

Secret Teacher:

How prison educators play a role to develop individual agency among inmate students

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Abstract—The idea of prison education program can imbue the learning with the skills, values and attitudes necessary for young inmates back onto society. This research study examines the role of educators in prison-based school. Educators of inmate students have unique dedication to their profession and role to develop individual agency among inmate students. We draw on interviews and observation data from a study of an Indonesia prison school to understand the experiences and role taken as a prison educator. Perspective transformation is utilized as a theoretical framework to analyze the data by emphasizing if the prison educators understand the meaning of their teaching experiences and the role, they play in the prison school. The research findings reveal that each prison educator play a different role such as co-learner and mentor, counsellor, second parent, and provocateur and police officer. The prison educators in this study also held many hope and aspiration about being a transformative educator for many young inmates.

Keywords—prison school; prison educator; educator role; perspective transformation

I. INTRODUCTION

At present, the Indonesia child prison shows a commitment in the effort to change the condition of the convicted person through the process of education. The education process held in the prison is expected that child prisoners will have provision after they are leaving the correctional institution. However, the need for educational program in children correctional facilities far exceed the current availability. This is the worldwide phenomena that in most prison schools around the world, both inmate students and prison educators face substantial challenges to educational achievement [1]. Many inmate students have lack motivation in learning and there are wide discrepancies in literacy and numeracy among the prison inmates [2]. In other side, prison educators also struggle with the condition of the prison classroom that often dynamic in nature in which many inmate students entering and leaving the programs as a result of reassessments, institutional transfers, parole and court commitment [3]. Furthermore, working with young offenders also have to deal with the disparity between inmate students in the classroom. It is commonly found that their attitude to learning, such as the use of inappropriate language is a constant battle for prison educator.

Despite the limited learning experiences of inmate students in prison school, many educators in this special education

context have expectations that their students have commitment to the understanding and mastering the content delivered in the classroom [4]. Specifically, the prison educators wanted their inmate students have eagerness to learn and willingness to engage in discussion, both in the classroom context and the prison school area. However, disruptive behavior often occurs in the classroom by one or more inmate students resulted in the teacher's difficult decision to teach effectively. To tackle this difficulty, it seems that prison educators must play different roles and strategies in facilitating learning in the prison classroom. In this regard, Freire offered teaching strategy to solve this kind of situation, in which dialogue between students and teachers is the essence of education as the "practice of freedom" [5]. Based on Freire's pedagogy, the prison educator may begin his/her lesson by providing the conversation and story so that the process of entering dialogue can be perceived and it will build trust among students and educators.

This paper examines the teaching experiences of prison educators to uncover their role play in teaching inmate students. Mezirow's perspective transformation is utilized as a theoretical framework by emphasizing if the prison educators understand the meaning of their teaching experiences and the role, they play in the prison school [6]. Perspective transformation is a process in which prison educators critically reflect on assimilated values and perspective of their own and others. Further, based on this critical reflection, the prison educator strategically acts based on their new-found understanding by critically reflected on their own teaching experiences. Applying perspective transformation to uncover prison educator's role in developing individual agency among inmate students is important to create a better approach to teaching and learning in prison school context.

II. METHODS

This study used an inductive approach, refers to approaches that primarily use detailed readings of raw data to derive concepts and themes through interpretations by researchers. As such, the following research question was asked: what is the route in to working as a prison educator? what is the first impression on teaching in prison school? and what is the role of educator to increase an individual agency among inmate students?

The study was conducted in four school prisons in Banten and West Java Province, this include *Sekolah Istimewa LPKA Klas I Tangerang*, *Sekolah Terbuka LPKA Klas II Bandung*, *PKBM Dr Saharjo* at LAPAS Serang and *PKBM Bina Pengayoman* at *Rumah Tahanan Serang*. The former two prison schools are in child prison. This is compulsory for child prison to provide education for every inmate child. The latter two are in adult correctional institution, means that the inmate children live in the same place or area with adult prisoners even though they have separate cell/room. A sample of twenty-five prison educator participants was recruited using snowball sampling [7]. The only criterion for the study was that participants must have worked as an educator in correctional facility. Each prison educator participants involved in in-depth interviews for one to two-hours conversation and it was audio recorded.

The method of qualitative analysis used within this research is thematic analysis. Thematic analysis is a method used to “identify, analyze and report themes with data” [8]. Key themes across questions were developed and responses to individual in-depth interviews were categorized and presented according to relevant themes. This procedure allows for rich interpretation of the data in which every theme was developed from the data, categories, insights and understandings.

III. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

A complex picture emerged from the analysis of teaching experiences of prison educators. Teaching in prison school was systematically related to prison norms and practice that mostly concern with security issue. Therefore, most educational activities in prison schools are very limited, in which the variety of learning activities are not the same with traditional school. The teaching and learning practices in prison school often measures to ensure physical safety for educators, prison staffs and inmate students itself. Based on the research questions and thematic analysis, we draw very important features of the prison educators’ narrative.

A. Three Categories of Prison Educators

Most educators would have an educational background and professional experiences to support their role and responsibilities. However, it is not the case for some prison educators. Based on the narrative of prison educators in this study, the Indonesian prison educators into three categories; (1) educators are prison officers with limited background on teaching, but have knowledge on law and right of prisoners, (2) educators are traditional school teachers with professional teaching experiences, but have very limited experiences on how to deal with prisoners, (3) educators are adult prisoners who selected by prison officers. We found the first category of prison educator at *Sekolah Istimewa* at LPKA Klas I Tangerang. The majority of educators in this prison school do not have an educational background match with their role as educator. In fact, many of them graduated from bachelor of law, criminology and social worker studies. Their initial job and duties in the prison is as a prison officer who have routine task to check the young prisoners.

The other child prison such as *Sekolah Terbuka* at LPKA Klas II Bandung prefer to recruit a traditional school nearby to teach at prison classrooms. These teachers come regularly to prison based on the schedule. However most these traditional teachers commented that this additional teaching role at prison school is not their preferences. Therefore, some of these teachers argued that this additional responsibility is accidental career. Traditional educators who end up teaching those behind bars just happen upon the career. Although they insisted to go to the prison because the environment is different with their original school, these educators often motivate themselves to serve inmate students.

Qualified educators in prison education programs are rare to nonexistent. Two prison schools in our study that is prison school at LAPAS Serang and RUTAN Serang are taught by adult prisoners. The head of prison carefully selected adult prisoners to teach at prison school either with or without professional background on teaching. For example, one of our informant educators is a lower secondary school teacher and been teaching for more than ten year. But, because he has committed criminal act that is sexual abuse of his students, he ended up in the jail for several years. From four prison schools in this study, it seems that there is no standard or regulation available yet from Indonesian government on how to set up prison school in every correctional institution. The decision of educator recruitment become the authority of each prison school. This gave us a general picture that the situation in each prison school is different, depend on the prison location, the availability of learning resource including educator and each prison regulation and commitment to education.

B. The First Impression

Teaching in prison school for many educators in this study is unexpected. Many educators commented that they are unprepared to teach in a prison environment. For educators in *Sekolah Terbuka LPKA* Bandung, they were not prepared to work in an environment they perceived as strange. Prison security also made the teachers scared. These teachers must endure extensive security procedures and often there is no flexibility for teachers to go to other place in the prison areas. This situation creates anxious feeling for traditional teachers, but they understand the situation. Prison culture and academia are diametrically opposed. Also, prison is closed institution in which control is primary concern. Thus, the teachers from outside prison must adapt with disciplinary or such kind of restrictions.

The opposite situation happens at LPKA Klas I Tangerang, RUTAN Serang and LAPAS Serang. Prison administrators and adult prisoners who also act as teachers are familiar with prison condition. But, most teachers in these schools do not have experiences in teaching. Furthermore, students’ diversity is another challenge. Sometimes, inmate students do not fully trust with adult prisoners who also teachers. Some students know that their teachers also commit with criminal act, who will doubt his commitment to teach about moral and goodness. This situation made some educator confuse on how to behave while teaching and build relationship and trust with their children. From perspective transformation, these prison educators are experiencing a disorienting dilemma [19].

Despite the limited skills and experiences, these educators are very committing with the role as teachers. One of the problems remain in the couple first week of teaching are difficulties to control the feeling or emotion. Upset and anger are often felt especially when the inmate students do not listen to them. To tackle this situation, some educators often threatening their students with the punishment. After some weeks, these educators are getting used to with the learning and teaching environment and challenge.

C. A Moment of Adaptability

The educators' stories about their experiences with inmate students typically had two aspects; first encounters when they witness confusion, anger, resistance, and doubt followed by the growth that happened latter. Several prison educators reported that their inmate students are difficult to engage in learning as it required in the curriculum. Because of the difficulties in teaching a whole class lesson, students mostly worked independently on textbook assignment or other resources such as printouts from the internet. But after some weeks, the prison educators started to adapt with the prison environment and regularity. Although some educators reported that sometimes it is hard to deliver an outstanding lesson when their students have other activities while learning time, such as family visit or irregular check, but they understand this life situation. It takes a lot of dedication of prison educators to overcome the obstacles presented by a prison environment [10]. Regarding this, transformative prison educators must have capacity explore their roles and relationships in this learning situation. To adapt with new roles, the teachers in prison schools show their resilient and was trying to develop good relationships with the young offenders.

Furthermore, understanding a conflict between education and prison is part of the adaptation skill showed by prison educators. These educators started to reflect the complexity and learn something about it. In carrying out their role as educators, these teachers 'wear many hat' – term to describe many roles they are playing. This include resource teacher, support teacher, counselor, mentor, role model, surrogate parent, and friend. The most important task of these educators is how to perform a bridging role, between home and prison as most of young inmate 'lose' their parent and family and need someone to replace them. Therefore, most prison educators understand the important of developing close relationships with the inmate students, getting to know them well, and becoming friend with them.

D. The Role of Prison Educators

The prison educators have chosen to follow path that is extremely demanding. Teaching in complex situation like prison school need highly skill on how to deal with prison environment and system. However, these educators have shown their motivation for teaching and believe that they can make a difference and improve the life chances of young inmates. Most of the prison educators interviewed in this study mentioned that they play different role, include: prison educator as co-learner and mentor, as counsellor, as second parent, as provocateur and police officer.

1) *The prison educator as co-learner and mentor:* Many prison educators commented that students in their classroom have low motivation and some of them has learning difficulties. Therefore, prison educators are not heavily relying on instrumental learning and curriculum, but facilitating more dialogic learning. One of the educator said "*the first 15 minutes focuses on the learning material and after that we will do enjoy other activities rather than learning*" (SY). This what we meant by prison educator as co-learner, which is teacher working side-by-side with students so teacher not always control of the flow of a lesson. Some educators encourage students to work individually on the worksheet with teacher's guidance.

Closer role to teacher as co-learner, some prison educators also a mentor for inmate students. These educators often share their knowledge based on the lived experience and delivery the content of the subject with informal style and relational in nature. Some educators from *Sekolah Istimewa LPKA* Tangerang often ask students in their free time to study individually in the office. Of course, this is not applying to all students. Only student is considered to have potential in learning will treat individually to enrich his learning outcome. The mentoring relationship aim to advance the educational and personal growth of the student. This special attention will benefit inmate students in which these students will feel comfortable and students can gradually become colleagues.

2) *The prison educator as counsellor:* One-on-one communication is important for educator as well as for student to create a personal attachment and build private connection. Thus, it will increase trust among school community. Prison educator in this study often play a role as a counsellor in which their listen to the need and problem of each inmate students. Part of the counselling roles of educators will create a safe environment, building trust between educator and inmate students and so they will obey the teacher rules. Counselling in prison school is a learning-oriented process in which the prison educator expresses care and concern toward inmate students with a problem. The teacher role, in this matter, is that of a guide who helps facilitate inmate student's personal growth and positive change through self-understanding. Inmate students problem often about their family absence in their life, not about learning or education. However, for prison educator, this is also important matter for these inmate students to speak and seek help, not about their learning, but also about their life.

3) *The prison educator as second parent:* Prison educator also are like second parents of inmate students. For few prison educators in this study, working at correctional education is their life, not about a job that pays the bills. One teacher share a story of what his student say to her: "*you are mostly like my parent, not a teacher. You are providing guidance to students in many areas, including friendship*" (AD). Other educator revealed: "*I treat the inmate students just like my family, I always try to listen to them and make conversation as they wish. So, it build a trust between teacher and the student*" (SN).

There are circumstances that some inmate students are voluntary sharing their problem to the teacher as they talk to their parent. For students who place the prison educators as their second parent, sometimes these educators know more of their students' secrets than their parents. Because of this, the teachers sometimes harsh with these students just like their parents. However, this is only because the teachers want their students to grow and be a good individual after release.

4) The prison educator as provocateur and police office: In contrast to previous role, some prison educators in this group act as provocateur and police officer. The prison educators in this category know that some inmate students difficult to manage. Some inmate students often show their disruptive behavior and become a challenge for teacher on how to manage a classroom more conducive for learning. Treat is one of the strategy undertaken by the teacher to reduce the bad behavior of student. One of educator said:

"in this prison, there is a special room to discipline young inmate and most of them are afraid of entering the room. The threat given by the teacher by reporting to the disciplinary officers to make them a little obedient" (HT).

This strategy is commonly practiced by prison educators to address offending behaviors. It seems that prison educator understands when they must show respect to their students and how to act as a police officer. Improper manner in the classroom, such as sleeping while teaching and learning process often occur, and to tackle this situation the teacher often gives a punishment. However, Freire [5] argued that dialogue is the essence of education as the "practice of freedom" to solve this kind of situation.

IV. CONCLUSION

This research study contributes to a greater understanding of the role of prison educator play in prison school. There are many role prison educators play to increase the agency of inmate students. Developing individual agency among young inmates become a feature of prison life based on the notion that "young prisoners are people" and must be return to their society with new and better attitude. However, the research study acknowledged that prison educators have to deal with various problem arose in prison classroom, thus the prison educators need ongoing support to learn to become teachers of

people who inhabit a world that 'remain unseen'. In international context, Garrett [10] has suggested that prison educators need ongoing support to learn transformative teaching methods. Transformative teaching method is teaching strategy that creates a change from individual's perspective that transforms the way they understand and engage with the experience of life. It means that prisons educators can help inmate students overcome situational and emotional constrains to learning through providing dialogue among educator and student.

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