

Reflections on the Value of Teaching and Learning in Rural Areas: It is from, for and by the inside

Nanda Parentsa Hopi^a, Robby Anggriawan^{b}*

^aIslamic State Sultan Syarif Kasim University, KH. Ahmad Dahlan St, Pekanbaru 28122, Indonesia

^bIllinois State University, 100 N University St, Normal, Illinois 61761, USA

ABSTRACT

Teaching and learning process, interestingly, based on the demography, can draw a huge gap in education. It can be experienced by educational components such as teachers, students, and communities. Teaching in rural areas becomes challenging too regarding its limitations, from human resources, infrastructures, and facilities. Through the Travelling and Teaching program by 1000 Guru Riau, these inequalities are expected to be bridged so that students in rural areas have better teaching and learning experiences from teachers and volunteers who come from urban areas. Undoubtedly, participating teachers and volunteers in this program can also reflect on the value of teaching and learning in rural areas. Their reflections are expected to be used for planning and transforming their lives personally and professionally to make some improvements in education. This study therefore aimed at exploring the experiences of teachers and volunteers in rural areas on (1) their perspectives in conducting teaching and learning in rural areas, (2) the challenges faced by the teacher and volunteers during the teaching and learning in rural areas, and (3) their recommendations in teaching and learning in rural areas. In addition, this study used qualitative research methods with a case study design. The participants were four volunteers and four teachers. Framed by a humanistic perspective, a semi-structured interview was employed as a data collection technique in this narrative case study. Furthermore, this study is expected to contribute to teacher professional development in rural areas.

Keywords: Reflections, teaching, and learning, rural school, rural education, volunteer.

1. Introduction

Teaching and learning process, interestingly, based on the demography, can draw a huge gap in education. It can be experienced by educational components such as teachers, students, and communities. Teaching in rural areas becomes challenging too regarding its limitations, from human resources, infrastructures, and facilities. It is related to a study conducted by Febriana et al (2018) who explain in terms of education, Indonesian rural communities lack qualified teachers and access to teaching and learning resources.

Riau is one of Indonesia's provinces with many rural schools because it is located in isolated villages. The Department of Community Empowerment and Rural Development and Population and Civil Registration (PMD-Dukcapil) of Riau Province noted that there were at least 87 underdeveloped villages in Riau Province (Village Development Index, 2022). Moreover, by 2021, at least there are 25 rural schools in Riau that are located in Kampar, Siak, Rokan Hilir, Rokan Hulu, and Indragiri Hulu.

Seeing the fact that there are many schools in rural areas in Riau with students who do not receive education as they should, the 1000 Guru Riau community has a real movement to help educate the students in rural areas, namely Traveling & Teaching. Traveling & Teaching is an activity where once a month the Community of 1000 Guru will open registration for volunteers who want to teach students in rural schools as well as travel to enjoy the beauty in rural areas of Indonesia. Volunteers from this community come from various backgrounds and have an age range of 17 to 35 years old (Esther et al, 2018).

Through the Travelling & Teaching program by 1000 Guru Riau, these inequalities are expected to be bridged so that students in rural areas have better teaching and learning experiences from teachers and volunteers who come from urban areas. Undoubtedly, participating teachers and volunteers in this program can also reflect on the value of teaching and learning in rural areas. Their reflections are expected to be used for planning and transforming their lives personally and professionally to make some improvements in education.

Derived from the preceding elaboration of issues, we are interested in exploring the volunteers' and teachers'

* Corresponding author. Tel.: +62 812 6898 368
E-mail address: 21990110713@students.uin-suska.ac.id
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experience teaching in rural schools in Riau. In addition, it is expected that by conducting this study, in the future, we can get more inside to prepare teacher candidates to teach in rural areas too, since the unique condition in rural areas will remain the challenges for teacher candidates to decide their career in teaching in rural areas so that there is the urgency to create a future program to address this issue too (Hidayah & Marhaeni, 2016).

The purposes of this study are to find out volunteers' and teachers' perspectives in conducting teaching and learning in rural areas; the challenges faced by the volunteers and teachers during the teaching and learning in rural areas; and to find out some possible suggestions for volunteers and teachers in conducting teaching and learning in rural areas. To achieve these purposes, this study has some research questions, more specifically, the constructed questions are:

- How do teachers and volunteers perceive conducting teaching and learning in rural areas?
- What are the challenges faced by the teacher and volunteers during teaching and learning in rural areas?
- What are their recommendations for teaching and learning in rural areas?

2. Method

2.1 Research design

This study was designed as a qualitative case study design to collect data on volunteers' and teachers' experience and their perceptions toward teaching and learning in rural schools in Riau. A qualitative case study is mainly selected as it provides the best procedures for describing, and interpreting a culture-sharing group, and shared patterns of behavior, beliefs, and values (Creswell, 2014). Using this research design allows the researcher to gain a thorough understanding of the participants' perspectives by talking with them and listening to their conversations.

2.2 Participants

Purposive sampling is a type of non-probability sampling that is most effective when studying a specific cultural domain with knowledgeable experts within that domain (Tongco, 2007). For this purpose, the participants in this study were four volunteers and four teachers who participated in the Traveling and Teaching program in rural schools in Riau. The demographic of participants is presented in Table 1

Table 1. Participants' Demographics

Participants	Gender	Occupation
Teacher 1	Male	Pre-school Teacher
Teacher 2	Female	Elementary Teacher
Teacher 3	Male	English Teacher, High School
Teacher 4	Female	English Teacher, High School

Volunteer 1	Male	Restaurant Manager
Volunteer 2	Female	Child therapist
Volunteer 3	Female	English Tutor
Volunteer 4	Female	Marketing

2.3 Data Collection Tool

Semi-structured interviews with open-ended questions about their perspectives on teaching and learning in rural areas, the challenges, and some possible suggestions were used to collect data for this study. The interviews were recorded using a mobile phone recorder application. The transcriptions were sent to all participants for validation and to ensure the accuracy and trustworthiness of the data (Utami & Prestridge, 2018). The interview form included the following questions:

- What is your opinion about conducting teaching and learning in rural schools in rural areas?
- How is the teaching and learning process in rural schools in rural areas?
- What are the challenges in conducting teaching and learning in rural areas?
- Do you have any suggestions or recommendations to solve the challenges in conducting teaching and learning in rural areas?

2.4 Data Analysis

This study used thematic data analysis. Thematic analysis is a method to analyze and identify the data within the themes and subthemes. The use of themes and subthemes of thematic analysis is to capture something important about the data in the relation to the research question (Braun and Clarke, 2006). The interviews with the participants are transcribed and analyzed in similar themes and subthemes which are presented in the findings and being discussed in the discussion.

3. Findings

The findings of this study are divided into three themes. First, it concerns volunteers' and teachers' perspectives toward teaching and learning in rural areas. Second, volunteers' and teachers' challenges in teaching and learning in rural areas. Last, volunteers and teachers suggested possible solutions to facing the challenges in conducting the teaching and learning processes in rural schools.

3.1 Teachers and volunteers perceive conducting teaching and learning in rural areas

Based on the result of the interview, it is found that there are four main themes being mentioned by volunteers and teachers related to the perceptions of conducting teaching and learning with traveling concepts in the rural areas

which are positive contribution, willingness to accept the challenge, and the class design.

3.2 Challenges in conducting teaching and learning in rural areas

Based on the volunteers' experiences, it is stated that there are four main challenges facing them, which are no public transportation, difficult access to the village, lack of electricity, and lack of network.

In terms of challenges faced by teachers in teaching students in rural areas, it is found that there are four points of challenges. These are the challenges in the area of infrastructure, source of learning, language barrier, and students' competence.

3.3 Volunteers and Teachers' Suggestions

Considering the teachers' teaching experiences, some recommendations are found for teachers who intend to be rural teachers in rural areas. The first recommendation related to characteristics that must be possessed by the teacher willing to teach in rural areas, that is, creativity, innovation, and adaptability. The second recommendation related to the language used when teaching in the classroom. The third recommendation related to the source of learning, the teacher can use offline software or offline application in the classroom, use the environment as the source of teaching and learning, and use several teaching strategies.

Besides, based on the experience of the volunteer conducting the program Traveling and Teaching, most of them recommend collaborating with other communities which have transportation and using a walkie-talkie to communicate.

4. Result and Discussion

4.1 Teachers and volunteers perceive conducting teaching and learning in rural areas

Based on the result of the interview of the teachers and volunteers, it is gained that both the teachers and volunteers can understand more the conditions of teaching and learning in rural schools in rural areas and the process of teaching and learning in rural schools. Besides, by conducting teaching and learning in rural schools through the Travelling & Teaching program, they can contribute to improving education in rural areas. One teacher said:

"By joining this program, I can contribute to improving rural education in Riau. Moreover, I can give a positive spirit, motivate, and share my knowledge and experience to the students in rural area" (Teacher-2)

Further, one volunteer said:

"In the Traveling & Teaching program, there was a motivational session which became an important key to the activity. The goal is to encourage the

students to keep learning even in difficult conditions" (Volunteer-4)

On the other hand, most teachers and volunteers said that they want to take on the challenge of rural education. One volunteer said:

"I am interested to teach in rural schools because I want to have an experience as a teacher in rural areas, such as how to teach the students with the limited facility, how to use suitable strategies to teach the students" (Teacher-3)

Another teacher said

"I want to teach the students in a rural area because if I don't go, no one else will go" (Teacher-3)

In terms of teaching experience of four teachers, it is stated that it is nearly impossible to design a class that is centered on the students. One teacher said:

"Teaching students in rural areas is different from teaching students in urban areas because of the condition of students and the facilities. In this case, direct teaching is used." (Teacher-1)

The four themes from volunteers and teachers in this program are about making a positive contribution to rural areas. As one of the teachers said, teaching in rural areas is not the first choice for teachers, since the challenges and the unique demographic there. We can imagine how challenging it will be for teaching in an area where the electricity is still under-developed, unstable internet connection, weather and natural climate, and the limited access to transportation too.

Regardless of the challenges in rural education, it must be appreciated for the willingness of the volunteers and teachers who wanted to contribute to this program too. The participants believed that by joining this program, they got the chance to give their positive contribution, inspiring and being inspired, teaching and being taught at the same time too. Even from the interviews, the participants indicate that they are willing to join the future program, even though the challenges to be in the location take many hours and even days, and they need to escape from their daily routine to get involved in this program.

Finally, the class design becomes one of the themes of the interviews with participants. Since the volunteers are not all from the education field, they might have difficulties to conduct and designing the program for teaching and learning there. Another unexpected factor, such as the preparation to conduct the program is related to the preparedness for the class design. Although the team has surveyed and observed the rural areas to conduct the project, since the location is difficult to be reached often, the teams and participants might not get enough information about the students, schools, and types of support which are needed to be addressed during the program.

4.2 Challenges in conducting teaching and learning in rural areas

Based on the result of the interview, there are four points of challenges faced by the teacher in conducting teaching in rural areas, they are, infrastructure, source of learning, language barrier, and students' competence

In terms of infrastructure, it is found that the teaching and learning process in rural schools mostly takes place in the inadequate infrastructure. It is because most schools in rural areas are limited in facilities. One teacher said:

"The infrastructure in the school where I taught was inadequate. The condition of the school is poor. There is a class that is just divided by a curtain in one room, so the students get distracted from the students besides their class" (Teacher-2)

The same thing was expressed by Teacher-4, who said:

"There is a lack of facilities and learning materials to support their study. It probably makes the students become less interested in learning" (Teacher-4)

In addition, Teacher-1 said:

"The condition of the classroom was inadequate and the chairs and the tables were bad" (Teacher-1)

Besides, the teachers faced challenges in language. The majority of the students in rural schools still struggle to communicate in Indonesian, they still use the local language. It thus raised a challenge to these teachers in terms of delivering lessons. One teacher said:

"It was funny because the students didn't understand what I explained because they were confused with Bahasa. Sometimes we also didn't understand what they said, because they used the local language. Sometimes, I have used body language" (Teacher-3)

Difficulties in language barrier also felt by Teacher-1, he said:

"Students are still having problems speaking Indonesian, they just know their local language" (Teacher-1)

Besides the language barrier, lack of students' knowledge and competence also becomes a challenge. This is due to a shortage of learning materials or books, which forces students to rely largely on teachers. One teacher said:

"We must explain the materials slowly and repeat it again and again. Most of the students also quiet when we asked questions that related to the topic" (Teacher-2)

The same thing is expressed by Teacher-4, she said:

"We can't teach them as fast as in urban areas. Many students are difficult to memorize the materials and answer the questions" (Teacher-4)

From the volunteers' sides, the challenges faced by them are inadequate public transportation and poor condition of streets. One volunteer said:

"Most schools in rural areas were located in the middle of the isolated village and public transportation is still inadequate. Sometimes, the school only can be reached by boat on the river for two hours" (Volunteer-1)

Moreover, the volunteer said that the location of the school is difficult to access. One volunteer said:

"The schools in rural areas were located far from the city and difficult to reach. Sometimes we need to walk more than five kilos to reach the location or cross the river" (Volunteer-3)

In addition, the facilities in rural areas are very limited. There is a lack of electricity and a network. One volunteer said:

"The electricity is very limited in rural areas; the source of electricity is from a generator that can be used only at night" (Volunteer-2)

The same thing is expressed by Volunteer-1, who said:

"It can be said that there is no network in most of the rural areas in Riau. We need to climb the tree of the hill to get network" (Volunteer-1)

According to Beeson and Strange (2003), what teachers and volunteers have mentioned about inadequate infrastructure and the source of learning, are the indicators besides low teacher salaries, low particular spending on school-level administration, and high transportation costs. The inadequate infrastructure and the source for teaching and learning, also indicate the limited computer access, which faced challenges during the project in the rural areas.

Although some participants mentioned that the limited computer access and internet connections were challenging, somehow, these conditions also benefit them. They could interact more with people there, and students, and make full connections meaningfully. They built deeper and merged with the community and the conditions in rural areas. It made them become part of the rural system and for a while, put aside their daily routine lives which are always working on the screen and technology on their palms.

The other challenge, the language barrier is also one of the challenges that need to be importantly mentioned. It is not only for the English teachers as the participants teaching students in the rural areas who are not familiar with English, but it is also the daily conversation and out of

teaching and learning process. Indonesia is a home for languages. It has about more than 350 languages which makes it apparent that the condition of Indonesia is a diverse and multicultural country (Kementerian Sekretariat Negara RI, 2013). With that being said, the language barrier also happens internally, where the locals in the rural areas speak different languages from the volunteers and teachers as the participants in this program. In addition, it is not language barriers that occur, but also cultural understanding too where two or more cultural backgrounds interact with one another. Participants need to be prepared for multicultural education too to understand the different cultures and identities of students, people, and communities that they are going to visit (Anggriawan, 2020). Furthermore, at the same time, through the teaching and learning program with students in the rural areas, they also need to teach and address diversity as the main core of *Bhineka Tunggal Ika*, as the national motto of Indonesia, means Unity in Diversity or Many, Yet One.

4.3 Volunteers and Teacher's Recommendations

Based on the result of the interview, it is obtained for three recommendations given to other teachers who want to teach in rural areas. These recommendations are in the field of the facility, teaching strategy, and language used.

The first recommendation is the field of facilities to support teaching and learning. Teacher 2 said:

“Due to very limited facilities and learning materials, the teacher in rural areas should be creative and innovative in creating the teaching materials. For example, we can use offline applications. In case there are no possibilities in using technology, the teacher can create own material or use the environment as the source of teaching and learning, such as use branches, leaves, and stones in a creative way” (Teacher-2)

Besides facilities, the way teachers teach the students also becomes important. Teacher-1 said:

“The teachers need to use various teaching strategies, such as singing a song, game, storytelling, or outdoor activity. Besides that, the teacher must look at their condition” (Teacher-1)

The last recommendation is about the language used by the teacher when teaching the students. Teacher-3 said:

“The teachers must use Bahasa in the classroom. This is to make the students understand and able to use Bahasa” (Teacher-3)

From the volunteers' sides, it obtained two recommendations given from other communities that want to conduct teaching and learning in rural areas. These recommendations are in the field of transportation, facilities, and learning materials.

The first recommendation is the field of transportation. The majority of the volunteers said that they should

collaborate with other communities that have adequate vehicles to reach rural areas.

“Because there is no public transportation in most of the rural areas in Riau, we need to collaborate with other communities which have adequate vehicles” (Volunteer-4)

Besides transportation, the way they can keep communicating even with the lack of electricity and network in rural areas is important.

“Sometimes we miss some information because the network is very limited, to solve these problems, it is better to use a walky-talky” (Volunteer-2)

In the recommendation part, the emphasis on partnership and collaboration is crucial to tackling rural education. According to Mikalsen and Jentoff (2001), it is important for the stakeholders to come together, participate, and make contributions to rural areas, especially in education. It is coming together as a common ground through connection and relationship to a place or geographic location. Not only that, this connection and relationship need to be built sustainably, so it is not going to be one hit program or project. With the consistent design and program for rural education, it is a growing program that is beneficial for all.

5. Conclusion

The result of this study reveals that volunteers and teachers who have taught in rural Riau schools have experienced conditions in rural schools which are different from the conditions in urban schools. By joining the Travelling & Teaching program, the volunteers and teachers can make positive contributions to rural education in Riau, solving the rural area education challenges, and giving insights about rural education for other provinces in Indonesia, and in the bigger education context around the globe too.

Besides, they want to conduct and join this program because of their willingness to accept the challenge. In addition, based on the teachers' experiences teaching students in rural areas, they can understand the class design that is used in rural schools. It is nearly impossible to design a class that is centered on the students because of the lack of students' knowledge and competence.

Besides, teaching and learning in rural schools present several challenges. Based on the volunteers' experiences, there are four main challenges faced by them, they are no public transportation, difficult access to the village, lack of electricity, and lack of network. In terms of challenges faced by teachers in teaching students in rural areas, they faced challenges which are in the area of infrastructure, source of learning, language barrier, and students' competence.

In addition, the participants also suggested possible solutions to facing the challenges in conducting the teaching and learning process in rural schools. The teacher has to be creative, innovative, and adaptable in creating

teaching materials, such as using offline software or offline application, using the environment as the source of teaching and learning, using Bahasa in the classroom, and using several teaching strategies. This finding is in line with a previous study by Febriana et al (2018) which mentioned that teaching strategies for the unique condition in rural areas and also teachers' professional development are two essential needs for rural education in Indonesia. Besides, based on the experience of the volunteer conducting the program Traveling and Teaching, most of them recommend collaborating with other communities which have transportation and using a walkie-talkie to communicate.

The volunteers' and teachers' reflections on teaching and learning in rural areas will help education institutions to determine and develop strategies and learning sources that can help students have better teaching and learning experiences. Hopefully, in the higher education system too, the development can be made to prepare teacher candidates to be ready to teach in rural areas so that the gap between rural and urban education in Indonesia will be bridged by the willingness of every party to get involved in rural education, since teaching in rural areas, it is more than materialistic things; it is from, for and by the insides.

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