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Response to "Stolen Trust"
Ethical Dilemmas in Education
Justice in Schools
The Met High School
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Personalized Learning, Not a School to Prison Pipeline

The dilemma "Stolen Trust" focuses on a teacher and her high school student named Wesley and their experience with a zero-tolerance policy in their school. Wesley has a history of disobedience, low grades and a criminal record. However, with the help of his teacher, Ms. Smith, he showed drastic improvement in both behavior and grades. Despite his progress, at the end of a tutoring session Wesley stole Ms. Smith's phone. Ms. Smith is obligated to report him, which will most likely get him expelled or maybe put him in jail due to the school's zero tolerance policy. The dilemma left us to decide whether Ms. Smith should obey the school's rules or take her own approach.

Before looking at Ms. Smith's dilemma, we should zoom out to the wider context. In a country where mass incarceration is widely practiced, prison seems to be an accepted, effective and worthy punishment for minor crimes. However, this approach is wrong. Far more progress can happen for individuals and society when we do not remove people, especially young people, from a real opportunity to learn and grow.

Often the outcomes of incarceration are more negative than they are positive for individuals and society. Incarceration often does not allow students to continue success in school - most incarcerated youth drop out. A criminal record can cause inordinate difficulty when looking for a job. According to a study by the Urban Institute, 71% of people released from jail struggled to find a job because of their criminal record even eight months after being released. And jails are already overflowing disproportionately with people of color who commit minor crimes. According to the Bureau of Justice Statistics, approximately 50% of all prisoners are black, even though they represent only 13% of the population. The system is racist and leaves people with a lack of options.

The story of Wesley is only an example of the many youth caught in the "school to prison pipeline." It is clear that the zero tolerance policy criminalizes youth, usually in very discriminatory ways. Students with special needs are often labeled as troublemakers and then punished rather than given access to additional help. According to The Hechinger Report put out by Columbia University, an estimated 70 percent of students caught in the school to prison pipeline have emotional or learning disabilities. According to educators and the National Institute of Mental Health, young brains are engineered to take risks and learn from them. These biological instincts should not be the cause of imprisonment.

Zero-tolerance also tends to perpetuate institutionalized racism by punishing students of color disproportionately. According to the Department of Education, black students account for 35% of those suspended, 46% of those suspended more than once, and 39% of those expelled, even though only 18% of students are black. Furthermore, organizations like the National Social Workers Association have stated that suspensions and expulsions can often be ineffective for many students. In a survey a classmate and I conducted regarding discipline in school, many students at my high school said traditional forms of punishment were “just annoying and completely ineffective”. Other students attributed their label as “a bad kid” to getting punished often (similar to the way stigmas effect people after being released from jail). These disciplinary policies have deeply unjust and sometimes severe consequences.

How does this context influence our thinking about this dilemma? Both Ms. Smith and Wesley face difficult circumstances. Ms. Smith runs the risk of losing her job if she doesn't follow the policy. If she does, Wesley runs the risk of getting put in jail. I believe Ms. Smith should not report Wesley simply because the consequences that she may face are far less significant compared to those of Wesley. It should be Ms. Smith's responsibility as both a teacher and a white woman to protect her students and promote equity for people of color. However, Ms. Smith should not have to compromise anything in order to keep students out of jail. Instead, the school should work to improve the way they discipline students, and prisons should reduce the amount of actions considered punishable by jail.

Instead of zero tolerance, suspensions, expulsions and stigmatization, Wesley should receive a consequence equivalent to the inconvenience caused by his action. This is derived from the concept of “restorative justice”. Assuming Wesley still has the phone, he should be forced to give it back in addition to having his own phone privileges revoked. If Wesley were to lose the phone or give it to someone else, he should be forced to repay Ms. Smith however much money the phone cost. This form of discipline can actually teach a lesson by forcing students to do something productive to counteract any inconvenience they caused. This form of justice also allows the student to feel the consequence of their own actions because they have to make amends with the person they harmed. At many homes for behavioral improvement (ie, residential programs for troubled youth), students and school staff find restorative justice to be effective.

Some people may argue that the zero-tolerance policy is effective in the way that it has lowered the amount of disciplinary issues in school. Lower disciplinary incidents are obviously positive. However just because there are fewer violations of rules within school, it does not inherently mean students are learning from their actions and applying that knowledge to outside issues throughout life - and isn't that the point of education? Much of the time teaching obedience in schools simply relies on the fact that a student does not enjoy detentions or suspensions. From these practices, students do not retain any valuable skills or lessons. In fact, students are still completely capable of making these bad decisions outside of school. Social workers have stated that ruling with an iron fist in the way many schools do promotes a negative and sometimes even abusive sense of authority in the future generation of students.

Additionally, people argue that the zero-tolerance policy helps to protect youth of color from a racist justice system. The protection of people of color from systematic racism is incredibly necessary, however North High School may have been counterproductive in their efforts to do so by further criminalizing youth of color. Regardless of intentions, schools should never perpetuate systemic racism in schools. In fact, schools should work towards eliminating racism and contributing to an end goal of equity. It should never be the job of an oppressed group of people to understand and adapt to an inhumane system that should not exist in the first place.

And even if a zero tolerance policy is able to teach a lesson to some, it does not make it a correct way to teach a lesson. In fact, zero tolerance policies do not take into account additional factors such as the reasoning behind a student's actions or the context surrounding the situation. Instead these policies dehumanize students by treating them as if they are not individuals who act and learn differently.

I've seen how the dehumanization of students has led to a bad dynamic between staff and students in schools. I've witnessed students who are not treated as individuals deserving of respect develop a negative self-image and an overall flawed education. Personally, I struggled to adjust to the environment and learning style of the traditional public middle school I attended (the grading system, overcrowding, fast-paced schedule, and being treated as part of a herd of 900). My middle school expected me to be another student on the "Honors" or "High Honors" list rather than encouraging growth in more personal aspects. These public recognition lists created a clear social hierarchy based on a standardized mark of intelligence and the separations of students were also reflected in race and income. This is similar to the way zero-tolerance policies and all dehumanizing policies stigmatize young people rather than educating them.

The school system and the justice system should be working together to ensure maximum education and future success to ALL students regardless of behavioral or racial differences. It is very clear jail is no place for progress. We should allow students to learn from their actions in ways that suit them.