

Est.  
1841

YORK  
ST JOHN  
UNIVERSITY

Back, Shlomo, Clarke, Matthew ORCID  
logoORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-4693-248X> and Phelan,  
Anne M (2018) Teacher education as the practice of virtue ethics:  
Editorial. *Research in Education*. pp. 1-7.

Downloaded from: <https://ray.yorks.ac.uk/id/eprint/2971/>

The version presented here may differ from the published version or version of record. If  
you intend to cite from the work you are advised to consult the publisher's version:  
<https://doi.org/10.1177/0034523718762146>

Research at York St John (RaY) is an institutional repository. It supports the principles of  
open access by making the research outputs of the University available in digital form.  
Copyright of the items stored in RaY reside with the authors and/or other copyright  
owners. Users may access full text items free of charge, and may download a copy for  
private study or non-commercial research. For further reuse terms, see licence terms  
governing individual outputs. [Institutional Repository Policy Statement](#)

# RaY

Research at the University of York St John

For more information please contact RaY at [ray@yorks.ac.uk](mailto:ray@yorks.ac.uk)

## **Teacher education as the practice of virtue ethics: Editorial**

Shlomo Back, Kaye College, Israel

Matthew Clarke, York St John University, UK

Anne M Phelan, University of British Columbia, Canada

Recent decades have seen the elevation of education from an intermittent concern of governments to its current place as a cornerstone of social and economic policy. More specifically, education is now deemed vital to the simultaneous achievement of economic growth, community cohesion and social justice (Furlong 2013). However, *primus inter pares* within this redemptive view of education has been an instrumental discourse of the centrality of the teacher as the guarantor (or potential under-miner) of future economic growth and prosperity (Larsen 2010). As a result, teacher education is now deemed too important to be left in the hands of academics and teacher educators. Thus, the field has consequently been subjected to an intense and extended series of authoritative reforms, underpinned by the same competitive, instrumental and utilitarian worldview that has transformed education more broadly (Frankham and Hiatt 2011), in order to ensure that education fulfils its economically conceived potential. Specifically, and justified as an attempt to ensure that teachers and schools rise to the challenges of globalisation and come out ‘on top’ in the context of relentless international economic competition (see, for example, Barber and Mourshed 2007), teacher education in a range of global contexts, including Canada, England, and Israel has undergone radical reconfiguration and reform. As a result of these reforms, teacher educators now find their work circumscribed within a matrix of policy requirements, including prescribed curricula, mandated teacher professional standards and ongoing inspection regimes. In short, teacher education has been turned into technical and instrumental, rather than a moral or ethical, practice (Biesta 2015).

This has led to a situation where teachers in some contexts, such as many US states, are paid and promoted according to the results of their students in standardised tests. In many contexts, teacher candidates are similarly judged primarily on the basis of the outcomes achieved under their tuition. Within such contexts, educators are encouraged to evaluate their actions on the basis of its likely outcomes where the latter are conceived in narrow performative terms. Will this activity or lesson help Johnny get a ‘C’ rather than a ‘D’? Will completing this spreadsheet help my school achieve an ‘outstanding’ rather than just a ‘good’ in the forthcoming inspection? The performative pressures manifested by such questions may lead to a range of unintended negative consequences, such as the narrowing of curriculum and adoption of extra-pedagogical strategies, such as gaming, for protecting and enhancing the ‘reputational capital’ of the individual or the institution (Lingard and Sellar 2013). Such practices may be undesirable and ultimately ineffective but they are understandable within the utilitarian ethical climate of teaching and teacher education today in which actions are judged by their consequences in relation to measurable outcomes.

Many of the papers in this special issue go back to Aristotle's ethical theory. After all, Aristotle was the first to suggest the idea of virtue ethics (Aristotle, E.N.). But is there a deeper reason to focus on Aristotle's moral views? After so many years, why should we return to this ancient theory to restore the place of ethics in our current teacher education programs?

Let us suggest a reasonable reason for this appeal. Aristotle's view may give a clue as to how to cope with the current moral disease of being an "indebted man" [sic]. The notion had been coined by Mauricio Lazzarato (2012), who believes that we live in a neoliberal society which seduces its members to become indebted, and thereby weakens their moral virtues.

According to Lazzarato, the agent in our society finds himself in a constant state of being in debt. S/he is in financial debts to institutions and to other fellows in his society. He is in social debts to become the first..., to have a bigger house/car/salary..., to have the last upgrade of..., etc. S/he is in a mental debt to be accountable and to always reflect upon his doings. Acting as an "entrepreneur of himself" [sic] (Foucault, 2008, p. 226), the individual feels free, but "his actions, his behavior, are confined to the limits defined by the debt he has entered into" (Lazzarato, 2012, p. 31).

In our individualized, privatized, society, the indebted individual wishes to fulfil his or her authentic self, and simultaneously, each individual agent must also resemble the "others" in society in having that expectation. Paradoxically, this autonomous free wish turns into a debt, because s/he is accountable for everything s/he does.

According to the hegemonic materialistic ideology, "fulfilling oneself" is socially recognized by evaluating the material wealth of the agent (Honneth, 1995). Thus, the indebted individual is in a steady state of stress and competition. Such a person lives in a society in which everyone should be an entrepreneur, but since the material resources are limited, s/he must demonstrate superiority over all rivals. Consequently, the indebted person cannot be trusted, for to win the competition requires constantly being seduced to utilize all possible means to maximize one's own utility.

The indebted person is constantly under external evaluation, which activates a punitive accountability system to ensure that s/he is still able to pay her or his debts. The indebted person is always in a defensive mood. S/he must constantly demonstrate the ability to pay off debts. S/he is guilty unless proven innocent. Back previously (2017) discussed the impact of Lazzarato's concept of the indebted man upon teacher education programs.

If Aristotle had had the opportunity to meet the indebted person he would have been surprised by this person's imprudent behaviour. For him, the indebted individual is wasting his or her life, because s/he overlooks the highest goal of life, to strive for well-being (happiness). This highest aim cannot be achieved if it is subordinated to outer conditions, e.g., if it is conditioned on what the "others" think about us as individuals. Thus, the "rational" action (i.e., suitable to achieve a specific end) may not be "reasonable" (i.e., suitable to achieve a proper end), for it might not contribute to the supreme ideal of approaching one's happiness (cf. Back, 2012).

Aristotle would have asked the indebted person questions like: "Why are you behaving like that?", "What for?" and "Which virtues are needed to achieve your aims, and can you justify them, i.e., show that they are necessary for you to achieve well-being"? The following points are critical to understand the current impact of the Aristotelian legacy:

According to Aristotle, the virtuous individual "Feels [pleasure and pain] at the right times, with references to the right objects, towards the right people, with the right aim, and in the right way." (Aristotle, E.N., II, 6, 1106<sup>b</sup> 19-23). The meaning of the concept "right" is to be in the "mean": "Excellence, then, is a state concerned with choice, lying in a mean relative to

us, this being determined by reason and in the way the man of practical wisdom would determine." (Aristotle E.N., II, 6, 1107<sup>a</sup> 1-2).

According to this view, the indebted person cannot be virtuous. Since s/he does not freely choose his or her actions, s/he cannot be in any "mean". S/he is always entitled to reach the "extreme". S/he is never satisfied. There is no limit to the person's ambitions. So, there cannot be any mean about their fulfilment. Without a "mean" the individual lacks any notion of "right", and is unable to prudently assess aims and actions. Consequently, the indebted engages in "short term" thinking. Usually s/he is not asking "why?" but "how to...?" Such reasoning is instrumental. The indebted person's entire process of deliberation does not consider the possibility that s/he has wrong aims, that s/he cheats him-/herself, or that s/he simply wants to please somebody. The indebted individual e thinks about the immediate usefulness of his or her doings..., and not about life as a whole.

For Aristotle, the good virtues are those character traits that help us approach the ideal state of wellbeing. Aristotle supposes that the virtues are innate, but like any muscle, which gets stronger when used, and degenerates when not in use, the virtues are developed by experience (E.N., II, 1, 1103<sup>a</sup> 30 - 1103<sup>b</sup> 1). Lectures about morality do not cause one to behave morally. Education is just this process of learning by doing (E.N., X, 9, 1179<sup>b</sup> 25). Maybe, the indebted man still has a chance to heal himself from the sickness of our *zeitgeist*. Teacher education programs are the arena where virtue ethics can potentially influence the prospective teachers' ethical thinking (Clarke & Phelan, 2017). The papers in this issue further examine this rightful possibility to cure the educational system.

In *Teacher Education In A Postmodern Liberal Democratic Society*, Nurit Basman Mor provides an account of why virtue ethics and an ethics of care, as a version of virtue ethics, are the appropriate ethical frameworks for contemporary teacher education. She cautions against "relativist conceptions" of the good, and disbelief in "absolute standards of value and thought," characteristic of the postmodern period. Arguing that if we care enough about our children and our societies, she declares that we cannot leave education open to a myriad of potentially harmful influences. Instead, we must identify compelling educational goals that are based on beliefs that can provide stability to our lives, allow us to embrace uncertainty, and enable us to respect others whom we do not understand.

Becoming self-conscious about one's educational goals and their premises involves criticality. In *Teaching Critical Thinking As A Vehicle For Personal And Social Transformation*, Raz Shpeizer examines the evolution of critical thinking as a broad educational ideal, illustrates the application of the ideal in teacher education, and offers some insights about how teachers might promote it in their own teaching. Integrating cognition – skills of analysis, evaluation and inference – and character – habits of mind – the author advocates for teacher education (as moral education) that promotes right and just judgment and action, usually with respect to other people. He concludes that teacher education practices, either on-line or face-to-face, that endorse the role of experience, well-reasoned discourse, and self-study through dialogue with peers about complex situations can cultivate "the *cardinal* virtues of commitment and devotion to the truth and a concern for the well-being of other people and society."

In his article titled, *Curiosity Killed the SAT: The Role of Research in Redirecting Performativity in Initial Teacher Education*, Julian Stern suggests that curiosity as a virtue may assist in overcoming the influence of external performance-drivers, such as England's

national curriculum assessments, colloquially known as ‘SATs’, that continue to terrorize teachers and their students. Curiosity enables teachers to embrace meaning making as a way of being in classrooms with a plurality of others; curiosity rejects mastery that knowing implies and it can provide teachers with rich and significant insight into why they do what they do. Teachers engaged in systematic “curiosity-driven research” about their subjects, their students’ ideas and histories, and their shared place may generate more curious students. This “virtuous cycle,” Stern believes, may ‘kill the adverse effects of SAT-directed school policy, and that might also help pupils ‘kill’ (i.e. succeed in) their SATs.’”

Engaging in sound, practical reasoning in classrooms requires more than the rationality implied by Stern’s “systematic investigation,” however; it may depend on teachers’ discernment. So argues Gilmour Jope in *Becoming Ethically Responsive In Initial Teacher Education*. Jope characterizes discernment as the capacity to see, to judge and to act ethically in relation to others in concrete situations. He invites us to consider the experience of one student teacher on practicum at a Canadian elementary school and the conditions under which the student teacher learns over time to *listen* to the text of classrooms – what it seem “to say and show about human life, about knowledge, about personality, about how to live” (Nussbaum, 1990, p. 35). Central to Jope’s argument is the importance of student teachers learning to attend to the value and wonder of the particular (child; context) while heeding their emotions, and to attune their judgements accordingly.

Discerning teachers are not only sensitive to the particulars of students’ lives, but to all the inconvenient complications and the competing demands of practice (Pendlebury, 1993). Rejecting the illusion that teachers can control life and master contingency via detached and objective knowledge (characteristic of technical rationality), Jeannie Kerr calls for “an ecology of knowledges” combining Aristotle’s ethics of knowing with powerful insights from Indigenous scholarship. In *Challenging Technocratic Logics In Teacher Education: Seeking Guidance From Indigenous and Aristotelian Tradition*, Kerr underscores the verb-like quality of knowing and the importance of creating generative conditions for teaching and learning in and through embodied ethical relationships. Drawing inspiration from Indigenous scholar Jacqui Green’s depiction of the Haisla oolichan fishing and processing as exemplifying embodied knowing, traditional practices and ethical relations, she illustrates how she lives such practices within teacher education.

Teaching approaches stemming from either an Aristotelian ethics of knowing and being through practice or the Haisla ethics of knowing through place and relation do not serve purposes beyond themselves. Surprisingly, perhaps, neither do those teaching approaches associated with liberal education, according to Arik Segev. In his essay, *Worthy Leisure Education: Teaching Here And Now*, Segev defines ‘leisure’ in terms of ‘life moments which do not serve any purpose beyond themselves.’ He explains that leisure education involves *non-outcome-based teaching*, or *teaching here and now*. A conceptual consequence of this approach to teaching, he continues, is “the perception of education and teaching as an *event*, a *state*, or a *state of being*, and *not* as a process, as it is commonly perceived.” The virtue that lies at the heart of the liberal tradition tying education to leisure is the love of wisdom. Here we find revealed the link between studying academic subjects and cultivating moral virtue. Although teachers and their students will never fully realize wisdom, the pursuit of wisdom will enhance awareness of, and a capacity to actualize, “the true, good, just and beautiful potentialities of reality.”

In her essay titled, *Techne, A Virtue To Be Thickened: Rethinking Technical Concerns In Teaching And Teacher Education*, Ying Ma alerts us to the importance of *techne*, as an intellectual virtue in teaching as long as it is tempered by *phronesis*. She wishes to temper Aristotelian *techne* by reconnecting it to the rough ground of experience, quietening its desire to master contingency in classrooms, and reasserting the moral dimension of educational judgement. The answer she finds in Dunne's (1997) concept of *phronetic techne*. Reading her own story of teaching in China, she elaborates and critiques the four attributes of *techne* – universality, teachability, precision and concern for explanation. While teacher educators should not forego *techne*, we must understand that it is simply insufficient for wise educational judgement. Teachers' adeptness at practical judgement relies on the extent to which they can engage a dialogue between universals – established norms or procedures – and particulars of a given situation. Ying Ma's essay also highlights the importance of challenging Eurocentric discourses of *techne* in light of a teacher's cultural heritage – in her case that of Confucianism's advocacy of the six arts.

How teachers responds to performativity regimes in different national and cultural contexts requires not only critical thought and situational discernment; their actions are inextricably intertwined with who they are as persons (Noel, 1999). In *Terror Vs Soul: The Struggle For Creativity In Primary Initial Teacher Education* – Peter Raymond argues that while creativity is not in itself a virtue it does enable teacher educators and student teachers “to work virtuously” within the pressures of a performative culture, thereby enabling the development and exercise of other virtues. Drawing on Ruti (2009), Raymond links creativity to agency stating that the point is not to dominate or be dominated by life's circumstances but to live in a way that has meaning for us as human beings; this, he concludes, is the very ‘art of living’ a human life.

The question that is central to this collection of essays is not just any question. The question each of these authors is dealing with is: how should one live? (Socrates in Republic I: 232d). At its core is the challenge of leading a good and faithful life – of meeting our obligations by responding to the needs and suffering of others, a given in a human life. However, in these dark times of indebtedness, “[f]idelity to oneself is not for the fainthearted,” (Lear, 2011, p. 5).

Rejecting the reduction of teaching to maximising effective instruction in the service of economic success and group solidarity, the cases of practice shared in this special issue retain a sense of teacher professionalism infused by ethical virtue in the sense of cultivating particular attitudes, dispositions and sensibilities. The papers explicitly challenge the reductive implications that inhere in much recent teacher education policy in different sectors, including the preparation of teachers for the school, further and higher education sectors, which views teacher education in terms of narrowly defined skills and competencies. The papers achieve this by providing a range of detailed examples of how practitioners in teacher education conceive and conduct their practice as a moral and ethical, rather than merely a technical and instrumental, endeavour insofar as they are focused on developing teachers equipped with certain virtues, such as creativity, criticality, or an ethic of care. These cases of teacher education as virtue ethics thus serve as an invaluable counter-discourse to reductive utilitarianism of much recent policy and practice in teacher education.

## References

- Aristotle. (1984). [E.N.] *Nicomachean Ethics* (Ross, W. & revised by Urmson, J., Trans.). In J. Barnes (Ed.), *The Complete Works of Aristotle* (The Revised Oxford Translation ed., Vol. 2, pp. 1729-867). Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Back, S. (2012). *Ways of Learning to Teach*. Rotterdam: Sense Publishers.
- Back, S. (2017). Undermining teacher education: Critic of the Neo-liberal Worldview. In M. Ben-Perez & S. Feiman-Nemser (Eds.), *An Arena for educational ideologies* (pp. 111-32). Lanham, Maryland: The Mofet institute; Rowman & Littlefield institute; Rowman & Littlefield.
- Barber, M, and M Mourshed. 2007. *How the world's best-performing schools systems come out on top*. London: McKinsey.
- Biesta, Gert. 2015. "What is education for? On good education, teacher judgement, and educational professionalism." *European Journal of Education* 50 (1):75-87.
- Dunne, J. (1997). *Back to the Rough Ground: Practical Judgment and the Lure of Technique*. Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press.
- Clarke, M., & Phelan, A. (2017). *Teacher education and the political: The power of negative thinking*. London: Routledge.
- Foucault, M. (2008). *The Birth of Biopolitics* (G. Burchell, Trans.). NY: Palgrave MacMillan.
- Frankham, J, and S Hiatt. 2011. "The Master's in teaching and learning: Expanding utilitarianism in the continuing professional development of teachers in England." *Journal of education policy* 26 (6):803-818.
- Honneth, A. (1995). *The Struggle for Recognition: The Moral Grammar of Social Conflicts* (J. Anderson, Trans.). Cambridge, Mass.: The M.I.T. Press
- Furlong, J. 2013. *Education – An anatomy of a discipline: Rescuing the university project?* London: Routledge.
- Larsen, M. 2010. "Troubling the discourse of teacher centrality: A comparative perspective." *Journal of Education Policy* 25 (2):207-231.
- Lazzarato, M. (2012). *The Making of the Indebted Men* (J. D. Jordan, Trans.). Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press.
- Lear, J. (2011). *The Case for Irony*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Lingard, B, and S Sellar. 2013. "‘Catalyst data’: Perverse systemic effects of audit and accountability in Australian schooling." *Journal of Education Policy* 28 (5):634-656.
- Noel, J. (1999). On the varieties of phronesis. *Educational Philosophy and Theory*, 31(3): 273-289
- Nussbaum, M. (1990). *Love's Knowledge: Essays on Philosophy and Literature*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Pendlebury, S. (1993). Practical arguments, rationalization and imagination in teachers' practical reasoning: a critical discussion. *Journal of Curriculum Studies*, 25(2): 145-151.
- Ruti, M. (2009). *A world of fragile things. Psychoanalysis and the art of living*. Albany, State University of New York Press.