

**Ethics Paper**

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EDUC 3013: School and Society

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November 3, 2024

Teacher ethics have long played a pivotal role in guiding educators' behavior and responsibilities, shaping not only classroom interactions but also how teachers respond to student misconduct. These ethical guidelines have evolved into a complex framework of principles aimed at establishing a fair and supportive educational environment. In the last fifty years, the concept of teacher ethics has shifted from a rigid focus on discipline and personal integrity to a more structured approach that balances professional obligations with the nuanced needs of students. Ethics in this context go beyond personal morals, which are inherently subjective and individual, and refer to more formalized standards that offer consistency in educators' behavior. While morals are values unique to each individual, ethics provide a collective framework that teachers follow as members of a profession with a unique influence over student's lives.

In recent years, policies such as zero tolerance have become common in schools, influencing how teachers navigate discipline and ethical challenges. Zero tolerance policies are designed to enforce strict responses to specific offenses, such as suspension or expulsion, with the intent to ensure objectivity and consistency in handling student misconduct. However, these policies often fail to consider the context surrounding a student's actions, creating ethical dilemmas for educators who must balance policy adherence with a compassionate response to individual circumstances. As F. Chris Curran highlights, these policies continue to be present in American schools and they can lead to unintended, severe outcomes for students involved in minor infractions (Curran, 2019).

In *Stolen Trust* by Kailey Burger and Meira Levinson, a teacher named Ms. Smith encounters the complexities of zero tolerance policies firsthand. After discovering that her cell phone was stolen by Wesley, a student with prior disciplinary issues, Ms. Smith faces a decision that could have long-term consequences for him (Burger & Levinson, 2015). Stealing a phone

worth around six hundred dollars is a class C felony, so reporting him under the school's strict zero tolerance policy would result in his referral to the criminal justice system, risking his future opportunities. Curran's research shows that these policies, despite being intended to create consistency, may not serve educational or developmental goals well, particularly for marginalized students who may already experience systemic inequities.

This scenario illustrates the tension between two ethical approaches. The rules based approach would have Ms. Smith report the theft, aligning with the school's policies and reinforcing accountability. However, the relational approach, which prioritizes empathy and considers the context of Wesley's background, would encourage Ms. Smith to look for alternative disciplinary actions. Curran's findings reveal that although zero tolerance policies were once seen as a solution to ensure unbiased discipline, they can disproportionately impact students from underprivileged backgrounds, with studies suggesting that they contribute to higher suspension rates and exacerbate racial disparities.

In Ms. Smith's case, balancing the ethics of rule following with empathy brings to light the limits of zero tolerance policies. The ethical choices she faces include reporting Wesley, compromising by addressing the incident informally, or choosing not to report him at all. Each option has potential repercussions, both for Wesley's future and for Ms. Smith's professional standing. Ultimately, her dilemma encourages a broader discussion on the ethics of school discipline. As Curran suggests, a clearer understanding of what zero tolerance policies actually entail could help educators and policymakers make informed decisions that truly support students' needs.

Relating this to curricular theories, offers additional context on how education systems might better align policies with student centered goals. For example, the humanist tradition

emphasizes academic rigor and intellectual growth through a standardized curriculum but often fails to represent diverse perspectives, which may reinforce systemic inequities. The social efficiency model focuses on preparing students for specific societal roles, prioritizing standardized testing and discipline but often overlooking students' unique needs and circumstances. This aligns somewhat with the zero tolerance framework, which seeks consistency but lacks the adaptability required to support individual growth.

In contrast, the developmental tradition, which centers on personal growth, offers an approach that prioritizes understanding students' unique backgrounds and needs. This approach could enable educators like Ms. Smith to make context-sensitive decisions that prioritize student development over punitive measures. Similarly, the critical tradition, emphasizing empowerment and social justice, challenges traditional power dynamics and promotes inclusivity, encouraging policies that allow students from marginalized backgrounds to thrive without fear of disproportionate punishment. The critical tradition views education as a tool for social change, which is particularly relevant in rethinking policies that may harm marginalized students (of Colorado, n.d.).

Through Ms. Smith's experience, *Stolen Trust* reflects the evolving role of teacher ethics in shaping school discipline and the need for policies that allow situational discretion to support equity and educational success. This case highlights the need for educational ethics to go beyond mere rule-following and embrace principles of empathy and fairness. As schools seek to develop supportive and equitable learning environments, these values can guide teachers in balancing their professional obligations with the needs of their students. The lessons from this case suggest that a compassionate and context-sensitive approach to discipline is essential in promoting educational equity, allowing students from all backgrounds to thrive.

## References

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