

To Be or Not To Be: A Teacher Commitment in Meeting Students' Diverse Needs

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This case study presents the experience of a young teacher at a private educational center, who enthusiastically works as an English teacher, and has forty academic hours per week including additional responsibilities of being a curator, and providing students with extra lessons. This has not created any issues until the teacher has faced an equity dilemma with one of her students, who had a difficult family and financial situation that required the teacher to stay at the center longer, consequently obliging her to stay late evening hours at the workplace. This narrative inquiry examines the commitment teachers often make to meet their students' diverse needs, and calls students and teachers to reflect on the ethical issues implicated. The questions for discussion and teaching notes for meeting students' diverse needs are provided.

Keywords: teacher commitment, student diverse needs, equity.

Case Context

By exploring the experience of a young teacher working at the educational center, this narrative considers the commitment teachers frequently need to make to meet their students' diverse needs; and invites educational leaders, teachers and students to reflect on the ethical issues this inquiry implicates. It was the teacher's first year as an English teacher with a BA diploma in hand. She was very enthusiastic and passionate to start as soon as possible, and at the same time curious about how it would go. It was her sixth year teaching in Kazakhstan, and this time it was going to be completely different, because of the new city she was in – Astana, and all the new experiences and people it would bring.

Her workplace was a famous private educational center. It had campuses in almost every city of Kazakhstan and was very famous for successfully getting students prepared for the UNT (United National Test), and entrance exams to BIL (Knowledge and Innovation Lyceum, previously known as KTL – Kazakh-Turkish Lyceum) and NIS (Nazarbayev Intellectual School). Hence, most of the students wishing to prepare for these exams outside their school would at least consider the center as a place to study at. It also provided extracurricular lessons of most of the subjects for grades from 4 to 11.

The campus the teacher worked at was in a very crowded part of Astana. There were many schools around it, thus the location was very convenient for students. During the first month of the new academic year about 400 students enrolled, and by the end of October there were approximately 700 students studying at the center. Being the only English teacher at the center, she gave lessons to every English language class, totaling forty academic hours per week.

In addition to teaching, all teachers were required to be curators of at least one group. The responsibilities of a curator included guiding the groups in their academic progress, providing psychological support, encouraging parental involvement and participating in extra-curricular activities with students. Moreover, teachers at the center were obliged to provide extra lessons for students who were falling behind. These were usually done on Sundays, there were seven full working days.

New Groups - New Challenges

In the middle of October the new teacher was assigned as curator to three 11th grade groups of around 15 students each. They were preparing for the UNT, this required a thorough control and guidance in order to achieve progress and results. The first meeting occurred during the week after lessons (around 8 pm), where they introduced themselves to each other, the teacher explained the action plan within that academic year; all the commitments they needed to be prepared for and explained her own responsibilities towards them. One of her responsibilities was encouraging parental involvement, which also included visiting the students' families in their home environment.

The idea was to meet with parents and caregivers outside the center to enhance the interpersonal relationships with them; if a parent did not wish to invite a teacher over to their home it was acceptable and they would meet somewhere else. Fortunately, being Kazakh involves a focus on hospitality, so most of the parents invited her to their homes. There they would eat, drink tea, and talk about the child – child’s personality, likes and dislikes, opportunities and challenges. They would also talk about each others’ lives to get a deeper understanding of who they were, therefore building a trusting and positive relationship.

Case Narrative

After the first meeting with the group, almost everyone went home as it was already 8.30 pm. However, one girl named Guldana asked if she could stay a bit longer in order to study. The teacher was tired as she was working from 9 am to 8 pm (the regular working time-table) that day, but she had a lesson the following day, which required more preparation, so she had a chance to get it finished before going home and relaxing. They, therefore, spent an hour more at the center. At around 9.30 pm Guldana rushed outside in order to catch her last bus home, waving and thanking the teacher for the opportunity to stay late and study. The teacher was very happy to have such a hard-working student in her class, but hadn’t thought of the challenges that would arise because of her.

The following day, upon asking other teachers about Guldana’s academic performance, the teacher learnt that though responsible and hardworking, she was below the average, so needed a lot of preparation to get a scholarship to study at the university. Thus, she decided to visit Guldana’s parents in order to encourage them to support and constantly motivate Guldana with her studies. Unfortunately, she couldn’t meet with her parents immediately as they were always busy, and couldn’t even come to the center or meet her at their workplace to discuss Guldana’s progress. About two months passed, and the teacher still had not met the parents, though she had spoken to them on the telephone. Meanwhile, Guldana asked to stay late and study at the center almost every day. Sometimes the teacher would agree, but most of the time she felt physically and emotionally tired, or had other things to do, so she would politely refuse. She would also explain to her that in order to study beneficially, Guldana also needed to have a good rest and spend time with her family.

One day, she decided to ask her if her parents were free that day so that she could meet with them. She called them and they said to come over that evening with Guldana. Her lessons finished at 7.45 pm as usual. Right after, she accompanied Guldana to her home by taxi, which took about 20 minutes. She hadn’t realized she lived so far away from the center. By bus it would make even longer. This meant Guldana spent much time travelling to the center and back home each day. Getting out of the car at Guldana’s home, the teacher looked around and understood they were in a disadvantaged part of the city. The apartment buildings seemed old and dirty. When they entered the building, she noticed a very bad smell. Walking up the stairs, she saw children running in the corridors, and people walking back to their rooms after having a bath. She realized that this was a dormitory for families. The moment she entered Guldana’s family’s room, she felt so *guilty* for those times she hadn’t been able to stay late with her to study, because now she understood the reason Guldana has requested it. The room’s area was 8 m². She lived there with her parents, an elder brother, and two small brothers aged around four and seven years. There was no place where she could actually sit and study. As she related later, the family would go to sleep at around 10 pm as they were usually very tired after work, so she couldn’t switch on the lights.

The teacher talked with the parents for over an hour. They were good people, struggling to pay for all their children’s bills. Guldana’s brother was already working as a security, and was responsible for paying for Guldana’s studies at the center. Her mother was a nurse, and her father worked as a loader. During the discussion, Guldana’s parents said that if she didn’t get a scholarship, they wouldn’t be able to pay for her university, so she wouldn’t study, but rather work to help them financially.

After arriving home that evening, the teacher realized she had a dilemma inside her – *to be or not to be there for Guldana*. She knew she had to help her get that scholarship, which meant that she would stay late most evenings to provide her with the necessary conditions to study. On the other hand, however, she knew how she would feel the following day when she hadn’t gotten enough sleep at night. Coming home after 10 pm meant that she would go to sleep after midnight, creating a deficiency in her teaching role towards the other students. If she had had weekends or at least Sundays free to have a proper rest, she wouldn’t have been concerned, but Saturday was a

full working day until 7.45 pm, and on Sundays there were also extra lessons and extra-curricular activities with the 11th graders.

Case Outcome

Yet, this indecision lasted for less than 10 minutes. She was committed to her profession, and knew there was nobody else to help Guldana, so her decision was to do whatever was in her power to help her get that scholarship, and have a chance to be independent and hopefully enter a profession in the end for her personal and family's happiness and success. She explained Guldana's situation to her teachers, so that they would pay more attention to her, and provide her with extra lessons if needed. They stayed at the center until 9.30 or 10.30 pm seven days a week, and on Sundays they would finish after 6 pm. She acquired the keys to the center from the principal, so that she could close it as she was the last one to leave. This agreement didn't come easily, because the principal was against the teachers staying at the workplace after lessons were finished. This way March came closer, and Guldana made huge progress in her UNT sample exams.

At the beginning of March, Guldana announced that she wouldn't be able to study at the center anymore. There were only two months left until the exam, and it was very important to keep studying even harder, but her brother had lost his job, so she couldn't pay. The teacher asked the principal whether they could provide Guldana with a discount, though she already had a 5% discount for being one of the first to register in September, and a 10% discount for living in a large family. The principal explained that giving Guldana a discount would encourage other students to ask for it, as there were others at the center that might also be in difficult financial situations. The teacher insisted saying that nobody actually knows how much others pay, so if they told Guldana not to tell anyone, she would understand and not disclose this information. Thus, the principal decided to give her a 20% discount in addition to the existing ones. In total she had a 35% discount, but it was still not enough. Hence, the teacher decided to pay half of the remaining cost, which would bring Guldana's contribution down to only fifteen thousand tenge.

In June, Guldana wrote the UNT. In August, her results showed that Guldana had gotten a scholarship to study towards her chosen profession in one of Almaty's good universities. The scholarship, a state grant would also cover her living accommodation and provide a monthly stipend.

Teaching Notes

1. This case study examines the commitment teachers often make to meet their students' diverse needs. The teaching profession can be a hard one to work in, mainly because teachers are always working with different people, that include the administration, parents, and students; all having diverse needs and personalities. Being full of physical and emotional energy is one of the key factors influencing teacher's efficacy.

2. To be an effective teacher, one needs to be flexible, both in one's attitude, and in other parts of one's life. It also requires certain commitments, which may be hard to make, but this is the way quality education works. In this case the teacher knew that the UNT requires constant and thorough preparation; that's why it was important for her student to get on the right track, and to keep studying continuously. Though it was difficult for the teacher to sacrifice her personal time and health, she knew she was doing the right thing. However, there are questions, provided below, that are crucial to bear in mind.

Questions for Discussion

1. What about other students like Guldana? Are there people who can help them? How can we identify such students at private educational centers, and what can we do for them?
2. How often and to what extent should a teacher make commitments in meeting students' diverse needs?
3. Is it acceptable for teachers to work in the way described in this case?
4. Were there any other alternatives for Guldana?
5. Could other stakeholders be involved to respond to Guldana's needs, such as parents, the principal, administration, other teachers or someone else?

Suggested Readings

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