Catching Character Through Phronetic Teachers

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Character as caught and taught: The Educational Power of Phronetic Teachers

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Introduction

A series of recent social phenomena – such as the COVID-19 pandemic (Moulin-Stożek et al., 2022), ongoing wars and international conflicts (Fisher, 2012), the massification of technology (Vallor, 2016), social fragmentation (Hernández-González, 2024), and the rising prevalence of mental health issues (Yoon et al., 2022), among others –, has reignited debate about the ultimate purposes and aims of education (McLoughlin & Kristjánsson, 2025). In this context, scholars from various disciplines, including philosophy, education, psychology, and theology, have argued that the primary goal of education should be human flourishing (de Ruyter et al., 2022; Kristjánsson, 2019; Martela, 2024; Wolbert et al., 2018). Against this backdrop, the concept of human flourishing has re-emerged as a central reference point for defining the ultimate goal of education.

1. Human flourishing as the primary goal of education

According to Aristotle, human flourishing (*eudaimonia*) is achieved through the cultivation of virtue. This insight continues to resonate in today's discussions about the goals of education, leadership, and personal development. In fact, numerous contemporary authors have inherited Aristotle's concept of human flourishing and have tried to go further in its conceptualization. As a result, it has been frequently conceived as an integral and multifaceted phenomenon. One of the problems associated with that plural definition—contributed to by various disciplines such as psychology, health sciences, philosophy, among others—is that human flourishing is often understood as the integral development or growth of a person in all their dimensions, that is, physical, mental, emotional, social, moral, spiritual, among others. In other words, general wellbeing. An example of this postulate is embodied by the Harvard Human Flourishing Program that identifies five universal domains of human flourishing: (i) happiness and life satisfaction, (ii) physical and mental health, (iii) meaning and purpose, (iv) character and virtue, (v) close social relationships (VanderWeele, 2017). Similarly, there are authors (McLoughlin et al., 2025) who claim that the World Health Organization's holistic definition of wellbeing that includes emotional, physical, meaning and purpose, character strengths, social bonds, and financial stability, is "*reasonably close to a neo-Aristotelian conception of flourishing*" (p. 15).

Contrary to those definitions, this article attempts to revive the original meaning of the concept, which does not imply that a flourishing life is free from suffering – no human life is. Rather, a flourishing life is marked by the virtuous exercise of reason and the development of a morally good character. As Aristotle put it, "*The aim of our studies is not to know what virtue is, but to become good*" (Aristotle, 1985). Consequently, this Aristotelian notion implies an ideal: It is never perfectly attained but always achieved relatively and is continuous; everyone flourishes to some degree and can always improve (Bernal Martínez de Soria & Naval, 2023).

Consequently, if we maintain that human flourishing is the actualization of human potential so that each person leads a good life, the development of character would be one of the facets of said fulfillment of the human being. Even more, the good character would be the "heart" and "head" of the human potential and its actualization (Bernal Martínez de Soria & Naval, 2023). Based on that definition of human flourishing, it is then possible to claim that the final aim of education is human flourishing, which means helping to update the intrinsic orientation of human nature (Joseph et al., 2020) and contributing to the development of people's internal qualities and capacities (Mollvik, 2021). If we accept that human flourishing constitutes the ultimate aim of education, the next question is how this ideal translates into practice within schools, and what kind of institutions are required to nurture it (Bernal Martínez de Soria & Naval, 2023).

One influential starting point for understanding how schools foster character is the work by the Jubilee Centre's model., The Jubilee Centre for Character and Virtues at the University of Birmingham. In their influential 2022 framework, scholars from the Centre define it as "*all explicit and implicit educational activities that help young people to develop positive personal strengths called virtues*" (Jubilee Centre, 2022, p. 6). In this view, schools committed to character education are places where character is *caught*, *taught*, and *sought*, providing students with both implicit and explicit opportunities to develop good character.

The first of the three dimensions highlighted—character as something "caught"—deserves closer attention. By "caught", the framework refers to the influence of a school's ethos, community life, and interpersonal relationships – those implicit features that transmit values through example and environment (Arthur et al., 2016). It is on this dimension of

transmission, within schools, by exemplarity, that we will focus in our paper. In particular, we will (i) defend the relevance of an exemplarist approach within schools of character; (ii) suggest that teachers, as bearers of "ordinary" practical wisdom, as opposed to saintliness or heroism typical of outstanding exemplars, play a decisive role in this respect; and (iii) that such ordinary phronesis should be cultivated in teachers and future teachers. We will also propose that one particular model of phronesis, the monistic one defended by the Aretai Center on Virtues, is particularly fruitful for this purpose.

2. Exemplars in schools: How character is "caught"

Linda Zagzebski's work in moral theory over the last decade provides one of the most comprehensive frameworks for explaining how role models can promote both moral and intellectual growth through the emotion of admiration. Her approach —known as *exemplarism*— describes how our admiration for exemplars shapes the moral concepts of a community, and in particular their conception of virtuous behavior, and inspires their members to emulate the actions of the exemplars(Zagzebski, 2010, 2017).

Although the theory has been primarily elaborated as a moral one, exemplarism has immediately revived interest among education scholars in the educational importance of role models, to the point that a whole branch of character education has arisen. Exemplarist character education claims that moral exemplars play a fundamental role in character formation and the development of virtue, serving as models that inspire and guide individuals toward morally excellent conduct (Croce & Vaccarezza, 2017). Far from being a peripheral element of ethical theory, or at best just a motivational factor, exemplars are central to understanding how people actually learn and embody moral qualities. Unlike approaches that focus solely on abstract principles, the influence of moral exemplars operates through lived experience, emotional engagement, and the concrete demonstration of virtues in action (Han, 2024).

The role of moral exemplars can be understood through several key aspects. The first one is the identification and cultivation of virtues: moral exemplars are key to identifying, classifying, and cultivating virtues (Croce, 2020). Many moral theories tend to overlook or underestimate this function. From the perspective of Aristotelian virtue ethics, moral

development does not primarily focus on understanding principles of conduct, but rather on the "*cultivation of a range of sensitivities to the particularities of moral engagement*," which implies a crucial interaction between the cognitive and the affective (Han, 2024). Character is "caught" more through modeling and emotional contagion than through the study of abstract values.

The impact of exemplars on moral education depends on several key dynamics. Admiration is a primary moral emotion that allows individuals to recognize the value of moral examples. Whether encountered directly or through stories, encountering a moral exemplar triggers admiration, which can inspire profound personal transformation (Han & Dawson, 2024). However, this admiration must be critically guided to ensure it is directed toward genuine virtues rather than misleading traits (Croce, 2019, 2020; Archer & Matheson, 2021). Alongside admiration comes emulation or imitation, a natural behavioral response to admired figures. Through imitating virtuous actions, individuals can begin to acquire virtues themselves, though caution is necessary to avoid adopting flawed models (Croce, 2019, 2020). Complementing these processes is conscious reflection (Zagzebski 2017), which enables individuals to examine their admiration, verify the traits they admire, and ensure that the virtues they seek to emulate are truly worthy.

But which kind of exemplars? Some have argued that when considering the educational advantages of different types of exemplars, both heroes and saints offer unique benefits. Saintly figures, such as Socrates or Jesus, who embody, in the common understanding, the perfection of virtue, can inspire their admirers to aim for the highest reaches of human potential. Heroes, on the other hand, as exemplars of courage, who often lack other important virtues, such as Oskar Schindler, are potentially even more effective because they are relatable and attainable. Their humanity, including their non-virtuous traits, makes them approachable models whose moral excellence does not seem impossibly distant. Their flaws can even serve a pedagogical purpose by stimulating students' moral imagination and illustrating the consequences of immoral behavior. Heroes are especially effective in helping students detect specific virtues because they typically embody a limited set of them (Croce, 2020; Croce & Vaccarezza, 2017).

3. Limits of exemplars: Concerns and critiques

Yet, despite the promise of exemplars in shaping moral character, their educational role is not without difficulties. Several scholars have raised concerns that complicate a straightforward reliance on exemplars. Scholars have identified at least four areas of concern: (i) how emulation should be understood, (ii) the risks of uncritical admiration, (iii) the contextual challenges and potential negative outcomes of improper implementation, and (iv) the influence of broader sociocultural factors.

First, emulation is widely regarded as an essential process for the development of moral character and virtue. Unlike imitation, which involves copying behaviors, emulation is a more complex process that includes grasping the underlying mechanisms that make virtuous action possible across contexts. Aristotle associated emulation with the desire to acquire valuable qualities one lacks, but some contemporary authors propose reconceptualizing it as a moral virtue in itself. This would involve not only admiration but also virtuous action, including four components: (a) perceiving the excellence of the role model, (b) evaluating it through phronesis, (c) feeling admiration and motivation, and (d) acting virtuously toward flourishing. Central to this is shared phronesis, whereby the learner initially relies on the model's practical wisdom and later integrates it into their own through action, explanation, and reflection. However, critics highlight the conceptual and methodological ambiguity of emulation, noting the lack of clarity regarding what it truly entails and how it should be practiced (Henderson). Without action, they argue, emulation becomes an "impotent" form of moral development.

Second, admiration plays a central role in exemplar-based education, but it can also mislead. Simply narrating the life of an exemplar may remain superficial and fail to translate into real-life practice (Navarini). Moreover, admiration can attach to non-virtuous traits, leading to flawed moral guidance (Henderson; Croce & Vaccarezza, 2017). Hero worship poses a particular danger: extraordinary exemplars may inspire blind idealization or create demotivation when their excellence seems unattainable. Even charismatic influence, while powerful, is not necessarily virtuous and can lead to vice. For this reason, scholars argue that the true criterion for selecting role models should not be admiration alone but the presence of practical wisdom (phronesis).

Third, another criticism is that mere exposure to exemplars is insufficient for cultivating virtue. The complexity of human morality cannot be reduced to storytelling or behavioral rules; emotions must be cultivated deliberately (Han). Without reflective and guided engagement, exemplars risk becoming ineffective or even counterproductive. Improper implementation may result in moral inertia, superficial learning, or demotivation when exemplars are presented as distant or unattainable figures. Han & Dawson (2024) stress that relatability and attainability—models whose actions appear within reach—are crucial for moral elevation, since neither heroes nor saints easily function as effective guides for students' everyday moral growth (Croce et al., forthcoming).

Finally, the effectiveness of role modeling is deeply shaped by cultural and systemic contexts. At macro and meso levels, cultural norms, social policies, and institutional structures can either reinforce or undermine the positive influence of exemplars (Han). In societies where virtues are undervalued—or where anti-moral behaviors are normalized—role models may have diminished impact or even become "negative examples." This makes it essential to embed exemplar-based education within supportive environments that provide supervision, mentoring, and opportunities for self-cultivation. Reflective and deliberative practices are also necessary so that students critically engage with both positive and negative examples.

These theoretical concerns find empirical support in the evaluation of the Narnian Virtues program, which employed C.S. Lewis's *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe* to present students with literary characters who model virtues such as courage, fortitude, love, wisdom, humility, and self-control. While students were encouraged to empathize with the characters and analyze their moral choices, the program's outcomes highlight the very limitations that philosophers have warned against. In a large-scale study with more than 700 students aged 11–12 in England, the program produced significant gains in students' knowledge and understanding of virtues but no significant improvements in their recognition of situations to practice virtue, virtue as motivation, attitudes toward virtues, or self-evaluation of conduct (Pike et al., 2021). In other words, students learned about virtues but did not become more disposed to practice them. This outcome validates the philosophical concern that extraordinary or idealized exemplars—such as heroes, saints, or literary characters—may inform moral cognition but fail to foster the dispositions and practical wisdom necessary for authentic moral development.

4. From extraordinary exemplars to phronetic teachers

Taken together, these concerns—both theoretical and empirical—suggest that extraordinary exemplars such as saints, heroes, and literary characters are insufficient for genuine moral formation. This recognition forces education to consider what lies beyond extraordinary exemplars, and how ordinary models might serve as more realistic guides. Social learning theory helps explain why this is problematic. According to Bandura (1977; 1986), much human behavior is acquired through observing others and imitating their actions, attitudes, and the consequences they receive. Human beings are inherently social learners, acquiring not only behaviors but also attitudes, values, and coping strategies from the models they consider significant. Such modeling may occur directly—through parents, teachers, or peers—or symbolically—through characters in literature, television, or digital media. In this sense, example and modeling are not peripheral to human development but constitute fundamental mechanisms of learning, particularly in childhood. If moral learning occurs primarily through social observation, then the ineffectiveness of extraordinary, distant exemplars leaves education with only one viable alternative: broadening the notion of exemplarity to include ordinary individuals whose lives reflect everyday struggles (Croce et al., forthcoming). These more accessible and relatable figures, Croce and colleagues argue, are better positioned to sustain moral motivation and guide processes of character formation.

Yet this shift brings with it two closely related educational challenges. The first is the *moral threshold problem*: many potential role models—such as teachers—lack the level of *phronesis* required to inspire genuine virtuous emulation in students (Henderson). This deficit risks producing what Henderson calls a "developmental moral misadventure," particularly among children who already lack adequate models at home. Moreover, emulation itself entails a paradox: it is meant for learners who lack *phronesis*, yet it requires precisely this capacity to succeed, even if it is shared only partially with the model. The second is the *scarcity problem*, highlighted by Han and Dawson (2024) and Croce et al. (forthcoming). Virtuous role models are neither widespread nor evenly distributed in society, meaning that those who most need them—such as students in search of moral formation—often have the least access to them.

The recognition of the limitations of extraordinary exemplars underscores the urgent need to focus on those who interact with students most directly and consistently: teachers (Yacek & Jonas, 2023). While stories of saints, heroes, or literary figures may inspire admiration, it is teachers—through their daily presence, actions, and decisions—who serve as the most immediate and impactful character developers for students. Their influence extends beyond the transmission of academic content or intellectual capacities, shaping students' moral sensitivities, habits, and aspirations. In fact, a substantial body of international empirical evidence consistently demonstrates that the teacher is the most important intra-school variable in explaining students' learning (Kersting et al., 2010). This finding highlights that no other school-related factor has a comparable impact on student learning, underscoring the decisive role teachers play not only in academic instruction but also in the broader moral and personal development of their students (Arthur et al., 2016; Lian et al., 2020; Rao et al., 2024).

Against this backdrop, the question arises: if sainthood and heroism are not widespread, and one cannot expect ordinary people to embody them, what can we realistically expect from teachers? Would heroic teachers serve the purpose of inspiring appropriate admiration, given the diminished relatability that moral perfection entails? Our answer to these related questions centers on the role of phronesis, or practical wisdom.

Recent scholarship has warned, however, that advocates of phronesis in teacher education often overstate its immediate attainability. For example, Yacek and Jonas (2023) argue that the cultivation of full-fledged phronesis requires years of ethical habituation (ethismos), something most pre-service teachers have not yet undergone. As a result, they suggest that teacher education should not presume to produce fully phronetic practitioners but rather create conditions for what they call epiphanies: transformative experiences that inspire teachers to embark on the long journey toward practical wisdom.

Unlike sanctity or heroism, practical wisdom, however difficult to obtain, has features that make it an attainable idea, and one that is crucial for character schools: (i) it is a scalar virtue that can be acquired by degrees; (ii) it represents the full-fledged realization of ordinary, not extraordinary, morality, without implying for its possessor to achieve overdemanding results or accomplish supererogatory acts; (iii) it is crucial to form character and virtue in oneself

and in others, being the meta-virtue that supervises the moral life; (iv) it equips its possessor with an ability to face moral dilemmas, as well as ordinary choices; (v) it is the object of renewed interest in both philosophy and psychology, which ensures the availability of useful operationalizations of the concept which make it possible to be taught and transferred.

In character schools, teachers must be formed in character and equipped with the capacity for practical wisdom (Carr et al., 2016; Kristjánsson, 2015; Revell & Arthur, 2007). Without such preparation, teachers risk becoming inadequate or even counterproductive models (Sanderse, 2013), perpetuating the very scarcity of virtuous exemplars that character education seeks to overcome (Arthur et al., 2016). This challenge calls for deliberate investment in teacher training programs that integrate moral and professional formation, ensuring that teachers are not only conveyors of knowledge but also cultivators of virtue (Yacek & Jonas, 2023). In this way, moving "beyond extraordinary exemplars" leads directly to the recognition of phronetic teachers as the cornerstone of character education. Their capacity to embody and deliberately teach virtues (Lickona, 1992) makes them indispensable agents of human flourishing—provided they receive the appropriate training to fulfill this demanding responsibility.

In relation to teaching, Kristjánsson (2024) argues that *phronesis* aims to re-equip teachers with the capacity and responsibility to make excellent ethical decisions, grounded in their moral/civic virtues and their understanding of situational complexity—something codified formulas can never replace. The absence of attention to *phronesis* in teaching practice and teacher education is considered by him as an act of de-professionalization.

5. **Training teachers to become phronetic**

The evidence generated in teacher training contexts shows that a highly effective teacher—that is, one who promotes quality learning in all students—is not born knowing how to do so, nor does such competence develop merely through the accumulation of years of classroom experience. Rather, outstanding performance is achieved through systematic and high-quality practice (Ericsson, 2006; Ericsson, 2014). By *quality practice* we understand practice-based opportunities that give novice teachers the possibility to integrate both disciplinary content and pedagogical strategies acquired through coursework, and to apply

them in situations that meet the following characteristics: (i) *focus*: quality practices must concentrate on those central or critical elements of disciplinary content and pedagogical practice identified as what every teacher must know and be able to do (Loewenberg Ball & Forzani, 2009); (ii) *duration*: the amount of time provided to prospective teachers to extend learning and achieve an adequate mastery of critical content and pedagogical practice must be sufficient to ensure they are prepared from the very beginning of their professional practice (Hindman et al., 2016; La Paz et al., 2011); (iii) *coherence*: coherence is determined by the existence of common expectations regarding teaching practices, and by the reinforcement and deepening of these practices throughout courses and real-world experiences. Additionally, it is influenced by whether courses are properly aligned, sequenced, and scaffolded (Phillips et al., 2004; Phillips et al., 2011); and (iv) *progression*: As prospective teachers advance along their training pathway, the knowledge and skills they must develop progressively increase in complexity.

In this context, the Aretai Centre's model of practical wisdom provides a valuable framework for understanding what such teacher training entails. The Aretai model's *monistic* view of virtue proposes that practical wisdom is a transferable form of ethical expertise (De Caro et al., 2025; Hacker-Wright, 2024; Vaccarezza et al., 2023). Rather than treating virtues as separate and independent traits, this model interprets them as contextual expressions of a single integrated moral competence. Drawing on skill-based accounts of both virtue (Annas, 2011; Stichter, 2018) and wisdom (Swartwood, 2013; Tsai, 2022) and on the literature on expertise in complex domains. Aretai identify four constitutive skills of *phronesis*:

Moral Perception. The ability to recognize morally relevant factors and conflicts within a given context (Kagan, 1998). Like experts in other domains, morally wise individuals rely on intuitive pattern recognition to process ethical dilemmas efficiently (Darnell et al., 2019; Dreyfus & Dreyfus, 1991).

Moral Deliberation. The capacity to weigh competing values, outcomes, and arguments in a goal-oriented manner (Hacker-Wright, 2024; Stichter, 2015). Moral experts develop rich complex mental models that enable them to navigate complexity, akin to professionals operating in high-stakes environments (Hoffman, 1998; Klein et al., 2010).

Emotion Regulation. The skill of integrating emotions into ethical reasoning without succumbing to bias or impulsivity (Greene et al., 2004; Helion & Ochsner, 2018). Effective moral agents neither suppress emotions nor allow them to override rational deliberation (De Caro & Marraffa, 2016; Greene et al., 2004; Navarini, 2023).

Moral Motivation. The intrinsic commitment to prioritize ethical considerations and act in accordance with one's best judgments (Nichols, 2004). Unlike akratic agents, morally wise individuals consistently translate moral insight into action (De Caro et al., 2021)

Having outlined the constitutive skills of phronesis, the next step is to consider how these capacities can be intentionally cultivated in teacher education. Regarding the methods of teaching phronesis, Kristjánsson (2024) notes that, since Aristotle did not delve into pedagogical details, we must rely on informed conjectures. Ethics education guided by phronesis should begin with the development of the constitutive function, also known as moral sensitivity—the capacity to identify ethical dilemmas. For this, the presentation of workplace dilemmas to teachers-in-training is proposed, asking them to analyze these and consider possible courses of action. A crucial component of this initial educational work is virtue literacy, which involves the ability to recognize, name, and apply virtues to personal experiences. Moreover, it is emphasized that professional ethics is largely acquired by "osmosis" from the work environment and organizational culture; a school ethos that does not promote virtue, or that is adverse to individual reflection, can hinder the development of phronesis. Therefore, the learning environment must be conducive to virtuous development.

By framing these skills—constitutive of practical wisdom—within the paradigm of expert skill acquisition, Aretai proposal strengthens philosophical treatments of virtue by connecting them with psychological research on the processes of expertise development and performance that are fully coherent with existing evidence of how teaching expertise develops (Ericsson et al., 2018; Kahneman & Klein, 2009; Phillips et al., 2004). In addition, this proposal further strengthens virtue-centered perspectives in moral psychology compared to alternative approaches to moral decision-making (Greene, 2014; Haidt, 2001), since it highlights the complex, context-dependent, and dynamic nature of moral reasoning (Alfano, 2013; De Caro et al., 2018; Sauer, 2012).

Conclusion

For teachers, cultivating the four skills of phronesis is not optional but essential: moral perception helps them recognize the ethical dimensions of daily classroom interactions; deliberation guides their judgment in complex educational dilemmas; emotion regulation enables them to respond constructively in high-stress environments; and moral motivation sustains their long-term commitment to students' flourishing. Thus, effective and significant teacher preparation must go beyond developing technical pedagogical skills to intentionally cultivate these dimensions of practical wisdom. By doing so, teachers become not only facilitators of knowledge but also cultivators of moral expertise, capable of guiding students toward flourishing through both word and deed.

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