

Tutoring on the Margins: Supporting a Migrant Student as a Visiting Educator

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Tags

Cross-Cultural Issues; Ethics, Equity and Social Justice; Language Education; Primary and Secondary Education; Student Learning and Development

Setting

This case took place in an all-girls Catholic secondary school in Austria. The events occurred in the early 2010s, within a classroom environment in a mid-sized Austrian city. Unlike in the United States, Austrian students stayed in the same classroom all day while teachers rotated in and out. Teachers shared long tables in a common lounge, where reputations circulated quickly. This system fostered both familiarity and hierarchy, as teachers' shared impressions could influence how students were treated across subjects. These informal networks functioned as an unwritten governance system—an example of how micro-cultures within schools can regulate belonging and marginality without explicit policy. Such shared impressions often extended beyond social gossip, subtly shaping professional reputations and even influencing evaluative decisions—a reminder of how informal culture can quietly steer formal outcomes.

The classrooms were teacher-centered: students sat at rectangular desks, three to a table, lined up side by side. The rooms were small and tightly arranged, making interaction limited and lessons largely lecture-based. During English lessons, most students copied notes in silence while only one or two answered questions—a structure that left little space for quieter voices to emerge.

As a Fulbright English Teaching Assistant (ETA), my role was to prepare students for the oral-proficiency

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portion of the *Matura*, Austria's rigorous university entrance exam. We discussed topics such as gun control, the U.S. electoral system, healthcare, and comparative education. Unlike my Austrian colleagues, I had no grading authority and held limited influence over curricular decisions—boundaries that shaped how I could intervene in students' learning experiences. From the outset, I was aware that my position as a foreign teaching assistant came with both symbolic privilege and structural powerlessness. This lack of institutional authority would later complicate my ethical decision-making as I tried to support a student within a system that constrained my role. This case reflects a core dilemma within international education practice—how visiting educators navigate equity, professionalism, and cultural partnership across differing educational systems.

Case

Among the upper-secondary students I taught was an Eastern European learner who rarely spoke in class, Simona. A colleague who also taught her English class frequently remarked on the student's socioeconomic background and questioned her language skills. In front of classmates, the teacher sometimes contrasted her performance with that of a more fluent peer, setting a benchmark that made Simona feel perpetually “less than.” The air in the room would tense for a moment, the silence heavy with embarrassment—a reminder of how easily comparison could wound in a public space. At times, she responded with quiet humor or a small smile—subtle gestures of resistance that hinted at both resilience and fatigue within the rigid classroom hierarchy.

Later, the teacher explained, “She's bright, but she needs extra support. If she fails the *Matura*, her options will be limited.” I sensed that the teacher's comment came from genuine concern; however, it was one framed by deficit assumptions. Valencia (1997) describes deficit thinking as the way in which teachers' well-meaning judgments can unintentionally frame students' backgrounds as barriers rather than assets. Privately, Simona admitted how painful those public comparisons were. “It feels like no matter what I say, it's not good enough,” she told me one afternoon. Students in this system remained in the same classroom all day, so there was no easy way to escape those dynamics. At the same time, I recognized that what appeared as deficit thinking might also reflect systemic pressures—teachers navigating accountability metrics and exam outcomes that leave little space for differentiated empathy. Each actor in this scenario—the student, the teacher, and I—was negotiating institutional pressures larger than any single classroom, a reminder that even well-intentioned educators can become constrained by the systems they inhabit.

At the teacher's request, I began tutoring Simona after school in a quiet space on campus, often in an otherwise empty building. In those sessions, I encountered a very different learner. Though her pronunciation blended elements of her heritage language and local Austrian German, her sentences were clear and thoughtful. Her ease in this one-to-one setting revealed how institutional design, not individual deficit, often determines who gets heard. When gaps appeared, I offered short translations, which Simona quickly absorbed. Interestingly, she drew comparisons across her three languages, using multilingualism as a bridge—an example of what Yosso (2005) describes as linguistic and navigational capital. These insights made me wonder how the trust and intellectual risk-taking that emerged in one-to-one tutoring could be translated into a full-class context—what structural or pedagogical conditions would allow similar growth for all students?

While our sessions were meant to prepare her for the *Matura*, they soon expanded into conversations about

politics, education, and social issues. In these dialogues, Simona's confidence and critical thinking flourished. The paradox grew sharper each week: in private, she revealed intellectual curiosity and courage; in class, she remained constrained by comparison culture and deficit narratives. Yet I also recognized that my individualized support could be perceived as favoritism—an ethical tension that complicated my efforts to advocate for her within institutional norms. Other teachers began questioning why I was giving Simona “special help,” even though the arrangement had been approved. This scrutiny reminded me that allyship within hierarchical cultures can be perceived as deviance, illustrating how professional boundaries can inadvertently protect bias under the guise of neutrality.

As trust deepened, I also became more aware of the ethical tightrope between advocacy and overstepping my role. The school's Catholic ethos of humility and obedience—intersecting with gendered expectations of quietness—further complicated the space for resistance. At this turning point, I wrestled with competing responsibilities: Should I continue tutoring her privately, honoring her progress? Or, should I confront the teacher's bias and risk conflict? Could I find new ways for Simona's voice to emerge in the classroom without singling her out as ‘different’? The dilemma also raised a broader question: when institutional expectations collide with moral obligation, whose definition of professionalism ultimately prevails? This question echoed broader ethical debates in intercultural education: whether moral courage requires quiet subversion or visible confrontation. Taken together, these moments reveal how structural power, professional identity, and moral agency intersect in cross-cultural education, challenging educators to reflect critically on their own boundaries and values.

Discussion Questions

As you consider this case, discuss:

- How do educational structures, such as teacher-centered classrooms, fixed student groups, and reputational staff cultures shape opportunities and limitations for students from migration-related backgrounds, including newly arrived migrants, children of migrants, and refugees?
- How can international staff in state-sponsored international education programs (such as Fulbright, the Peace Corps, or the JET Program) navigate cultural differences and professional hierarchies while maintaining collegial respect and professional integrity? What training or supervision structures could help international educators negotiate such ethical gray zones?
- What ethical responsibilities does an international educator have when asked to support students by an institution whose culture perpetuates deficit narratives? Based on your answer, what challenges might an educator face?
- How can educators reframe a multilingual student's language repertoire as an asset rather than a deficit? How can they reinforce this mindset in the classroom?
- How might the culture of an all-girls faith-based school influence comparison, conformity, and authority in the classroom? What pedagogical approaches could expand space for diverse voices in such environments?

References

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