

# Peace Education in Freedom Writers Movie

## *A Sociological Perspective*

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Abstract: The paper focuses on analysing peace education reflected in *Freedom Writers* movie. The movie depicts Erin Gruwell as major character taking role as teacher has done some meaningful efforts to teach, educate and guide her students on the right tract of life. Not only do her students make noisy in the classroom but they also often quarrel and fight in the school yard. In researching the problem, the researcher made use of qualitative research by applying descriptive method in the analysis. There are two types of the data such as primary data consisting of texts of the movie relating to peace education and secondary data that support the analysis. Technique of the data analysis is carried out by applying the theory of Sociology of Literature by Laurenson and Swingewood. The result shows that Gruwell creates many efforts in her teaching strategy such as buying her students some good books to read, switching her students' sitting position, sharing discussion of Holocaust, picnic to Holocaust Museum, Line Games, writing journals and many other valuable activities. In the end of the day they can live hand-in-hand with their friends from different religion, race, and ethnicity.

## 1 INTRODUCTION

What had happened on Saturday, August 12, 2017 in Charlottesville, Virginia USA, absolutely makes us very shocked. Some people in US call it as a domestic terrorism. The terror was done by the ultranationalists who are essentially racists. Aljazeera (2017) reported that US's President Donald Trump called for people in the country: "We ALL must be united & condemn all that hate stands for. There is no place for this kind of violence in America. Lets come together as one!" In USA as the nation of immigrants, it should not happen anymore such kind of incident. Not only should Black and White be melted but also the other races in US should be as their national slogan says the melting pot. It is off-course in opposition with their national constitution saying all men are created equal.

The phenomena that took place in USA also happened in Indonesia. In reality there are still many social friction happening in Indonesia. *Human Rights Watch* (2001) reported that the social conflict between the people of Dayak and Madura in part of Kalimantan, the religious conflict between the followers of Sunni and Si'ah in Madura (Detiknews, 2013). Detiknews (2017) reported that suicide bomber also occurred in the country. In addition to

this, social and political conflict also happened in the local leader election in DKI Jakarta (KOMPAS.com, 2017). So what's wrong with the nation? Why did it happen? There are so many possible answers to the questions. One of them is an inadequate education in part of US as well as in Indonesia.

The above phenomena are not so far different from those occurred in the movie entitled *The Freedom Writers*. The major character, Erin Gruwell, is a teacher in Wilson High School in Long Beach. In the classroom, she teaches her students coming from different religion, ethnicity, race and culture. They hate each other and often quarrel and hit each other not only in the classroom but also in the school yard. A small case can make them angry and make the class rowdy. Her students also hate Gruwell because she is a white woman. They hate white people. Looking at the phenomena, Gruwell does not give up. As teacher, she tries to find a way-out of the problem. Finally with her creativity, she finally is able to guide, teach, and educate them on the right tract of life. They become one family in the classroom.

The paper is aimed at analyzing a phenomenon of peace education carried out by a teacher with a great vision of multiculturalism to guide, teach, and educate her students through a right tract of life. In relation to the aim, a proper theoretical framework to

apply is Sociology of Literature by Laurenson and Swingewood. According to them, there are some basic principles of the theory covering firstly literary work as the social document, secondly literary work as the reflection of social situation of the writer and thirdly literary work as the manifestation of historical moment. The first principle means literature as the mirror of age (Laurenson & Swingewood, 1972; 13). It indicates that literary work can explain the civilization of certain place in a certain time to the audience and it is like a picture that describes a historical moment of a society and also delineates what happens in the society in a certain period of time. The second principle means that many of their works were influenced by social phenomenon around them. In their opinion, there is relationship between the set of crucial social factors and the complex situation of the writer and the character of his work: its genre, scope, content and at times its subtleties and ambiguities. The third means that literary work attempts to trace the ways in which a work of literature is actually received by a particular society at specific historical moment.

Furthermore this paper examines a peace education that has a close relation with the concept of multiculturalism so that it needs to clarify a proper understanding of it. Herbert et. al (2006) explain that the core aims of multiculturalism is to respect and value ethnic difference and protect groups from discrimination. In addition to this, the understanding to multicultural education is also needed. Banks (in Zirkel, 2008) articulated five core dimensions that characterize multicultural education: (1) *content integration*—infusing the curriculum with material from diverse groups, (e.g., new authors, new historical material); (2) *knowledge construction*—an awareness of and focus on the way that cultural frames shape the identification and interpretation of educational content (e.g., understanding that the “westward migration” was only “west” for one social group); (3) *prejudice reduction*—the extent to which the teachers and administrators in a school actively work to reduce prejudice and stereotyping by students in the school, such as through the inclusion of an explicitly antiracist curriculum; (4) *equity pedagogy*—pedagogies designed specifically to increase the academic achievement of lower performing students and to create greater equity between students (see also C. A. M. Banks & J. A. Banks, 1995); and (5) *empowering school culture*—altering school structures and processes to be more empowering for all students, with particular attention to eliminating institutionalized racism in school practices.

The focus of this paper is on peace education done by a teacher reflected in *Freedom Writers* movie. Based on the focus, it is broken down into some questions as follows; 1. What problems are faced by Gruwell, as teacher, in the classroom? 2. What factors cause those problems? 3. How does Gruwell tackle the problems?

Looking at the above questions, objective of the study is to examine the problem faced by her, to analyze some causes of the problem and to examine some solution done by Gruwell. The significance of the study is theoretically to accumulate the research on *Freedom Writers* movie. By doing so, we get many perspectives on literary study. Practically the study can give many advantages for the reader in understanding multiculturalism as a means of eliminating the social and racial gap and conflict among the students.

## 2 METHOD

Research method of the study can be explained as follows. Type of the study is qualitative one with descriptive approach. Object of the study is peace education reflected in the movie. Type of the data consists of primary and secondary data. The primary data derive from the texts of the movie focusing on peace education. The secondary data covers some data that support the analysis. It can be criticism of *Freedom Writer* movie, Journals of the movie and what not. Technique of the data collection is done through library research with the following steps; to watch the movie, to sort the texts of the movie that relate with peace education done by Gruwell. Technique of the data analysis is carried out by applying the theory of Sociology of Literature by Laurenson and Swingewood.

## 3 RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

### 3.1 Results

Based on the analysis of the movie, some results can be presented as follows.

### 3.1.1 A Gruwell becomes a teacher at Wilson High School

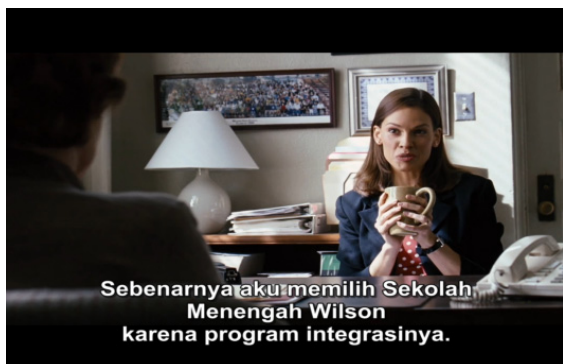


Figure 1: Gruwell is interested in teaching at Wilson High School because of integration program.

The following is her expression of her intention.

Gruwell (Gru): *"Well, actually, I chose Wilson because of the integration program. I think what's happening here is really exciting, don't you? My father was involved in the civil rights movement. And I remember when I was watching the LA riots on TV, I was thinking of going to law school at the time. And I thought, "God, by the time "you're defending a kid in a courtroom, the battles already lost." I think the real fighting should happen here in the classroom."*

From her statement of *I think the real fighting should happen here in the classroom*. Can be interpreted that education for the US students can end the social and racial conflict occurring in the society. It means that Gruwell believes strongly that education is very important to strengthen the unity of the nation.

### 3.1.2 Eva describes her school like a city of jail



Figure 2: Eva describes her school like a city as a jail.

The below is her narrative expression.

Eva: *"If it was up to me, I wouldn't even be in school. My probation officer threatened me, telling me it was either school or boot camp. Dumbass. He thinks that the problems going on in Long Beach aren't going to touch me at Wilson. My PO doesn't understand that schools are like the city, and the city is just like a prison, all of them divided into separate sections, depending on tribes. There's Little Cambodia. The Ghetto. Wonder Bread Land. And us, south of the Border or Little Tijuana. That's just the way it is, and everyone knows it. But soon enough, you have little wannabes trying to hit you up at school, demanding respect they haven't earned. It looks like this, one tribe drifting quietly to another's territory without respect, as if to claim what isn't theirs. An outsider looking in would never see it, but we could feel it. Something was coming."*

These texts show that the school environment is not healthy for the students to grow. They cannot interact well among them. They get together on with their group. As described by Eva, her school looks like a jail. They cannot stay and study in the school peacefully.

### 3.1.3 Gruwell switches her students' sitting position

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.

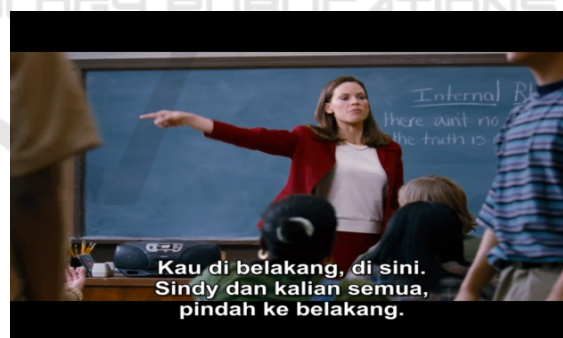


Figure 3: Gruwell is giving instruction to her students to switch their sitting position.

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."

### 3.1.4 Her discussion with her students is inspired by one of her students drawing a black man with a big lips and big nose. With this picture Gruwell discusses Holocaust with her students

Gruwell explains to them the event of Holocaust by Nazi. Through a hot debate, Gruwell can make her students have a wide vision of humanity.

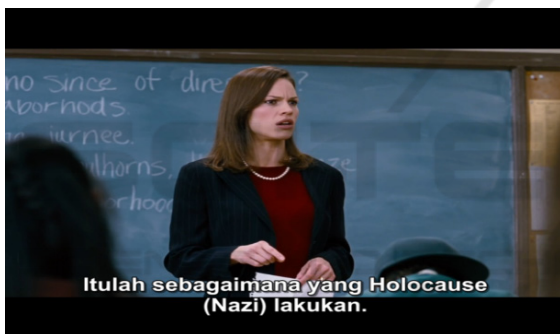


Figure 4: Gruwell is debating about Holocaust with her students.

The followings are Gruwell's expression when explaining Holocaust to them.

"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

neighbourhoods?" "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."

### 3.1.5 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.



Figure 5: 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."

Her students' response is as follows.

"James."

"Beatriz."

"Thank you all very much." said Gruwell.

### 3.1.6 Gruwell asks her students to write their feeling and experience in the journal

The next 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.

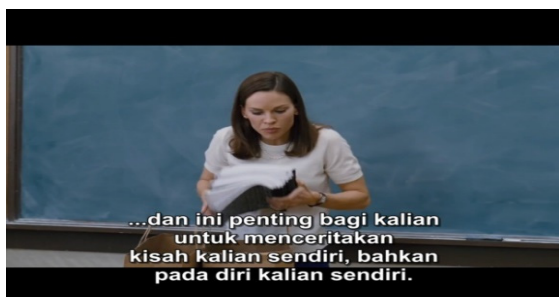


Figure 6: Gruwell is telling her students to write anything in the journal.

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."

## 3.2 Discussion

A movie belongs to one of literary works. The movie creation is fictional although it is inspired by a true story like *Freedom Writers* movie. The movie was created based on the real story of Erin Gruwell as the teacher at Wilson High School in Long Beach Los Angeles USA in 1994. This movie was directed by Richard LaGravenese and starred by Hilary Swank as Erin Gruwell. The film was produced in 2007.

Gruwell succeeded to teach, educate and guide her students into the right tract of life. Her students in the classroom comes from different social, cultural, and religious background. In the classroom they interact well with the same ethnicity and race but they hate other group and also hate Gruwell as their teacher because she is white. They hate white people very much.

Gruwell sees her students' bad manner. They don't respect other friends from different race or ethnicity and even they hate each other. A small case can make them fight each other. Gruwell is also very concerned with their manner to her. They underestimate her as their teacher. In the school yard, they just interact with the same race or ethnicity. They make a demarcation border with other group. They get together with their own group. There's Little Cambodia, the Ghetto, Wonder Bread Land, and South of the Border or Little Tijuana. This classroom condition inspires Gruwell to find out a solution of her students' problems.

Gruwell creates some activities for them in order they can integrate and respect each other. She change her students' sitting position. She does this in the sake of eliminating the border of race and ethnicity among them. By such sitting position, they can interact with their friends from other groups. It means that Gruwell as teacher has tried to educate them how to know each other. What Gruwell has done is in line with the

concept of empowering school culture (Zirkel, 2008). The pattern of students' sitting position can break the wall of segregation of race, ethnicity and religion interaction among them. It can create a new web relation among the students. In such a sitting position, her students can learn how to address, interact, and behave respectfully. In relation to the matter of learning, Hamner (in Miner, 2005) explained that learning, defined as a relatively permanent change in behavior potentiality that results from reinforced practice or experience. So what Gruwell has done to force her student is in the sake of changing her students' behavior in order to be able to interact friendly with other friends from different races and ethnicities.

The other activity of Gruwell is motivated by one of her students drawing a black man with a big lips and big nose. From this drawing, she asks them to discuss and share their responses of the drawing and also about Holocaust. Through this activity, Gruwell opens up her students' mind to the fact that as human being living in the world, they should respect and tolerate one to the other. By discussing Holocaust in the classroom and visiting Holocaust Museum, having dinner with some survivors and also Miep Gies' visit to the school can reduce prejudice, intolerance, hatred and violence (Zirkel, 2008).

In equity pedagogy (Zirkel, 2008), Erin has them play a game called *Line Game*. By this game, Erin has a deep purpose of more understanding their friends. They can know well what have happened with their friends. They can feel what their friends are feeling now. Thus this game can improve their sympathy to their friends. Through this game, they also discover that they share many feelings in common.

Her next activity is that her students are required to write everything in a journal. The form of writing can be poem, essay, song lyric and what not. By the activity, Gruwell can understand well her students feeling and her students their journal or diaries provide a healthier way of giving an outlet for their frustration and anger than gangbanging and violence. Erin then asks them to retype their journal into computer program. Finally Gruwell published her students' journal into a book entitled *The Freedom Writers Diary*.

The journal is very beneficial for everyone who read. The benefit of publishing their journal is not only for them but also for other people who want to know how the teacher and her students are able to change their lives from a bad condition into a better one. Finally the students in room 203 become a family. They respect, tolerate and love each other. They live peacefully.

From the above explanation, the role of teacher is very crucial to deliver a concept of multiculturalism for peace education to the students. The teacher should have a wide range of knowledge concerning multiculturalism and peace education. The teacher as the agent of change should teach, educate, and guide the students into the right tract of life. The students should be able to respect, tolerate and love people from different ethnicity, religion or race. The success or failure of peace education to the students depends on the multiculturalism understanding quality of the teacher and the implementation of the multiculturalism values or the students.

## 4 CONCLUSIONS

Based on the above analysis, it can be concluded as follows. Firstly problem faced by Gruwell in the classroom is her students' bad manner. They do not respect their teacher. They hate their teacher because she is a white woman. They also hate their friends from other race or ethnicity. Secondly the students' bad manner appears in their day-to-day lives because of white supremacy at that time. Due to the superiority, the white people do everything to the other race and ethnicity as they like. The white people as the dominant group in the USA at that time cannot treat wisely the minority. Even among the minority themselves, they cannot interact well. They hate each other. Gruwell's solution of the social and racial problem in USA is a peace education for USA's young generation. Gruwell creates many efforts in her teaching strategy such as buying her students some good books to read, switching her students' sitting position, sharing discussion of Holocaust, picnic to Holocaust Museum, Line Games, writing journals and many other valuable activities. All Gruwell has done is in the sake of educating them a peace education. In the end of the day they can live hand-in-hand with their friends from different religion, race, and ethnicity.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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