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Who measures whose virtue? Lessons from action research for measuring pupils' character

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"Research is the servant of professional judgement, not its master." (Pring, 2000)

1. Modern character education research

While the measurement of children's moral character are currently 'hot' in educational theory and practice, it is certainly not the first time in history. Of course, there is Kohlberg's memorable contribution to the measurement of children's moral development, but he was not interested in moral development *qua* development of virtue. There are a few places in his work where Kohlberg is quite sympathetic to notions of virtue and character (Sanderse, 2012, p. 69), but generally speaking, he dismissed what he called the 'bag of virtues' approach because it would allow everyone to compile his own list of virtues and interpret these virtues differently (Kohlberg, 1981, pp. 8-10). His critique of character education makes sense if we place it in the social-historical context. With the memory of World War II in mind, Kohlberg's mission was to morally justify and empirically validate a developmental model that culminated in universal moral criteria. This would show that morality does not have to be relative, and that moral education can be critical - contrary to what happened in Nazi-Germany.

Kohlberg's critique illustrates that character education has a much longer history than the 'new wave' that started in the early 1990s, when American educationalists started writing about the education of virtue and character. In particular in the United States, 'character education' has always been present, although its popularity and interpretation varied through the centuries. At the end of the 19th century, character education had become very popular again, because educators believed that 'character' was a rather neutral notion that could somehow "...mend the ideological and perspectival fractions of America's new pluralism" (Cunningham, 2005, p. 170). However, at the beginning of the twentieth century, disagreements emerged again as a diversity of groups fought for control over schooling and psychology was seen as the science that could settle these disputes.

A massive empirical research project, the *Character Education Inquiry* (CEI), was carried out between 1925 and 1926 to determine whether 'character' consisted of general traits or of responses triggered by situational stimuli. Hartshorne & May (1930) found that children were rather inconsistent in how they reacted to the psychological tests. They argued that specific elements of the situation determined more what a child would do than their character traits. Partly because of these results, psychologists gradually abandoned the notion of 'character' and replaced it with the moral neutral notion of 'personality' (see Allport, 1937). The CEI had implications for education too. The results "nurtured seeds of doubt among researchers and policy makers about whether character could be effectively taught." (Cunningham, 2008, p. 262). After World War II, and before Kohlberg's research

caught on in educational circles, 'values clarification' became a very popular approach with educators.

In the early 1990s, and sixty-five years after the CEI, philosophers, educators and psychologists became interested again in the notions of virtue and character, predominantly from an Aristotelian perspective. As we live now in what Biesta (2010) has called the 'age of measurement', the interest in empirical research into the notions of 'virtue' and 'character' has only increased. In this paper, I will argue that if research is to contribute to pupils' character development, we would better take serious the kind of action research in which teachers participate. But before we do so, let us first look at three examples of the mainstream empirical research about issues related to character, and their relevance for educational practice. These projects are about (1) the situational or dispositional nature of moral behaviour, (2) the effectiveness of character education programmes, and (3) the measurement of people's character.

At the end of the 1990s, John Doris (2002) sparked the so-called 'situationism debate' in moral psychology. He drew on social psychological research from the 1970s in which people are put in experimental settings (e.g. Zimbardo's Stanford Prison Experiment, Milgram's obedience studies, and Darley & Bateson Good Samaritan Study) to show that people typically do not have a consistent and integrated set of character traits, but are influenced e.g. by group pressure or obedience to authority. The situationism debate gained a lot of attention in the first decade of the new millennium, but has reached a saturation point now (Kristjánsson, 2010, p. 129). Whether moral behaviour depends more on character or situational factors, can, as we saw with the CEI, have educational consequences too. For example, if Harman (2000, p. 224) is right that "there is no such thing as a character trait", it would not make much sense to help children acquire one.

Second, the effectiveness of character education programmes has been subject of empirical research. Since the 1990s, a large number of character education programmes have been implemented in the United States and they were later accompanied by studies to evaluate these programmes. However, not all studies that evaluated these programmes are scientifically acceptable, and it became increasingly difficult for teachers to determine which ones are effective. Berkowitz & Bier (2006) reviewed over a hundred research studies concerning character education. Such reviews are relevant for educational practice because they enable teachers to make informed choices about what program to choose for their own school.

Third, instruments have been developed to measure people's character traits, such as the *Values in Action Inventory of Strengths* (VIA-IS), and its counterpart for youth (Peterson & Seligman, 2004). It is an assessment of 24 character strengths, subdivided into 6 'virtues' with a self-report survey that takes about 30-40 minutes. To mention just two of the almost countless results that the VIA has produced: self-regulation, perseverance and love of learning are predictive of school success (Weber & Ruch, 2012) and love, kindness, creativity, curiosity, and humour are the most prevalent character strengths in young children (Park & Peterson, 2006). When used in educational settings, these and other results can give individual pupils an idea of what virtues they (purport to) have, and what virtues they still have to work on. Moreover, teachers and head teachers can get an impression of the 'ethos' of the classes they teach.

However, do such studies actually have an impact on education? For example, do teachers read the journals in which the results are published? And do teachers participate in the research? In short, are teachers merely 'channels' that receive and transmit the

conclusions of character research, or does it also 'enter into the heart, head and hands of educators'? (Dewey, 1929, pp. 47, 76). An alternative to the 'standard' approach in the social sciences is to see research as part of teachers' own professional responsibility. There is a tradition of so-called 'action research', in particular in the UK, which I will draw on to explain what it means to have teachers investigate the moral education they provide for, and how in this way, character research can contribute to pupils' moral development more directly. By doing so, I hope to do justice to Aristotle's idea that "...we are inquiring not in order to know what virtue is, but in order to become good, since otherwise our inquiry would have been of no use." (Aristotle, NE, Book II, ch. 2). The purpose of measuring virtue is, in the end, not only to know to what extent pupils are morally developed, but also to stimulate this development.

This paper consists of six sections. In Section 2, 'action research' will be introduced by distinguishing between three perspectives on the nature and justification of action research: the empirical-analytical, interpretative and critical-emancipatory tradition. In Section 3, a very short history of action research in the UK will be presented, which culminates in a description of the ideas of Wilfred Carr and Stephan Kemmis, who have argued that action research can increase teachers' practical wisdom (*phronesis*). As this Aristotelian notion seems to fit with an Aristotelian approach to moral education, Section 4 evaluates the idea that action research is a kind of moral enquiry that improves teachers' practical wisdom. In Section 5, we will look at concrete examples of (American) action research about character education and examine whether and how this contributes to measuring pupils' virtue. The paper will end with a conclusion in which the implications for character research are discussed.

2. Traditions of action research

Very broadly construed, action research is the "systematic inquiry by practitioners about their own practices" (Zeichner, 1993, p. 200). Action research often starts from a question that a teacher has formulated because he encountered a problem and wishes to improve his practice or personal understanding. By clearly defining the problem, specifying a plan of action, implementing the proposed action and evaluating its effectiveness, teachers can get a better understanding of their practice. While the results from several enquiries can be combined, the value of this kind of research does not lie in its generalisability, but in its concrete usability for particular teachers and the improvement of the classes that *they* teach.

However, there have been different perspectives on action research, each with its own ideas about the justification, nature and proper methods of action research. For example, some action research is individual oriented while some is collective; some is done by practitioners and some is done by external researchers with collaboration with insiders; some see as its goal the improvement of practice, whereas others see it as the transformation of practice (Herr & Anderson, 2005, p. 10). There is no space here to do justice to all perspectives and discuss all debates going on within action research. Instead, three major research traditions (or paradigms) will be focused on, which are often referred to as the (1) empirical-analytical or positivistic, (2) the interpretative or hermeneutical, and (3) the critical-emancipatory. While the strengths and weaknesses of these approaches will be highlighted, there is no space here for a systematic evaluation of action research as a form of educational research (see e.g. Pring, 2000).

According to the empirical-analytical or positivist tradition, all human and social phenomena are “in principle entirely comprehensible from the standpoint of an assumed detached and objective observer” (Clark, 2011, p. 47). It treats the phenomena in the social world as, in principle, identical to phenomena in the natural world. By discovering facts, a body of knowledge can be developed that results in general laws that can be used to predict human behaviour. Applied to action research, this means that researchers can look for practitioners who facilitate the implementation of particular interventions. For example, by using a certain teaching method, teachers enable researchers to collect data and draw conclusions about what method works best. Many researchers find it difficult to reconcile this tradition with action research, as it is after general knowledge claims and does not offer much room for the interpretations of (unobservable) meanings that practitioners attribute to the world. At the same time, the desire to be ‘scientific’ has stimulated action researchers to develop their research method. Instead of an ‘empirical cycle’, action researchers developed a problem-solving or ‘regulative cycle’, which consists of a number of (spiral) steps: the formulation of the problem, diagnosis, planning, action and evaluation (Van Strien, 1997). The output of this process is a ‘mini-theory’ that is only applicable to an individual case. However, by evaluating and classifying a number of selected and successful of these theories, the results may be generalised (Corey, 1953).

According to the ‘interpretative’ or hermeneutical perspective, the social world is not a collection of facts to be explained and predicted, but a human construction that can only be understood by interpreting it. People always find themselves in social contexts that (at least partly) determine their perspective on the world. This construction of reality comes about through interaction between people who live in different cultures, with their own traditions, institutions and their own languages (Berger & Luckmann, 1967). The goal of the interpretative tradition is to clarify and understand these subjective human experiences, not some kind of ‘objective’ world. In the interpretative tradition, research starts by taking people’s experiences seriously, then trying to formulate a relevant ‘grounded’ theory (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Researchers and practitioners get together to identify potential problems, discuss possible causes and come up with solutions. By (collective) thinking, teachers become aware of their own educational beliefs and values. Educational practice is improved in the sense that practitioners, through shared interpretations, achieve a greater understanding of their work

Finally, the critical-emancipatory tradition has criticised the hermeneutical for focusing too much on the social world of practitioners, not taking into account the way in which society influences their construction of reality. Teachers might *feel* that they are in charge of their work, while the real forces that determine what is taught remain hidden from them. In order to prevent teachers developing a ‘false consciousness’, the critical-emancipatory tradition places educational issues in a wider political context. This tradition originates from the *Frankfurter Schule*, which, just as a Marxist approach more broadly, is concerned with inequalities in society. If the organisation of society is not taken into account, schools might as well reproduce or reinforce existing inequalities. The Brazilian educator and philosopher Paulo Freire (1970) argued that participatory action research would have an emancipatory effect on those who conduct it, as it would help people to identify and act on social policies that keep unequal power relations in place. This tradition has been criticized from a positivist perspective, according to which practitioners would be too biased to be objective, and would only become disappointed when it turns out that they are not able to change society.

3. A short history of action research

These three ideal types of action research can, in one way or another, all be recognised in the history of action research. Often, the history of action research is divided in two stages (Carr, 2006, p. 422). The first covers the period between the 1920s and the 1950s. Throughout the twentieth century, the idea that teachers do research in their own classrooms and schools has always been present (see e.g. Dewey, 1929), but the history of action-research is often traced to the American psychologist Kurt Lewin, who developed a theory of action research that made it an acceptable form of research in the social sciences (Herr & Anderson, 2005, p. 11). He is also credited for providing action research with its own method, which is composed of a 'circle' of planning, acting, and fact finding about the result of an action. In the mid-1940s, Lewin (1948) argued that in order to understand and change social practices, such as education, social scientists would have to include practitioners from the real social world. At that time, 'action research' was defined as a method that enabled social scientists to apply their theories in practice and test their practical effectiveness (Carr, 2006, p. 423). It was, in short, a kind of 'applied science'.

Action research in education declined in the 1960s, when a research, development and dissemination (RD&D) model pervaded the educational establishment. In the United States, action research was criticised for not meeting the positivist criteria that research should produce empirical generalisations by employing quantitative methods (Carr, 2006, p. 423). The second stage of the history of action research started in the early 1970s, when the 'teacher as researcher' movement emerged. Lawrence Stenhouse, who saw action research as a means to enhance teacher professionalism, established the Centre for Applied Research in Education (CARE) at the University of East Anglia, and later John Elliott, his colleague, developed the Classroom Action Research Network (CARN). The British version of action research rejected positivist research methods and advocated interpretative method, such as case studies. Stenhouse (1975) believed that teaching should be based on research, conducted by teachers themselves, who – by improving their understanding and judgment – would be able to improve their practice in a self-directed way. These initiatives "...grew out of a concern by teachers over the forces implementation of behavioural objectives in curriculum and Britain's tracked education system." (Herr & Anderson, p. 20).

In the 1970s and 1980s, as a series of large, state-funded collaborative action research projects were conducted, several debates took place, also over the question whether action research was losing its critical potential as it was being directed by state agencies and monitored by researchers (Herr & Anderson, pp. 20-21). Stephan Kemmis and Wilfred Carr wanted to move beyond action research as planned interventions by state agencies. In their view, educational theory had become obsessed with finding out what interventions are effective. A teachers' job was considered to implement these interventions, without having to think critically about the desirability of educational goals. Therefore, Carr & Kemmis (1986, pp. 123-124) wanted to enable teachers to "reflect upon and examine critically the inadequacies of different conceptions of educational practice". In their view, teachers who do action research, learn to criticise or justify their (often implicit) beliefs and values about teaching, which is, however, not a goal itself, but a means to improve their practical observations, interpretations and judgements. They called this 'practical wisdom', explicitly drawing on Aristotle's virtue of *phronesis* (e.g. Carr & Kemmis, 1986; Carr, 1995; Carr, 2006).

In the last decade of the twentieth century, this notion of 'practical wisdom' became a so much debated topic in educational theory that Kristjánsson (2007, p. 157) even talks about an "all-you-can-eat *phronesis-praxis* buffet". Several philosophers and educational theorists (e.g. Schön, 1983; Sockett, 1993; Dunne, 1993) argued that teachers need practical wisdom in order to be able to teach, conceived of as a value-laden activity. They distinguished it from scientific knowledge, but in particular from a kind of technical or instrumental rationality with which one 'produces' certain predetermined outcomes. When we look at teaching through the lens of an Aristotelian *praxis*, we see that teaching is a complex and coherent set of social activities in which practitioners are committed to sustain and develop certain goods, such as pupils' development and well-being, for the realisation of which they need certain virtues (Dunne, 2011, p. 14).

4. Action research and practical wisdom

This last approach, which regards action research as a kind of moral enquiry that can improve teachers' practical wisdom, is interesting since 'character education' has an Aristotelian background too. Could a kind of 'Aristotelian action research' improve teachers' practical wisdom, and enable them to measure pupils' character? And if it can, what would this action research look like?

A first source to turn to is Carr & Kemmis' book *Becoming Critical* (1986). While they discuss the relevance of the Aristotelian notions of *phronesis* and *praxis*, they explicitly place themselves in a critical-empiric tradition, which has a critical stance towards practical wisdom. They consider an Aristotelian approach to be a good, but not the *ideal* kind of action research. For example, when they compare different views of what the 'professional competence' of teachers involves, Carr and Kemmis distinguish the so-called 'practical view' from the 'critical view'. On the practical view, teachers need a kind of knowledge that enables them to make "morally defensible decisions about practice" [...] "within the context of existing educational institutions" (p. 30). While this is an important thing, sound practical judgment is only *part* of what they are looking for. Those who subscribe to the critical view "accept much of the thinking that informs the 'practical' view", but *expand* it because they realise that teachers' practical wisdom may be distorted by ideological forces (p. 31). Teachers can use practical wisdom to realise good education within the schools as they exist today, but since the society in which schools are situated are not necessarily just, teachers also have to critically examine the political and social structures that influence teaching. Instead of practical wisdom, the goal of action research is 'transformed consciousness'. Carr and Kemmis' hero is not Aristotle, but Habermas (see Ewert, 1991). Consequently, Carr and Kemmis account cannot answer the question how action research can contribute to the development of practical wisdom.

Carr and Kemmis are, however, not the only researchers who have written about the relation between practical wisdom and the social sciences. Since the early 1990s, the Danish economic geographer Bent Flyvbjerg (2001, 2012) has developed what he calls a 'phronetic social science', explicitly drawing on Aristotle. However, there are several aspects of Flyvbjerg's work that make it less useful for the present purpose. First, his work is mainly on urban policy and planning research and not explicitly on action research, and he makes a division between practitioners and researchers, who remain 'outsiders' getting close to the practice. Second, Flyvbjerg is interested in the Aristotelian notion of *phronesis*, because it would be, contrary to scientific and technical knowledge, concerned with concrete

deliberation about values in planning research. However, just like Carr and Kemmis, Flyvbjerg believes that *phronesis* cannot do all the work in this field, because it would not be able to deal with issues of power. By drawing on Nietzsche and Foucault he tries to develop a contemporary notion of *phronesis* that takes into account the “practical political realities of any situation as part of an integrated judgment in terms of power.” (Flyvbjerg, 2004, p. 284). Thirdly, worries have been aired that Flyvbjerg’s has misunderstood the Aristotelian notion of *phronesis*. He makes too strict a distinction between *phronesis* and *episteme*, equates *phronesis* with Weber’s notion of value rationality, and treats it as a research strategy while it is a kind of knowledge (Eikeland, 2008, pp. 43-45).

A critical follower of Flyvbjerg, the Norwegian philosophers and action researcher Olav Eikeland (2008), has developed an Aristotelian approach to action research by carefully examining the notion of *phronesis*, placing it within the wider context of Aristotle’s theoretical and practical philosophy. Eikeland (2008, pp. 28-31) argues that Aristotle’s main concern was to think “from inside human practices”, i.e from the perspective and the normative standards that practitioners already use. Before we start to systematically reflect, we have already been acting for some time with others in complex practices. Therefore, Aristotle is not interested in how *others* behave – by treating them as research objects, observed by an external researcher – but in *us*, trying to think through and to clarify our lives as actors, extracting from our (prejudiced) experiences intrinsic standards of good conduct. As Aristotle thinks as an engaged practitioner, Eikeland (2008, p. 35) qualifies Aristotle’s way of thinking as a kind of action research. Aristotelian action research would have to foster “dialogical communities” in which practitioners make explicit the assumptions already implicit in their practice. The Greek called this *skhole* (the original meaning of ‘school’), a free and open space for dialogue built into and surrounding practices, protecting them from institutional, political and rhetorical considerations (Eikeland, 2008, p. 33).

How can a free and open space for dialogue contribute to the development of teachers’ practical wisdom? In Eikeland’s view, an Aristotelian approach to action research would have two main ingredients: (1) theoretically oriented or directed, *dialogical* action research, and (2) practically oriented or directed, deliberative and *phronetic* action research (Eikeland, 2008, p. 459). On the one hand, ‘dialogical action research’, it is to help practitioners, by reflecting on experience, to arrive at the basic principles of professional practice. The kind of knowledge that is necessary to achieve this, is not *phronesis*, but another intellectual virtue called *nous* (p. 459). As a human faculty that apprehends fundamental principles, it is not concerned with putting virtues in action, but rather with enquiring what character traits are virtues, and why. On the other hand, ‘phronetic action research’, does *not* develop or define the ends and basic principles”. *Phronesis*, as Aristotle conceived of it, takes principles and ends for granted. So, the context for practical wisdom is not moral development, but how someone, who is already virtuous, can think, feel and act in particular circumstances. “The context is the *performance* of virtue”, as Eikeland (2008, p. 136) puts it.

Eikeland (2008, p. 460) argues that the challenge for contemporary action research is not only to produce practical knowledge *for* action, but also theoretical knowledge *from* action. The two are mutually dependent, since “knowledge *from* action is necessary in order to make it adequate *for* action.” The importance of the dialogical element shows that action research should not be reduced to the application of given ends, but should also inform and transform these ends. By interpreting action research in this way, Eikeland (2008, p. 33) criticizes Habermas’ critique of Aristotle as being a ‘conservative’ philosopher who does not

allow for existing practices and communities to be criticised. Eikeland maintains that an Aristotelian approach to action research is essentially critical. It has been misunderstood because Carr & Kemmis and Flyvbjerg have only shown an interest in practical wisdom, ignoring other aspects of Aristotle's epistemology, such as *nous*. Eikeland (2008, p. 364): "Action research cannot be just *phronesis*. *Nothing* can be merely *phronesis*."

The distinction between 'phronetic' and 'dialogical' action research suggests that dialogue has no place in the cultivation of *phronesis*. However, this can still be the case, as long as a distinction between two 'movements' in a dialogue is made. In a conversation, participants make a 'backward' (regressive) movement when they try to derive more general concepts (e.g. virtues) from experiences in concrete circumstances. The question is then: 'What is apparently virtuous, having acted in the way I did?'. Participants make a 'forward' movement when they apply general concepts to actions in concrete circumstances. The central question is then: "Knowing what virtue is, what should be done in this situation?". While I have argued elsewhere (Sanderse, 2012, ch. 4) that practical wisdom is involved in *both* movements, I now see that Aristotle has a more limited understanding of practical wisdom. Dialogue only contributes to practical wisdom if practitioners, who already know what e.g. justice is in general and want to act accordingly, analyse and interpret the details of the situations they are in, and deliberate together about what to do. Other parts of Aristotle's epistemology (i.e. *nous*) can be appealed to in order to explain how people can gain a better understanding of virtue by reflecting on their actions.

5. Action research and measuring virtue

Now we have seen that action research can contribute to the development of practical wisdom – but is at the same time about much more – we can address in this last section the question how Aristotelian action research can enable teachers to measure pupils' moral character in schools. There are, it seems, two paths that we can follow to answer this question. The first is to explain that (phronetic) action research leads to practical wisdom, and that practical wisdom includes noticing things about the moral character of people in one's vicinity. In this case, however, *measuring* pupils' virtue rather means something like 'noticing' and 'judging' pupils' character. Practical wisdom resembles perception in the sense that is "the ability to recognise, acknowledge, respond to, pick out certain salient features of a complex situation" (Nussbaum, 2001, p. 305). It seems, therefore, that practical wisdom can, in complex classroom settings, help teachers to recognise the kind of character that pupils have (a discriminating eye) and enable them to respond to their observations accordingly. This, in turn, raises the questions whether this is what we expect when we talk about 'measuring' virtue.

The second option is to explain that measuring pupils' characters can be the topic of teachers' action research. By drawing on the whole repertory of the social sciences, and ideally through triangulation, teachers can try to get a more 'objective' picture of pupils' virtues. For example, teachers could use the VIA-Youth to measure people's character traits, or investigate the effect of a character education programmes. This kind of research could contribute to teachers' knowledge of the kind of character that students are developing, but also their practical wisdom? After having seen the results of his pupils John or Mary filling out the VIA-Youth, their teacher *knows* now that John does not consider himself to be very courageous, and Mary thinks she lacks self-discipline. But does the teacher also *recognise* these states of character in the way that the pupils act in the classroom? What is needed for

practical wisdom to develop is experience, for which a quantity of time is needed, and scientific knowledge does not suffice (Aristotle, NE 1142a12-16). While action research can be justified from a more positivistic perspective (see Section 2), it is questionable whether this second option counts as Aristotelian action research, as it concerns research about 'them' (pupils being virtuous or not), and not about teachers as actors, who admit that they have difficulties judging what stage of moral development children's characters are in (see Sanderse, 2013).

In particular in the United States, teachers have conducted action research about character education in schools. While the results of this kind of research is not always published in mainstream educational journals, reports can be found on the internet (a combined search of 'character education' and 'action research' revealed 26.900 hits). Because time and space does not allow me to review all reports, I only looked at the research questions of ten studies¹. Two of them were published in academic journals, one was a PhD-thesis, three were MA-thesis and the rest reports written by teachers or student-teachers doing an internship. Eight out of ten studies evaluated the effects of character education programmes on various students outcomes, such as their knowledge of character traits, positive behaviour in and outside the classroom, bullying, the development of social skills, and their reading achievements. One study explored student voices as they described how they do (not) wish to be treated (Bergmark, 2008) and one study focussed on the implementation process (instead of the results) of a teacher-initiated character education program (Svirbel, 2007). This small sample confirms what Berkowitz & Bier (2005) found in their study of existing scientific research on the effects of K-12 character education. They counted and examined 33 programs with evidence supporting their effectiveness in promoting character development in students. While they do not explicitly mention action research in their report, our small inventory makes clear that many teachers measure the effect of character education programs they have chosen or invented on specific ends they have set themselves.

None of these teacher-researchers have investigated whether working with character education program has contributed to the development of their own moral character and practical wisdom. Their research starts out from an outside point of view, with teachers observing the effects of teaching strategies and programmes on children's behaviour. This reduces their actions to 'interventions' that are to bring about a kind of 'character education' that is supposed to be self-explanatory. However, education does not produce

¹ Svirbel, E. A. (2007). *Action research: the description and analysis of the implementation process of a teacher-initiated character education program in an elementary school* (PhD-thesis, University of Pittsburgh); Bergmark, U. (2008). 'I want people to believe in me, listen when I say something and remember me' – how students wish to be treated. *Pastoral Care in Education* 26(4), 267–279; Freeman, G.G. (2013). The implementation of character education and children's literature to teach bullying characteristics and prevention strategies to preschool children: an action research project. *Early Childhood Education Journal*. DOI: 10.1007/s10643-013-1614-5; Montonye, M., Butenhoff, S., Krinke, S. (2013). *The influence of character education on positive behavior in the classroom* (MA-thesis St. Catherine University & St. Paul, Minnesota); Bowman, M.L. & Potts, A. (2001). *The building blocks of character education: respect, responsibility, citizenship* (MA-thesis, St. Xavier University, Chicago, Illinois); Duer, M., Parisi, A. & Valintis, M. (2002). *Character education effectiveness* (MA-thesis, Saint Xavier University, Chicago, Illinois). Copeland, R. (2010). Integrating character education across the curriculum: Unique student responses to respect and responsibility. *A Rising Tide* 3; Reed, L. (2004). *Action research: character education in an elementary school setting* (Portland State University); O'Leary, N. (2010). *The effects of character education on reading achievement* (CUNY Brooklyn College, New York); Butler, L. (2005). *Using technology to teach character to middle school students* (Valdosta State University Graduate School).

separate products that are independent from their maker. The moral character of the teachers makes all the difference in children's education, and what it means to acquire a character will only gradually emerge from the process itself. Aristotle was interested in the fluid, unruly 'world below', from which he tried to derive standards (Eikeland, 2008, p. 87). If we stay true to this Aristotelian insight, action research about character (education) should primarily be conducted by teachers who investigate *themselves*, as subjects that put virtues in action and, by reflecting on experience, develop refine their ideas about what it means to lead a virtuous life.

6. Conclusion

As more and more research is done about character in British schools, the question can be raised how teachers can be engaged in such a way that the research has a real impact on pupils' moral development. From an Aristotelian perspective, measuring virtue should, in the end, not just yield knowledge about character, but help us to *acquire* it. By describing three perspectives on action research, and their presence in the twentieth century history of (British) action research, I have tried to explain that there is a large body of knowledge that can help us to understand what it means that practitioners take ownership of character research. Moreover, I have tried to show that there is a distinctive Aristotelian approach to action research, which has sometimes been misunderstood because of the complicated nature of practical wisdom within Aristotle's corpus. From an Aristotelian perspective, teachers engaged in action research do not only develop *phronesis*, but also *nous*. These intellectual virtues can be practiced through dialogues that have both a 'virtue-specifying' and an 'action-guiding' aspect. In today's schools, such dialogues can only be realised if schools become what they used to be, offering free time and space to systematically and collectively discuss two basic questions, the one being "What should we, given our understanding of virtue, do in this situation?", the other "What do we, given the way we acted, apparently consider to be virtuous?". From an Aristotelian action research approach, we should not be lured into thinking that 'measuring virtue' means that we know what virtue is. Instead of focussing on detecting virtue in others, or developing the best means to ensure that other acquire it, teachers would better take their own measure first, and invite students in joining their search for a good life.

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