

Article

Patterns of Acting Wisely: A Virtue Ethical Approach to the Professional Formation of Christian Teachers

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Abstract: Teachers require well-formed characters to practise their profession. Following previous research on the role of virtue in teachers' professional practice, the author argues that teachers require patterns of wise action. Based on Aristotle's cardinal virtues and Thomas Aquinas's theological virtues, he elaborates on how such patterns can emerge in teachers' professional formation. After considering the possibilities and limitations of practising virtuously and making patterns of wise action, the author proposes a model for empirical research on the role of virtues in teachers' actions.

Keywords: professional formation; character formation; virtue ethics; teacher education

1. Introduction

Good teaching is intrinsically connected to a teacher's identity and integrity. This led Parker Palmer (1998) to claim that 'good teaching comes from good people' (p. 13). A teacher's personal qualities and dispositions are constitutive of good teaching (Beijaard et al. 2020; Carr 2006, 2007; De Mynck and Kunz 2022; Kelchtermans 2009, 2023). When we conceive of the role of teachers as not only sharing knowledge but primarily embodying values in wise action, this implies that teachers' professionalism demands not just that they follow certain rules but that they are well-formed persons (Carr 2006). In this article, we elaborate on this from the viewpoint of character formation; that is, good teaching not only presupposes subject knowledge, pedagogical–didactic knowledge and skills but also, above all, the teacher's well-formed character.

Connecting professionalism to character enters the realm of virtue ethics, i.e., the values teachers cherish and how they live out these values in virtues in their professional practice. We explore a virtue ethical perspective on the formation of teachers, particularly Christian teachers. However, living out values by virtues can also be applied to other beliefs. The main question is as follows: how do teachers form themselves as professionals to embody values and express those values through virtuous actions? Because virtues presuppose a context (social or cultural), we begin by exploring the significance of character formation in teachers' professionalism with the help of the theory of social practices, as elaborated by the British philosopher Alisdair MacIntyre (Section 2). Thereafter, we approach character formation from the perspective of Aristotelian virtue ethics and from a Christian point of view with the help of Thomas Aquinas's theological virtues of faith, hope and love (Section 3). Next, we turn to the questions of how acting wisely can be acquired and whether forming patterns for wise action is applicable to virtue ethics (Section 4). Although this article is mainly conceptual, it aims to provide empirical research on the formation of teachers' character. Therefore, we develop a model for empirical research (Section 5). We end with the limitations of this article and perspectives for further research (Section 6).



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2. Professionalism and the Formation of Character: Theoretical Considerations

What does it entail to consider the professional formation of teachers from the perspective of character formation? First, we remark on terminology concerning what is meant by ‘professionalism’ and ‘character formation’. We relate both terms to each other with the help of MacIntyre’s (2019) theory of social practices.

According to the Dutch philosopher Gerrit Glas (2019), professionalism is ‘a unique combination of roles, excellence and commitment, which includes personal dedication to the welfare of others, mastery at a high level of skills and knowledge, sensitivity to the art of the profession, and a wide range of other commitments’ (p. 3). To this, we add that, for professionals, authority and confidence are presuppositions for their actions. From an educational point of view, it is important to underline that fostering others’ well-being always has a normative dimension because it requires the determination of what is necessary and desirable for a person in a specific context (Biesta 2020). This implies that professionalism appeals to the personality of the teacher, to their values and norms and to their wise decisions in practice.

When it comes to the virtuous action of teachers, we enter the field of character formation. In this context, ‘character’ should not be constrained to personality traits; regarding virtues, it is about patterns enabling people to act appropriately. For this, we refer to the Greek *χαρακτήρ*, which means ‘something carved in’, from which the word ‘character’ is derived. For the formation of a teacher’s character, we may think of patterns that enable the teacher to act wisely by developing dispositions and habits that determine actions. Although not all patterns are good, since there are also bad habits (vices), we restrict them here to virtues because vices do not contribute to wise action. Virtues enable people to act in a good manner without much deliberation. As we argue below, this does not mean a denial of the deliberative character of virtuous action. Rather, it is a plea for deliberation based on practical experiences and is related to the teachers’ values. It enables teachers to think about what constitutes the right action in a specific situation and to evaluate their actions in order to act wisely when prompt intervention is required. This matters for teachers’ professional practice, as they often need to act promptly. Besides this, a plea for patterns does not deny the uniqueness of the person acting, since character is personal in nature. The development of a virtuous professional follows an unpredictable path unique to every teacher (De Muijnck and Kunz 2022, p. 50). Patterns are not a one-size-fits-all principle but, as we argue, a personal habituation of virtues.

We elaborate on the relationship between professionalism and virtuousness with the help of MacIntyre’s (2019) concept of social practices (pp. 218–22). Doing good is at the very heart of his virtue ethics. However, what does it mean to do the good, since Western culture has become increasingly individualistic since the Enlightenment? According to MacIntyre, there has been a cultural loss of virtue because doing the right thing presupposes a common purpose. However, there is no necessity to end in the swamp of moral relativism, since there are still practices that tie people together with a shared narrative to achieve a common goal. In this context, MacIntyre introduced the concept of social practices. People are united by practices in a shared goal. In the case of education, this is teaching students to form themselves into responsible members of society. In MacIntyre’s virtue ethical vocabulary, such a goal is an internal good; it is inherently linked to practice.

According to MacIntyre (2019), each practice has its own narrative—that is, a story about what is essential, what is worth pursuing or, on the contrary, what should be avoided. Working towards a common goal presupposes not only engagement with the mission but also virtuous actions that contribute to the achievement of the goal. According to MacIntyre, the purpose of social practice and the virtues cultivated for that purpose are determined by

philosophical traditions. For professionals, a narrative is important: ‘I can only answer the question “What am I to do?” if I can answer the prior question “Of what story or stories do I find myself a part?”’ (p. 250). Stories are embedded in traditions. For this reason, MacIntyre spoke of social practices. The collective narrative is embodied in standards of excellence; that is, what do professionals think about regarding the means and goals of their profession, and how do they contribute to the mission of the organisation? For teachers, we can think of examples of good teachers as well as of the vocational standards they must relate to. The latter makes clear that a virtue ethical approach to teachers’ professionalism does not necessarily imply the rejection of duties. We do not have to play off virtue ethics against duty ethics. However, from a virtue ethical perspective, duty is more than doing what is obligatory. It presupposes that people have an inner disposition, so they have a readiness to do what is assigned. Without character development, teachers may meet professional standards, but that itself does not make them teachers (Carr 2007). A human enterprise such as education is not just contractual but also moral (Carr 2006; De Muynck and Kunz 2022). When the personality of the teacher, their ideals and their (pedagogical) actions are at stake, we need a vocabulary of virtues. For this reason, we now turn to teachers’ formation of character, especially for Christian teachers, with the help of a philosophical–theological framework.

3. Background: Aristotle and Aquinas on the Formation of Character

What does an approach to teachers’ professional formation entail from a virtue ethical perspective? First, we address character virtues, as elaborated on by the Greek philosopher Aristotle, who is commonly regarded as the father of virtue ethics. Thereafter, we consider theological virtues added to Aristotelian virtues by the Doctor of the Church, Thomas Aquinas.

According to Aristotle, virtue ethics is about how virtuously a person should live (Aristotle 2009, p. 3). Its overarching goal is to live a good life with happiness (eudaimonia). A person who exercises well the desires and intellectual functions of the soul displays virtue (Van Hooft 2006). Therefore, for Aristotle, being virtuous is not about rules or principles but about the cultivation of character. In other words, not doing certain things but being a certain kind of person is at the very heart of Aristotle’s virtue ethics (Arthur 2020). For teacher education, this is a relevant point of view. Vocational training is more than learning skills; it is about the formation of teachers’ character. In this context, we can refer to Aristotle’s goal of living a good life as contributing to pupils’ well-being. This is, in terms of MacIntyre’s (2019) social practices, one of the internal goods of educational practice (e.g., preparing pupils for society).

In *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle discerns several virtues of character, such as prudence, justice, courage and self-control, which enable people to do what is right (Aristotle 2009, pp. 49–79). To discern what is good, people need intellectual virtues, especially the virtue of practical wisdom (phronesis) (pp. 102–10). The latter is constitutive of the former because the primary activity of character is practical reasoning, whereby each person deliberates and then freely chooses what makes their life a good life (Arthur 2020). Applied to teachers, practical wisdom is needed to determine how to act towards the individual pupil, the whole class, the school, parents and society. To act wisely, teachers also need character virtues. We can consider the Aristotelian virtues of prudence, justice, courage and self-control. Teachers must be able to assess a situation: what is going on with a pupil or between pupils? What do they need at a specific time? This includes assessing the differences in approach between individual pupils (prudence). A safe classroom climate is important for the learning process and for living together; everyone is entitled to equal, respectful treatment (justice). Teachers must be able to raise controversial issues in their

educational programmes and make difficult decisions given the pedagogical situation, even if this may put their relationships with pupils under pressure in those moments (courage). Finally, virtuous teachers are able to manage themselves (self-control).

Aristotle defined virtue as the mean between two extremes (Aristotle 2009, pp. 29–31), e.g., courage sits between hubris and cowardice. Acting virtuously implies that a person who acts knows what the good entails in a specific situation. It demands avoiding excess and deficiency. This presupposes rational consideration followed by good intentional action. Acting virtuously demands habituation. It is important to stress that Aristotle had everyday life in mind here. The plea for the mean does not imply that he advocated mediocrity. There can be situations of extreme and intense actions that are not habitual. For everyday situations, however, it is important that teachers are able to assess what kind of response is desirable. Therefore, they consider the interests of both the individual pupil and the group. In doing so, the mean does not imply mediocrity but rather pedagogically based action. Internalising virtuous action is important because they must usually make pedagogical decisions in a split second.

Regarding character formation and virtues, one important point remains. For Aristotle, being virtuous is more than doing one's duty. It is even more than acquiring the disposition to act properly. It involves wanting to act in a certain way (Aristotle 2009, pp. 27–28; cf. Van Hooft 2006). Virtuous action presupposes a disposition gained by habituation, but its most important feature is readiness. As stated in the previous section, for the formation of a teacher's character, this is a key issue. Acting virtuously requires more than a correct understanding of one's task; it demands commitment. Readiness presumes being available to others.

Aristotelian virtues are compatible with various philosophies of life. It is helpful for teachers to develop a professional attitude aimed at pupils' well-being. In different contexts, virtues such as prudence, justice, courage and self-control are important for teachers' actions, although the cultural context gives its own elaboration of these virtues. This is also true when we look at teachers' character formation from a Christian perspective. Christian teachers share their professionalism with colleagues who hold different beliefs. However, although there are shared virtues, how virtues are valued may differ. Regarding this, we must keep in mind MacIntyre's (2019) observation that Aristotle's virtues do not converge with those of St. Paul (p. 215). To Aristotle, they are about the hero's functioning as a citizen of the polis (the city-state). This includes virtues such as prudence, justice, courage and self-control. However, it does not entail, for instance, faith, hope or love, or Christian virtues connected with them, such as humility and forgiveness. For Aristotle, these virtues have a different focus compared to St. Paul; for the former, the focus is specifically on the virtuous person while, for St. Paul, they are directed towards the other, particularly towards God.

Assuming that practices have their own narratives, with virtues as their embodiment, what does this mean for a Christian view of teachers' character formation and for acting wisely? To answer this question, we return to MacIntyre's (2019) concept of social practices. Virtues are not all the same, and they are defined by philosophical traditions. From the Christian tradition, we introduce three virtues: faith, hope and love (see 1 Cor. 13). When we want to include these virtues in the character formation of teachers, we refer to Thomas Aquinas. It would go beyond the scope of this article to cover Aquinas's doctrine of virtues at length. For our argument, it is insightful that Aquinas adopted Aristotle's character virtues, which he called 'cardinal virtues', in the *Summa Theologiae* (Q. 61) (Aquinas 2017, pp. 537–45). As Aquinas argued, these virtues are dispositions and habits acquired through practice. In line with Aristotle, a virtuous life is rationally grounded. Aquinas also adopted the teleological structure of Aristotle's virtue ethics. However, the goal itself was different:

not the happiness of the individual but happiness in loving God (Arthur 2020). This is an important point because it puts the Aristotelian virtues in a new configuration (e.g., of serving God). In addition, he distinguished in the *Summa Theologiae* (Q. 62) three other virtues: faith, hope and love (Aquinas 2017, pp. 547–54; cf. Kaczor 2008; Kaczor and Sherman 2008). Aquinas called them ‘theological virtues’ because God is their object, they are gained by grace and they can only be known through divine revelation (Aquinas 2017). Theological virtues cannot be acquired through habituation, on one’s own initiative or by practice, but rather they must be ‘given’ to us (Vos 2018, p. 57).

That Aquinas added theological virtues to cardinal virtues is important for the understanding of the formation of Christian teachers’ character. Faith, hope and love become an integral part of virtue ethics and thus show how a Christian philosophy of life becomes visible in teachers’ wise actions. How can we apply these theological virtues to Christian teachers’ formation of character? This question again concerns the teacher as a person. When good teaching presupposes good teachers, from a Christian perspective the teachers’ beliefs come into play in their pedagogical actions. Christian teachers are faithful. This implies that they are, in person, determined by their relationship with Christ. Christian character formation radically changes the subject’s position: the goal is not personal happiness or living one’s own desires but glorifying God. For Christian teachers, this means that character formation is not about self-realisation but about Christ taking shape in us to embody His gracious attitude towards pupils. A faithful attitude also works through the way a teacher connects with a Christian narrative of education, thereby contributing to the formation of pupils in becoming responsible members of society, living in loving obedience to God and with one’s neighbour.

Christian teachers are also hopeful. In this, the connection with the biblical ideal of raising children in Psalm 78 is obvious: children should know God’s deeds and commandments so that they put their hope in God, do not forget His deeds, keep His laws and do not become like their rebellious fathers (Ps. 78:7–8). Those who want to teach children to hope in God must provide examples of this themselves. To hope in God does not mean denying fear and anxiety but rather learning to put things that happen in the world and in pupils’ lives into the larger perspective of God’s actions. Hope is also important for teachers’ acting regarding the classroom climate because uncertainty about the future is evident in classroom practice, and global issues of security and climate invade it. When we relate hope to the concrete actions of teachers, we can also think of the active passivity characteristic of being a teacher. Teachers expect something they cannot realise by themselves. It is the ‘virtue of the “nevertheless”’: despite the fragility of what you do, you continue to expect a good outcome’ (Vos 2018, p. 60).

Finally, a Christian teacher is charitable. This point could also have been mentioned first because it touches on the teacher’s pedagogical heart. Anyone who does not love children is not suitable for education. In this context, love is not about affection; it is about seeking good for the other—in this case, pupils. Fortunately, Christians are not unique but, based on the finality of the practice concept, we can now refine the purpose of Christian education. Seeking good for pupils means that education is aimed at approaching one’s destination by developing and devoting one’s talents to God’s honour and for others’ benefit. To do this, pupils need a guide—somebody who seeks the good for them. For a loving teacher, seeking good has become second nature.

This raises the question of how theological virtues affect cardinal virtues in the process of character formation. Although theological virtues can be applied to wise actions between humans (Van Tongeren 2003), they are characterised by a theocentric orientation. In terms of virtues and acting wisely, from a Christian perspective, we must consider their intrinsic connection to the Christian faith. If we keep in mind that virtues are dispositions of a person

as a whole, we can argue that, when it comes to Christian teachers, Aristotelian virtues, such as prudence, justice, courage and self-control, have the same orientation as faith, hope and love—that is, serving God and the other. Another argument is that virtues are always contextual; they are dispositions of a single person who acts more or less according to their own education in a context that appeals to action. Applied to Christian teachers, acting virtuously entails the personality of the teacher, their biography and beliefs, the pupils in the classroom, the team, the school and its mission, parental contacts and society.

Before presenting a model for empirical research regarding teachers' wise action, we address two questions, based on our reading of Aristotle and Aquinas: What is needed for teachers to act virtuously and to what extent are patterns for wise action desirable?

4. Acquiring Patterns for Acting Wisely: Possibilities and Limitations

When we connect conceptual research to empirical research, it is important to consider the ways in which the acquisition of virtue takes place. We take as our starting point the teacher. However, we will see, in line with [MacIntyre's \(2019\)](#) theory of social practices, that the acquisition of virtuous action is also related to teacher training and school teams, since virtues are shaped and practiced in social contexts.

Being virtuous is not innate. According to Aristotle and Aquinas, virtues must be internalised by practice (cf. [Carr 2007](#), who defined virtues as 'behavioural dispositions acquired through practice' (p. 383)). For the development of intellectual virtues, people need education, while character virtues can be obtained through habituation. According to [Van Hooft \(2006\)](#), the first steps towards acting virtuously are encouragement and training (p. 57). This insight is relevant to both teacher education and professional practice. To act wisely in practice requires habituation in order to act without much deliberation. For this, teaching is indispensable, whether in teacher training, during internships or in everyday life as a teacher. In sum, acquiring patterns of acting wisely is necessary to become a good teacher.

Teachers can learn from experiences, both positive and negative. In doing so, they develop practical pedagogical wisdom. Another way to acquire virtues is through imitation ([De Muynck 2006](#); [Van Crombrugge 2017](#)). For teacher education, this entails teacher trainers showing exemplary behaviour, such as in their subject dedication, preparation of lessons and approach to students (teach as you preach). In addition, examples from the pedagogical tradition as embodiments of the teaching profession are important. In this way, upcoming teachers are invited to connect to the narrative of education.

Developing patterns of wise action through experiences and imitation implies the ability of teachers to reflect on their own actions ([Carr 2006](#); [Kelchtermans 2023](#)). [Kelchtermans \(2023\)](#) distinguished three types of reflection (pp. 130–32). First, tacit knowledge in action refers to routine behaviour that occurs almost unconsciously, at least without the teacher's reflection. These are routines that the teacher knows will have the desired effect. Such patterns have been developed because of past experiences, reflections and insights. Second, the teacher's actions can be reflected in action (Kelchtermans derived this terminology from the American philosopher Donald Schön (cf. [Schön 1983](#))), which refers to interpreting a situation and deciding to act in a certain way. Third, there is reflection on action, which takes place after an action by the teacher, evaluating what they have done and looking for ways to improve actions. To develop patterns of virtuous action, teachers need all three forms of reflection. Reflection, however, reveals not only virtues but also vices. What patterns do not serve the pupil, or primarily serve the teacher's self-interest?

However, not all virtues can be acquired through practice or by following good examples. According to Aquinas, the theological virtues of faith, hope and love cannot be acquired by one's own initiative or through practice because they are 'given' ([Vos 2018](#),

p. 57). This would seem to constrain the significance of theological virtues for professional formation. It is important, first, to emphasise the gracious character of these virtues. By doing so, we return to the concept of imitation. As we have seen, people form themselves by imitating good examples. Jesus is the ultimate example of virtuousness (John 13:15). He embodies humility, courage, justice, prudence and all other virtues. At the same time, we run into the limits of imitation here. In person and work, Jesus, as the Son of God, is incomparable. From a Christian point of view, imitation is, above all, connected to participation—that is, in faithful connection with Christ, sharing in his grace, exercising gratitude in contact with pupils (e.g., forgiveness in classroom situations), providing perspectives of hope (regarding the pupil's actual life at school and within their family and regarding future perspectives in societal life and in respect of eternal life) and practising an attitude of love (e.g., paying attention to the vulnerable or combating exclusion). In this respect, participation is a good category for practising virtues, in particular theological virtues; they can only be practised by following Christ, and living out virtues presumes the practitioner's active involvement. In participation, the virtuousness of Christ becomes visible to others—an important point in Christian formation.

Finally, we mention the practice of readiness. Acting wisely presupposes the personhood formation of the teacher. This relates to identity, job perception, bearing responsibility, and the way the teacher wants to be present for pupils. Readiness is related to the teacher's values, which, as we have said, are embodied in virtues. This makes readiness an important aspect of character building, although it is a lifelong process.

As stated earlier, virtues are shaped and practiced in social contexts. For the formation of the character of teachers in order to act wisely, this implies that habituation is not merely a personal activity. For instance, it also happens within the school to which the teacher belongs. According to [MacIntyre's \(2019\)](#) concept of social practice, teachers not only contribute to school practice, and thus to the achievement of the school's mission, but also are formed by the practice in which they are involved. In teacher education and school teams, this entails teachers learning to reflect on their actions collectively: what is acting wisely, what virtues do we foster in our social practice, how do we act and in what respect can those actions be characterised as wise or not? Finally, this involves not only virtues but also awareness of patterns of vices.

So far, we have stressed that teachers need patterns to act wisely. This raises the question of whether forming patterns is consistent with a virtue ethical approach. Is it at odds with the deliberative nature of virtue? Our understanding of teachers' character formation does not necessarily imply that it gives them rules that they can apply in all situations. This does not fit with the dynamics of the teaching profession. Teachers need deliberation, such as by encouraging a pupil in a difficult situation but correcting the same pupil in another situation. Pedagogical virtues can be determined only from concrete situations and can grow only in a context of personal consideration (cf. [De Muynck and Kunz 2021](#), p. 165). However, this example shows, on the contrary, that teachers must make many decisions within the complexity of everyday life. For sound pedagogical judgments, they need patterns of acting wisely—that is, the formation of character, through which they can properly assess from theoretical and, above all, experiential know-how how they act with wisdom (cf. [Van Tongeren 2003](#); [Van der Zee 2023](#)). In other words, habituation presupposes deliberation.

This goes back to the very heart of our argument: professional formation presumes the formation of the teacher's person. Patterns of action can only be patterns of wise action if ethical considerations by professionals take place. This must be done with freedom and responsibility, based on values and virtues, as its embodiment. Even if these patterns allow

teachers to rely on wisdom acquired previously, it is still the teacher who, as a person, decides what action is in the pupil's best interest.

5. Modelling Virtuous Action

In the preceding sections, we argued why teachers need character to be formed. In their work, they must make decisions promptly that are pedagogically sound. Hence, from the idea of a formed character, we speak of patterns of acting wisely. The formation of patterns is about habituation and is aimed at making a way of life one's own, learning to handle matters in accordance with one's values, reasoning how to act properly and, last but not least, learning from others and from one's own experiences. This already shows that patterns, as mentioned, do not deny the relevance of deliberation; rather, they confirm it. To develop patterns of wise action, teachers need deliberation and reflection.

So far, we have approached the research question from a conceptual perspective. In this section, we connect conceptual and empirical research by proposing a model for empirical research on teachers acting wisely. To visualise reflection on teacher's actions in order to gather patterns of wise action, we developed a circle of virtuous action for individual teachers (Figure 1). As stated, virtues are shaped and practiced in social contexts. Teachers belong to a social practice (MacIntyre 2019). They do not practise their profession in isolation but are connected to other professionals (both contemporary colleagues and those who practised before them). Therefore, we extended the model to school practice (Figure 2). The model involves two questions: how do teachers come across wise action, and how can they develop patterns of acting wisely? From the philosophical–theological background of virtue ethics, we derived a threefold approach for virtuous action: teachers need intellectual virtues (practical reasoning for deliberating and freely choosing what is the right action), character virtues (e.g., prudence, justice, courage and self-control, which enable teachers to do what is right) and theological virtues (faith, hope and love, as an expression of Christian belief). Therefore, it should be stressed that both imitation and participation are important to the habituation of virtuous action. Finally, virtuous action is about visualising readiness: how are teachers willing to embody values in acting wisely, in the best interests of pupils and, more broadly, as a contribution to the school's mission?

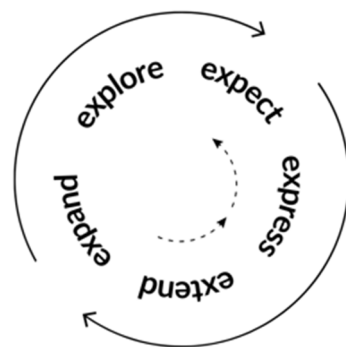


Figure 1. The circle of virtuous action for individual teachers.

The circle contains five verbs: explore, expect, express, extend and expand. These indicate a process of reflection through which patterns of wise action can emerge. With each verb, one can raise the question of what it means for making teachers aware of acting wisely. The arrows in the model show that professional formation never ends. Habituation of virtues is not a step-by-step plan, as if coming up with wise action means simply following the steps. Instead, it is a back-and-forth movement, as the broken arrows inside the circle show. To trace wise action, teachers need to go forward to the next step as well as go back to the previous step.

The circle of virtuous action is linked to the professional interpretation framework developed by the Leuven pedagogue Geert Kelchtermans; that is, by using meaningful career experiences, teachers build a set of mental representations that functions as a lens through which they perceive concrete teaching situations, give them meaning, and subsequently act accordingly (Kelchtermans 2009). This is an ongoing process in which new experiences and circumstances are incorporated (cf. Klaassen et al. 1999, p. 377). From the perspective of a virtues approach, which virtues are important in the practice of the teaching profession and how do they contribute to wise action? We now briefly elaborate on the five verbs.

1. Explore: This refers to the exploration of a situation. We can think here of the following in the classroom situation: getting pupils involved in subject matter and paying attention to individual pupils and to the occurrence of a pedagogical situation that appeals to a teacher's actions. However, it can also be applied to the other tasks of teachers. Thinking from a teacher's perspective, 'explore' involves questions such as who am I (socialisation) and how do I want to take responsibility (subjectification) (Biesta 2018)? What is at stake in this situation? In what way does this situation appeal to my values? Afterwards, in what way did I act and to what extent was this wise (virtuous) action?

2. Expect: Regarding detecting virtues, this means that wise action in concrete situations should not be sought immediately in the realm of solving problems. Expecting involves procrastination by practicing an attitude of receptivity to develop the intellectual virtue of wisdom. In the hustle and bustle of daily practice, it is important to step back. For Christian teachers, it is most of all the recognition that they depend on God and that wisdom is God's gracious gift. Regarding virtuousness, 'to expect' also comes into focus when teachers consider what the theological virtues of faith, hope and love mean for acting wisely. As we have stated, these virtues cannot be acquired through practice but by grace.

3. Express: This is about teachers' stories about themselves and their ideals. How does a concrete situation appeal to a teacher's biography and ideals? In teacher education, biographical stories are useful for one's professional formation: why did I choose this profession, which aspects of my biography are relevant and which examples do I have of teachers who have demonstrated how things should and should not be done? Besides ideals, teachers' stories also give voice to values and virtues. In school practice, they help teachers express the values and beliefs they cherish, the virtues involved and how they act when their values and virtues become compromised. How do teachers express themselves when it comes to prudence, justice, courage and self-control? What meanings do they give to faith, hope and love in relation to their work? On this point, it could be reasonable to go back to the previous stage: what do I expect, and what does this mean for the expression of my virtues in this situation?

4. Extend: This is to be understood as 'broadening'. A concrete situation is placed here in a broader perspective of both tradition and present society. If we conceive of teaching as a social practice, we need to consider the tradition in which education has developed as well as the context in which teachers perform their work nowadays. For teachers, broadening means putting their work in the context of tradition; for Christian teachers, this is the Christian pedagogical tradition. Beyond this, there is the broader context of the school. Teachers contribute to achieving the school's mission. Taking an entirely broader view, there is society and the world for which teachers educate their pupils. Again, here is the back-and-forth movement: what do the pedagogical tradition and the appeal of society mean for the teacher's ideals?

5. Expand: The question here is how virtues, such as prudence, justice, courage and self-control, improve the teacher's actions. A similar question can be asked about theological virtues. To reflect is to look back critically at one's actions yet always improve them in the future (Kelchtermans 2023, p. 135). Another reflective question concerns what

vices hinder wise action. To put it in Christian terminology: what does the teacher need to convert from?

Thus far, the teacher's work context has been left out of consideration in the model. However, teachers work in schools; therefore, they are part of a social practice. According to MacIntyre (2019), one of the characteristics of a social practice is its formative power. Anyone who participates in a practice is formed by it. Professionals learn their profession primarily in practice (MacIntyre 2019) and, as we have seen, virtues are shaped and practiced within social contexts. Therefore, we put the process of the formation of Christian teachers into the broader framework of the school (Figure 2).

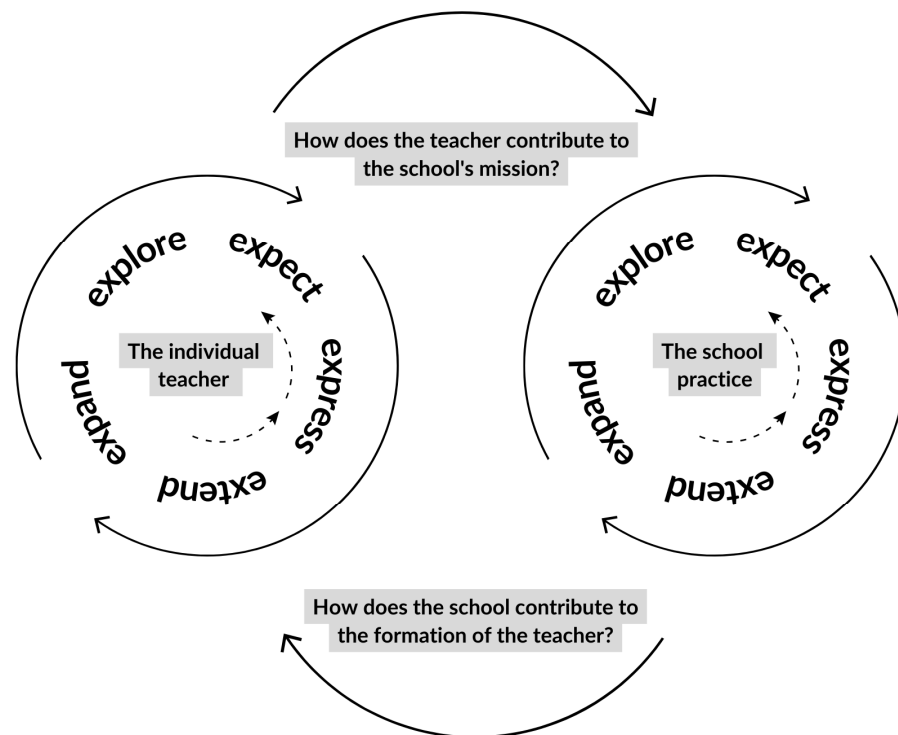


Figure 2. The circle of virtuous action in school practice.

With this, the community comes into view—another aspect of MacIntyre's (2019) practices approach. In what ways does the community contribute to the acquisition of collective wisdom? We can address this issue from two directions. From the perspective of teachers' professional formation, it means how they contribute to the fulfilment of the school's mission. Formulated from the perspective of the community, it is about how the school contributes to the formation of individual teachers. Which virtues are practised in the school and in what ways does the school as a whole contribute to the process of forming patterns of wise action by teachers?

The professional formation of an individual teacher is related to team culture. From the individual teacher's perspective, critical reflection on school practice should be encouraged. After all, practices can not only form but also deform people. Therefore, teachers need the team's safety for their professional development. If there is none, professional formation is at risk. To put it the other way around, team culture affects the formation of the individual; if virtues such as prudence, justice, courage and self-control are practised within the team, it will influence the formation of individual teachers. The same applies to the place of faith, hope and love in a Christian school. Are these theological virtues embodied in school practice (e.g., in forgiveness, hope and readiness to serve God, pupils and colleagues?). A vulnerable conversation about these virtues provides opportunities for working together to achieve the mission of Christian education.

6. Discussion

In this article, we present a theoretical framework and a circle for reflection on wise action in empirical research. Although the model was developed for practice-based research, there are no results regarding its applicability and validity. To determine this, empirical research that uses the model is required. This could also reveal where adjustments to the model are needed, such as considerations of reflection. Another limitation is that the model was developed from a Western cultural perspective. A relevant research question is whether and how the model functions in different contexts, such as a professional understanding in which reflection has a secondary place.

The viewpoint from which the model has been developed is the professional formation of teachers. How can teachers act with wisdom in a demanding practice? Based on the study of Aristotle's virtue ethics, connecting virtue development (character formation) to teachers' professional formation is promising. After all, teachers' work is ethically qualified. The idea of habituation as a condition for wise action offers a perspective for teachers to act responsibly when there is no time for deliberation. This is valuable for both teacher training and in-service teacher education. For Christian teachers, a virtue ethical approach involves how Christian beliefs resonate in professional actions; that is, what becomes visible in the practice of faith, hope and love? When we emphasise, as did Aquinas, the gracious nature of these virtues, this makes space for a Christian perspective on professional behaviour that also practices the teacher's dependence on God. Although we focus explicitly on Christian teachers, this can also be applied to teachers with other beliefs.

We hold that the model, as elaborated above, is helpful for making virtuous action concrete in teachers' daily practice and in the context (historical or contemporary) in which they do their job. The same applies to the school as a community, which, if all goes well, is a learning community. Empirical research should therefore focus on the person of the Christian teacher and the formation of character for acting wisely in the context of the school and its mission and in the broader context of the school's vocation to family, church and society.

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