

Specialisation Course One
Strand 2: Theories and Concepts
Unit 3 Case Study

Self-Directed Learning Activity:

To complete the hour of self-directed learning attached to this unit.

1. Read again the Case Study “When diversity is not enough,”
2. Read the analysing text below and answer the following questions / prompts in a text of your own (150 words):

Case Study

When Diversity as a Resource is not enough

Source: Forghani-Arani, et al. (2019): *The lives of teachers in diverse classrooms. OECD Working Papers*, pp. 20. <https://doi.org/10.1787/8c26fee5-en>.

Drawing on the work on teachers’ lived experience and their meaning-making processes in selected school sites identified as so-called hot spot or high-need schools in Austria, the following account explores some of the challenges of diversity in the classroom. A teacher of history and English in a lower secondary Viennese school describes the heterogeneous set-up of the students in her class:

I have students from – let’s say – 12 different nationalities. Many of them are from India, one from Iran – her father is from Iran, her mother is from Iraq, there is one from Sri Lanka, two from Croatia, from Poland, three from Nigeria, actually there are only two Austrians. Many of the parents work at the UN. Many of them are expats’ kids, UN kids, or the parents are here on business. Most parents work for international organisations.

A student of mine from Sri Lanka, he went to Hajj, you know the Muslim pilgrimage, and I could tell he was different, when he came back. He was just so filled with faith when he came back from Mecca. Imagine, there are millions of people circumambulating the Kaaba, and you are part of it, I mean for a 13-year-old. Shortly after that we were studying major religions, and I said: “Well, tell us about it, you were there.” And then he took his Holy Book, stood in the corner of the class, and chanted a prayer for us with all the movements that go with the phrases. Everything turned so quiet. Then he told us about his religious beliefs. He made it very clear that he would never ever marry a girl who doesn’t wear a headscarf, and that he persuaded his mother and his sister to wear the hijab after he came back. He said: ‘otherwise a woman’s hair would catch fire.’ That’s when I said: “Let’s change the topic.”

When asked to share the reasoning behind her decision to “change the topic,” the teacher explains:

This is always extremely sensitive. As a teacher, if I contradict him, I’d create resistance and opposition on his part. I would end up shoving him into a corner and that is exactly

what I want to avoid as a teacher. That's not my job. That's not what I'm here for. That's not my role. If I let it pass and let the other kids take over the discussion - well actually I didn't even think of that option. You have absolutely no idea what would turn out. You never know. Someone could get up and say: 'rubbish' or 'that's nonsense' or something like that. So, I simply turned it off. I said: 'That's enough for now' because it was getting out of hand. It was actually kind of scary. I was somehow perplexed. You have to be so careful. It's like walking in a minefield.

Case Study - Analysis

The teacher explains above the potentially explosive collision of beliefs and perspectives as one of her immigrant students, moving across national, cultural, and religious borders, affects not only his own private sphere but the public space of the classroom (Levitt and Waters, 2002). This is one of the many instances where the social space of the classroom is reworked through her students' simultaneous embeddedness in more than one society, continuously re-inventing the classroom space in unpredictable ways.

What is at stake in this and in numerous comparable situations that shape lives in diverse classrooms every day? For the teacher it is a case of **making the right pedagogical choices, judgements, and decisions.**

She makes two key decisions:

- 1) to invite and welcome the difference a student brings into the classroom, and the reverse,
- 2) to shut down the irritating difference the student brings into the classroom.

The teacher's first decision – to include – appears to be reasoned by a **commitment to diversity**, by drawing on students' diversity as an asset, by enriching the curriculum through students' knowledge, experience, or background. The kind of difference the young man introduces, however, does not seem to fit within the usual study of world religions in a history lesson. The plurality initially sought by the teacher can no longer be managed as a curriculum resource intended to enrich the topic of major religions. The potential response from the other students renders the event sufficiently 'scary,' in the teacher's view, to shut down the discussion before it becomes ignited.

Therein appears the teacher's second judgment. Her decision to change the topic stems from her concern that if things get out of hand, some harm could befall the young man or his classmates. There seem to be **several sources of pedagogical commitment at play in this classroom moment: the obligation to plurality and diversity, the obligation to be open to other ideas and perspectives, the obligation to care, and the obligation to protect, to name a few.** The teacher's pedagogical obligation to prevent harm creates a satisfying substitution, which replaces the lost gratification of plurality and diversity as an educational principle. [...] Teachers tell us that teaching in diverse classroom is far more complex and intricate than having a positive attitude towards diversity and drawing on it as a resource.

Source: Forghani-Arani, et al. (2019): *The lives of teachers in diverse classrooms.* OECD Working Papers, p. 21. <https://doi.org/10.1787/8c26fee5-en>.

- **Which pedagogical commitments (to diversity, safety, plurality, etc.) do you find most challenging to uphold in your own practice? How might you strengthen your ability to manage these commitments?**

Further Reading

This case study shows the complex and nuanced role of a teacher in navigating diversity within the classroom, particularly when dealing with controversy and situations of conflict. The teacher faces a challenging situation where they must balance multiple pedagogical commitments, including acknowledging diversity, inclusion of different perspectives, and encouraging students to develop a critical consciousness and challenge oppressive social structures.

It highlights a specific incident where a student introduces a perspective that challenges the teacher's initial commitment to value-based diversity. The teacher's first instinct is to include the student's perspective as part of a broader commitment to enriching the curriculum with diverse viewpoints. However, they quickly realise that the student might provoke a reaction either from other students, potentially leading to conflict or the teacher will be obliged to contradict the student themselves due to intersecting values, rules, and policies they want or must abide by. As a result, they decide to shut down the discussion to prevent any conflict.

This decision illustrates the tension that inclusion and diversity produce through moments of conflict and controversy. The teacher's choice reflects that teaching in a diverse classroom is not simply about having a positive attitude toward diversity. Instead, it involves making complex, often difficult decisions that require careful consideration of the potential consequences of including or excluding perspectives. The teacher must weigh her obligations to plurality, demonstrating the intricate and sometimes contradictory nature of enacting diversity in educational practice.

Ultimately, it suggests that teaching in a diverse classroom requires more than just following a "diversity agenda"; it demands a deep understanding of the complexities involved and the ability to navigate these challenges with sensitivity and foresight – or as mentioned in the chapter before, with "tact".

We can thus identify that the teacher's different pedagogical acts may lead to intersecting and conflicting results. These complexities can lead to difficult decisions, which themselves are framed within unconscious (racial and or religious) narratives.

In the case study, the teacher seems to have ended the discussion because it was turning into a confrontation between the student's religious beliefs and feminism. According to Spivak, teaching is inherently political, and pedagogical commitment is not merely about delivering content effectively. It also involves engaging students in critical thinking about their positions in the world and the global inequities that exist. This involves fostering a critical consciousness in students, encouraging them to question dominant narratives and consider the perspectives of those who are marginalised.

Thus, it is important to create a space where the student feels free to express themselves but also is encouraged to engage with their own narratives (and hegemonies) from other perspectives. Therefore, pedagogical commitment involves being constantly aware of and responsive to the “otherness” of students – their diverse backgrounds, and the ways in which dominant cultural narratives will exclude or misrepresent them but also them taking part in them.

Classrooms are often sites where hegemonic ideas are reproduced. Therefore, a committed teacher must be aware of the ways in which education can either reinforce or resist these dominant ideologies. Pedagogical commitment, in this context, involves a conscious effort to use education as a means to disrupt hegemonic norms and promote alternative ways of thinking.

Furthermore, pedagogical commitment in this context also means being reflexive—that is, the teacher must continually reflect on their own biases, assumptions, and the power dynamics inherent in the teacher-student relationship. Meaning that it is important to acknowledge that the perceived confrontation between the student's religious beliefs and feminism might be more a matter of interpretation than a conscious conflict. As teachers and observers, we bring our own biases, cultural lenses, and assumptions to classroom interactions. The perceived tension might stem from one's own preconceptions about the incompatibility of certain systems. However, for the student involved, the interaction may not necessarily be experienced as such. They might view their religious beliefs and feminist principles as coexisting in their individual lived experience.

