TEACHER AS AN AGENT OF LITERACY CULTURE: A SOCIOLOGICAL STUDY ON *FREEDOM WRITERS* MOVIE

Dr. Abdillah Nugroho

Universitas Muhammadiyah Surakarta
abdillah_nugroho@ums.ac.id

Abstract

This paper aims at analysing a teacher figure as an agent of literacy culture in *Freedom Writers* movie. Erin Gruwell as the major character can be an ideal teacher to motivate her students to grow a culture of literacy. As teacher, Gruwell had been aware of her students' needs to read a selected book and write a journal for a better quality of life. The study belongs to qualitative study. There are two kinds of data; the primary data taken from the movie scripts and the secondary data supporting to the analysis. Technique of the data collection is carried out as follows; watching the movie, selecting the scripts and events that correlate to the problem, and limiting the data. Technique of the data analysis is done through library research and to use a descriptive method and to apply theoretical framework of Sociology of Literature by Laurensen and Swingewood. The result shows role of teacher to grow culture of literacy is very important. Teacher should have passion to motivate students to read and write in order to get many benefits from it. Finally the culture of literacy can be grown or not, it depends on the quality of teacher' awareness to the importance of literacy culture for them.

Keywords: Teacher, Students' Need, Literacy Culture, Selected Book, Writing Journal

INTRODUCTION

Literacy culture is very important in human life. Reading activity really provides people a wide range of knowledge. With knowledge they can make up their life vision. The life vision of the people enables them to change their worldview into a better one. Meanwhile writing activity helps people record their knowledges. Recording knowledge in a form of book or in a form of modern device will be useful for human being's life development. The book is a brilliant product of human being's culture. The more they read and write, the better will be. Of course, the reading and writing materials must be selective. Thus the quality of reading and writing materials will determine the goodness or badness of the quality of human life.

Not all can people improve the literacy culture in a society. Although most people have a potency to create such culture but it needs a strong motivation, passion and self-awareness of the people to create an atmosphere of literacy culture. These aspects are not possessed by all people. In relating to an effort to create the literacy culture, teacher profession might be closer to the creation of that culture. As a teacher, she or he should be able to encourage their students to read and write. In reality not all are teachers able to provide a literacy culture for their students and even some of them neglect their students' literacy needs.

The paper scrutinizes a teacher figure as an agent of literacy culture reflected in *Freedom Writers* movie. Compared to her colleagues in Woodrow Wilson High School in Long Beach California USA, Erin Gruwell gives more attention to her students' literacy needs. It is not easy for her to realize her ideas in the frame work of establishing literacy culture in the school. She gets resistance from both her colleagues and students. As a teacher, her colleagues should support Gruwell's ideas to improve literacy culture at the school and so should her students. Looking at the fact, the focus of the paper is on teacher as an agent of literacy culture. Then the focus is broken down into the following research question; 1. What does Gruwell do to make their

students in the habit of literacy culture? 2. Why does Gruwell do a hard effort to cultivate the literacy culture to her students?

Still relating to *The Freedom Writers* movie, there are some researchers having studied it. Firstly Maftukhah (2012) had conducted a research focusing on a descriptive study on teaching and learning process. The result is that the role of teacher in *Freedom Writers* movie covers the teacher as a motivator, a problem solver, an educator, an instructional manager, and an inspirator. Secondly Sari (2015) researched the movie on the character of Eva who searched her social identity formation. The result shows that Eva's social identity formation process is influenced by family, environment, and self-experience. Thirdly Syahri (2011) studied the movie focusing on Semiotic analysis on *Freedom Writers* movie. She concludes that delivering the message of the movie is appropriately presented to the audiences so that the moral message can be caught by the audiences clearly. Looking at the previous researches, what the present researcher does is different in issue, topic or problem to study. The present researcher takes an issue of teacher as agent of literacy culture.

To examine the issue, the researcher applies the perspective of Sociology of Literature by Laurensen and Swingewood. According to them (1972: 13) literature provides a mirror to the age. It means that literature is a direct reflection of various facets of social structure, family relationships, class conflict, and possibly divorce trends and population composition. In addition to this, Sociology of Literature examines especially the social situation of the writer (Laurensen and Swingewood, 1972: 17). In this case, they say that patronage and the costs of production replace the literary text as the centre of discussion. The impact of the condition is that writers were forced more and more to depend on the system of royalties for their living: literature, as already observed, turned into a trade. The third perspective is that one demanding a high level of skills, attempts to trace the ways in which a work of literature is actually received by a particular society at specific historical moment (Laurensen and Swingewood, 1972: 21).

RESEARCH METHOD

The research belongs to qualitative study. There are two types of the research object namely the material object, *Freedom Writers* movie itself and the formal object i.e. teacher as agent of the literacy culture. The data consist of two types covering primary data i.e. the texts of the movie and secondary data consisting of data supporting the analysis such as research journals, criticism of the movie and the like. Technique of the data collection is carried out in the following steps; firstly watching the movie, taking note the movie texts concerning with the focus analyzed, and categorizing the texts of the movie for the analysis. Technique of the data analysis is done descriptively with the theoretical framework of Sociology of Literature.

FINDING AND DISCUSSION

Finding

There are many phenomena concerning with literacy culture in the movie. The phenomena are expressed in the dialogue as follows.

Gruwell's Intention to be a Teacher

Although Gruwell was graduated from Law Faculty, she tends to be more interested in teaching profession. She expresses her desire to her father that she prefers to be a teacher rather than a lawyer like her father. The following dialogue shows her intention to be a teacher.

"Well, actually, I chose Wilson because of the integration program."

She is interested in Wilson High School because the school implements the government policy dealing with the integration program. This program at school is more intriguing to do than a lawyer profession. According to her, the way out of American racial problem is through education. She is very optimistic that by education, the teacher can resolve the problem. The following transcript shows her thought.

"I think the real fighting should happen here in the classroom."

Although she does not know yet exactly her students, but she is very optimistic that if she teaches her students, they will be enthusiastic to study. Here is her optimistic statement: *"Well, if I do my job, they might be lining up at the door."*

Gruwell-Students Debate of Holocaust

A hot debate and mutual sharing ideas with her students in the classroom is also carried out by Gruwell to brain storm them with a certain case. While showing a paper with drawing of man with big lips, she explains Holocaust in detail to her students. The following texts show the phenomena.

"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." "Raise your hand if you know what the Holocaust is. Raise your hand"

Through the activity, the teacher can encourage them to study and improve her students' knowledge and vision of Holocaust.

Going to Museum of Holocaust

To increase her students' knowledge of Holocaust, Gruwell asked them to go to the museum of Holocaust. The intention of Gruwell to get her students to the Holocaust museum is based on the fact of what Gruwell says in the following texts.

"I'm thinking trips. Most of them have never been outside of Long Beach. They haven't been given the opportunity. To expand their thinking about what's out there for them. And they're hungry for it. I know it. And it's purely a reward system."

In order that her students understand the event of Holocaust, Gruwell also invites person that have a real experience of Holocaust in their lives. They can share their experiences to the students and the students can get a information from the first hand.

Gruwell-Ms. Campbell Conflict in the School Library

After realizing her students' bad reading scores, she tries to borrow books from the school library. When she meets Ms. Campbell in the library, Gruwell is very socked with her response. Ms. Campbell does not permit her students to borrow the library books because some reasons such as incapability to read, tearing some parts of the book and making drawing on the books, budget restriction and what not.

- Gruwell: "What about this? We were discussing the Holocaust."
- Campbell: "No, they won't be able to read that."
- Gruwell: "We can try. The books are just sitting here. Look at their reading scores."
- Campbell: "And if I give your kids these books, I'll never see them again. If I do, they'll be damaged."
- Gruwell: "What about these? Romeo and Juliet. That's a great gang story."
- Campbell: "No, not the books. This is what we give them."
- Gruwell: "It is Romeo and Juliet, but it's a condensed version."
- Campbell: "But even these, look how they treat them. See how torn up they are? They draw on them."
- Gruwell: "Ms. Campbell? They know they get these because no one thinks they're smart enough for real books."
- Campbell: "Well, I don't have the budget to buy new books every semester when these kids don't return them."
- Gruwell: "So, what do I do? Buy their books myself?"
- Campbell: "Well, that's up to you, but you'd be wasting your money."
- Gruwell: "Is there someone else I can speak to about this?"
- Campbell: "Excuse me?"
- Gruwell: "I'm sorry, but I don't understand. Does the Long Beach Board of Ed agree that these books should just sit here and not be used at all?"

The above dialogue shows how Gruwell struggles to fulfill her students' need for reading materials to improve their knowledge. She also buys some suitable books for them to read in the sake of improving and widening their worldviews.

Writing Journal

After paying attention to her students' potency, Gruwell asked them to explore more their talent in writing. In relation to this, she requested them to express their feelings, ideas, and desires in their journal. The following texts show what Gruwell wants her students to write.

"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. And they won't be graded. How can I give an A or a B for writing the truth, right? And I will not read them unless you give me permission. I will need to see that you've made an entry, but I'll just do this, skim to see that you wrote that day. Now, if you want me to read it, I have... Excuse me. A cabinet over here. It has a lock on it. I will keep it open during class, and you can leave your diary there if you want me to read it. I will lock this cabinet at the end of every class. Okay?"

Discussion

The production of *Freedom Writers* movie was inspired by the true story of a teacher figure, Erin Gruwell acted by Hilary Swank, who succeeded to teach, educate and guide her students from the darkness into brightness. She became the teacher at Woodrow Wilson High School in Long Beach California because she was attracted with the integration program at the school. The USA government raised the program all over the country because the country faced a complex social problem, such as gang violence and racial tension, ethnic and cultural problems. Here and there the violation among the people took place. In 1992 Los Angeles and California, the unrest spread

out. In Long Beach over 120 murders took place in months and Rodney King riots also happened massively. Her teaching technique is very useful for integrating young American students coming from many different races, ethnicities and cultures. She got success to make her 150 students in room 203 in harmony. Her teaching technique finally becomes a model at the American school to integrate students from various social backgrounds.

Viewed from literacy perspective, *Freedom Writers* movie gives a lot of phenomena. Erin Gruwell, as the major character, has many creativities to guide her students into the literacy culture. Gruwell is very confident that her students have talent and potency of literacy. They cannot expand their literacy competence because their surrounding does not support them to improve. Her students in room 203 are well known as unteachable and at-risk students. The students in her room come from different ethnicities and races. They always make riots, conflicts and also problem in the classroom as well as outside. For Gruwell, it is the real fighting. She says: *"I think the real fighting should happen here in the classroom."*

Classroom becomes an arena for the teacher to repair misbehavior of the students. The students in room 203 always make troubles in the class. They do not respect and love each other. One race tries to dominate a lower race and they intimidate other ethnicity. Almost every day they quarrel each other because of simple problem. Even they do not respect Gruwell as their teacher. They hate her because her white skin. They should indeed respect each other. They should indeed love and maintain a mutual relationship among them and also they should indeed respect their teacher, Gruwell, although she is a white woman. It is a big job for a teacher to change the students' mind set.

Changing the students' mind set is a long process for the teacher. Gruwell cannot instantly change her students' misbehavior. Gruwell belongs to a patient figure to teach and guide them and has a strong passion to be a teacher. She indeed pays attention her students' needs. In the process of changing their misbehavior, she firstly observes what they want. Actually they want love and belonging needs. They have family but they are not happy with them. Some of them come from a broken family, lower economic family, and also complex family. Some of them are homeless and live on the street. Looking at the fact of her students' condition, Gruwell supplies some good books for them to open up their minds. The books consist of *Durango Street* by Frank Bonham, *The Diary of a Young Girl* by Anne Frank, *A Child's Life in Sarajevo* by Zlata's Diary and many others.

By reading *Durango Street*, Gruwell wants her students to contemplate of becoming a gang member. She also warns them when reading this book because of some brutal narration in it. She says as follows.

"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."

When reading *The Diary of Anne Frank*, the students are hoped to understand accurately what happened with Holocaust. In the middle of discussing the book, one of her students, Marcus, gives Gruwell an idea to write a letter to Miep Gies. By doing so, her students are trained to be in the habit of expressing their feeling through writing. The following is what Gruwell requests to her students to write a letter to Miep Gies.

"Okay, listen up. Marcus has given me an idea. Instead of doing a book report on The Diary of Anne Frank, For our assignment I want you to write a letter to Miep Gies, The woman who helped shelter the Franks. She's still alive and she lives in Europe. In the letter, I want you to tell her how you feel about the book. Tell her about your own experiences. Tell her anything you like."

Gruwell, as their teacher, surely understand her students' talents and potencies. For accommodating their capabilities, everyday her students are required to write anything. It can be the troubles of their past, present and future. She sees that her students have a great competency in writing and it needs improving. As a result, it surprises Gruwell. When she reads her students' journal after some times, she more understands her students' condition, situation and problem. To document her students' journal, Gruwell asks them to rewrite their journal into computer program. The compilation of their journal is very monumental and the content is universal for everyone today. They entitled it *The Freedom Writers Diary*.

CONCLUSION

From the analysis above, it can be concluded that firstly what Gruwell does to make her students accustomed to literacy culture consists of supplying the students with varied books. The content of books is closer to their problems such as *Durango Street* by Frank Bonham, *The Diary of a Young Girl* by Anne Frank, *A Child's Life in Sarajevo* by Zlata's Diary and many others. By reading a lot books, it enables them to get a wide range of knowledge useful for changing themselves and the world around them. Secondly Gruwell does a hard effort to cultivate the literacy culture to her students because she surely believes that through reading and writing tradition people can increase and improve their quality of life at today and in the future for a better human civilization.

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