

While the term “ethical” can be quite subjective in a vacuum, in the context of the field of education, there are several answers to the question, “What makes an ethical teacher?” which unequivocally contribute to the full moral-teacher-jigsaw-puzzle. Other answers to this question, however, prove themselves to be hazier in nature. For example: is it *ethical* to hold extra, mandatory, graded choir rehearsals during lunchtime, as long as one ensures that students are able to hork down their food five minutes before music-making commences? Some may say no, undeniably, this is not ethical; others may posit that it depends on the circumstances, and that this is not a scenario that might be so easily judged to be “right” or “wrong”. I have a feeling that teachers on both sides of this particular circumstance, however, would agree that three vital pillars of ethical teaching are: 1) meeting students, “where they are at;” 2) practicing radical empathy in every conversation and situation; and 3) acting in the best interest of the students’ physical and emotional well-beings. How each teacher might go about achieving these pillars, however, may vary in wildly different ways.

Exploring the “lunch rehearsal” example further: some might question a teacher who holds additional, graded choral rehearsals during lunch: “how can you justify interrupting your students’ first, and possibly only, substantial meal of the day, in order to rehearse for all of the additional gigs and opportunities that *you* signed them up for?” While posing such a question might lead the uncritical eavesdropper towards one desired conclusion over another, the opposing teacher might rebut: “Because I teach at a magnet school, my students come from far and wide; as such, they cannot afford to miss the only after-school bus scheduled to take them home. In light of this, as to act in the best interest of my students, we have our rehearsals during lunch. I allow students to get their lunch and eat it in my room before we begin singing, and my students know that if this was a situation that was going to affect their physical or mental health

detrimentally, that they could talk to me, because I've established an environment in which that is prioritized above all else." Both teachers have put thought into their stances on this issue; both have wielded empathy, taking their students' personal lives and circumstances into consideration when calculating the best solution for all involved. Both teachers also attempt to meet their students "where they are at," allowing for open dialogue if a student has an issue, or is struggling with the way things are. It seems as if the answer to the question, "What makes an ethical teacher?" lies within the deeper consideration, "How are you, using your best judgement and kindest heart, acting in the best possible interest of your students within the specific limitations and quirks presented by your school and educational community?" One teacher may have a completely different way of satisfying these criteria than another, because each group of students, and the community in which they exist, form a specific educational culture, which comes with a unique set of items for one to consider in their approach to implementing effective, ethical teaching.

Approaching ethical teaching from a different vantage point, while teachers' empathy practices may manifest in many different ways, an ethical teacher's sense of empathy should always be informed by what they know about each student's individual culture(s), intersecting identities, family circumstances, socioeconomic status, etc., even if these factors do not reflect the teacher's own lived experience. It is up to the teacher to learn, to the best of their ability, about the ways in which each student's cultural background may function to influence their lives, and act accordingly. For example, if a student is having a bad day and is lashing out at the teacher, rather than sending them straight to the office, or responding with discipline of equal intensity, the teacher might consider how, for example, being from a Latinx household with a single mother, or having a father who is incarcerated, may be affecting the student. Maybe this is

the root of the specific issue at hand; maybe it is not. But an ethical teacher recognizes that these factors intrinsically influence the lens through which each student views life, and always takes this extra step in their thought processes to practice intersectional empathy, applying what they know about each student's lives to their approach to instruction, dialogue, and discipline.

In exploring the issue of ethical teaching, it quickly becomes clear that there is no cut-and-dry formula which results in the execution of perfectly ethical educational methods. In any profession in which one is a technician expected to interact with and assist other people, no situation is black and white, because humans are complex, and life is messy; this is especially true within the field of education. In light of this reality, the best thing a teacher can do to commit themselves to ethical teaching is to attempt to run their classroom in a way which: 1) acknowledges and respects the intersectionalities of their students; and 2) works to act in the best interest of students' well-beings, all the while considering the intersections between the way one's school operates, and the idiosyncratic needs of the school community they serve.