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the intersection of teacher modelling and student emulation in moral education

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This paper explores the intersection of teacher modelling and student emulation in moral education. First, two interpretations of teacher modelling are discussed: expressing moral virtues unintentionally and intentionally teaching morality. Next, student emulation is examined, differentiating between mimicry, imitation, and emulation. Third, the paper introduces four scenarios of intentional/unintentional and effective/ineffective modelling, highlighting the complex relationship between teachers' intentions and students' responses in the moral education process.

Keywords: emulation, modelling, moral education, virtue

Introduction

Modelling moral behaviour is an important moral educational method, particularly popular in neo-Aristotelian character education circles. However, for various reasons, students often do not recognise, admire or emulate teachers who model. At the same time, students may imitate and emulate teachers' behaviour in the classroom without teachers being aware of this. The aim of this paper is to give an overview of how, from a virtue ethical perspective on moral education, teacher modelling and student emulation can hang together. To my knowledge, these concepts have not been discussed together before in a systemic way. On the one hand, philosophers interested in emulation as a moral psychological concept often do not consider the role teachers can play in students' moral development. On the other hand, (moral) educationalists who recommend teachers to be role models often do not consider whether and how students imitate or emulate the modelled behaviour. In what follows, I will first discuss teacher modelling and then student emulation separately, before connecting the two in the end.

Teacher Modelling

In this section, I will discuss two interpretations of teacher modelling in the context of moral education (see also Sanderse, 2024). Modelling can refer, first of all, to teachers expressing moral values and virtues in the classroom, whether they are conscious about it or not. When teachers 'model' in this sense, they simply convey to students what they consider to be good and right without the intention to contribute to students' moral development. This is what Fenstermacher, Osguthorpe and Sanger (2009) have called 'teaching morally'.

Several studies have found that, in this sense, modelling is ubiquitous in schools (Buzzelli & Johnston, 2002; Fallona, 2000). For example, in their classic observational study about the moral

life of schools, Jackson et al. (1993) found that teachers express morality by their facial expressions, gestures and bodily postures, and they also spontaneously interject brief moral commentary on what is going in the classroom, e.g., by giving a compliment or asking for students' attention. From having observed these and other factors, the researchers concluded that teachers express moral values and virtues all or most of the time in classrooms. The moral influence that teachers exercise on students "extends to what teachers say and do without consciously intending to act as moral agents" (Jackson et al., 1993, p. 237).

Many teachers agree that, in this sense, modelling is an important, if not the most important way through which students develop morally in schools. For example, when American pre-service teachers were asked about whether children can be taught to be good and, if so, how moral education occurs, modelling was mentioned most often (Sanger & Osguthorpe, 2013). Teachers' enthusiasm for modelling was even so overwhelming that the researchers recommended teacher educators to help pre-service teachers become aware of the limitations of modelling and "get beyond" it (Sanger & Osguthorpe, 2013, p. 173).

Why do teachers expect so much from modelling in a moral educational context? A qualitative study among Dutch primary and secondary school teachers about pedagogically demanding situations gives a hint. Klaassen (2002) found that respondents placed a "heavy emphasis on setting a good example for students and their own nonverbal performance" (p. 155). The teachers had a rather subjective understanding of values and did not want to teach about values in the classroom in an explicit way, because they wanted to avoid dogmatism and indoctrination. So, modelling seems to offer teachers the opportunity to bring pedagogical or moral values to students' attention without having to discuss them.

Secondly, modelling is also advocated as a teaching method in the field of moral education. When teachers model in this sense, they do not only 'teach morally', but also 'teach morality', which means that they display moral behaviour intentionally in order to help students becoming a good person (Fenstermacher et al., 2009). Most contemporary approaches to moral education have called on teachers to be moral exemplars or role models (Sanderse, 2013). For example, while Kohlberg's cognitive development approach has become known for dilemma discussions and moral community schools, Snarey and Samuelson (2014, p. 73) rehabilitate the importance of moral exemplars, which they see as "the least acknowledged of Kohlberg's methods of moral education". In addition, Noddings (2013) sees modelling as an important moral educational method, next to confirmation, dialogue and practice: "To support her students as ones-caring, she must show them herself as one-caring" (p. 178). However, over the last two decades, in particular neo-Aristotelian character educationalists have developed modelling as a moral educational method (see e.g. Croce, 2020; Croce & Vaccarezza, 2017; Vaccarezza & Niccoli, 2019; Kristjánsson, 2006; 2017; Sanderse, 2013; Vos, 2018).

However, modelling has been discussed in most detail in the field of teacher education, which is not surprising, because by teaching their students (the pre-service teachers) teacher educators provide them with models of how these students can teach the children in their own classroom. The starting point is that teachers 'model' when they display the kind of reasoning, emotions, or actions that they want to promote in students. This has also been described as "congruent teaching" (Swennen et al., 2008). However, modelling involves more. Because students may not be aware that teachers are modelling, they may not understand the specific messages that teachers communicate or uncritically accept messages that remain implicit, modelling has been developed as a full-blown didactical

approach. As a method, modelling comprises four steps: (1) teaching congruently, (2) stepping out of the situation and thinking out loud about the modelling, (3) justifying the modelling, and (4) encouraging students to 'reconstruct' the modelling, i.e. invite them to think about what the modelled behaviour means for their own situation (Boyd, 2014).

Student Emulation

The two interpretations of modelling that we described so far – as teaching morally or as a method to teach morality to students – are different but have also something in common: modelling is initiated by teachers and then, ideally, adopted by students. In other words, it is assumed that teachers model virtuous behaviour and attitudes, such as honesty, fairness and respect, and that this will somehow trickle down to students. However, this focus neglects the question whether and how students may come to learn from role models. Therefore, I recently proposed to pay more attention to the process of how students pick up things from teachers (Sanderse, 2024). From this perspective, students are seen as young people who are in the process of growing up and who explore different options of how to lead their lives well. They also learn through imitating and emulating others, a process that also goes on in schools, whether teachers model moral behaviour intentionally or not.

There are several ways in which students can reproduce teachers' moral behaviour, and not all of these ways contribute to students becoming virtuous. If one thinks about the effects of modelling on students, a distinction can be made between 'mimicry', 'imitation' and 'emulation' (Warnick, 2008). People *mimic* when they copy a model's behaviour but not the ends of the behaviour; they *imitate* when they adopt both the behaviour and the ends of the model; and they *emulate* when they adopt the model's ends but reach them through different means. While I adopt this simple and useful means/end distinction, we should keep in mind that it is often difficult to differentiate between means and ends in behaviour and that people can engage in goal-driven imitation and emulation without knowing or sharing a models' ends (Warnick, 2008). How are these three notions related to students' *moral* development? Several virtue ethical minded philosophers, most notably Fossheim (2006) and Zagzebski (2017), have assumed that people start out mimicking other peoples' sounds, gestures, and skills when they are children. Once they mature, they will think more about who deserves their imitation, and why, moving on to imitation and emulation. Most philosophers do not only describe this developmental process, but also evaluate what kind of learning is necessary for becoming virtuous. There is agreement in the academic literature that mimicry is not sufficient for becoming virtuous, and that it can only be achieved through what is called 'emulation'. For example, while Vos (2018, p. 18) recognises that children and adolescents learn through observation and imitation, also in schools, in order to become virtuous, the real question is "how students can *emulate* the moral qualities of exceptional persons".

This view is informed by an Aristotelian understanding of 'being virtuous', which does not only consist in doing virtuous things, but also in relation to the right person, at the right time, to the right extent, in the right manner, and for the right purpose (Aristotle, 2002, NE 1120a20-25). In other words, "[t]o possess a virtue is to be a certain sort of person with a certain complex mindset, including "…the wholehearted acceptance of a distinctive range of considerations as reasons for action." (Hursthouse & Pettigrove, 2022). For example, while helping out in the community garden can be virtuous thing, helping is only performed by a virtuous person if she perceives the situation right, feels appropriate emotions, and helps for the right reason, i.e., for the sake of its nobility.

This account of virtue makes clear why people cannot become virtuous through mimicry alone: mimicry enables students to copy virtuous behaviours, but the understanding of ends that is required for imitation or emulation is needed to acquire the right *reasons,* which is part of what it means to be virtuous. Furthermore, imitation does not suffice either, because it only results in students behaving (more or less) the same as the model. Annas (2011, p. 15) has argued that virtue does not only require students to repeat predictable actions but to give "a response which is appropriate to the situation", which often means that we have to "respond in creative and imaginative ways to new challenges". This explains why virtue ethical minded philosophers of education are mostly interested in emulation, which they also see as a virtue in its own right (Kristjánsson, 2006; Henderson, 2024). As a virtue, emulation does not only include acting for certain reasons, but also having a certain feeling towards a role model, which has been understood in different ways, e.g. as 'admiration', 'elevation' and 'adoration' (see e.g. Zagzebski, 2017; Kristjánsson, 2017).

Connecting Modelling to Emulation

So far, we discussed some educational literature on 'modelling' as an activity that is initiated by teachers, through teaching morally or as a moral educational method. We also looked at some ways in which philosophers have understood 'imitation' and 'emulation' in relation to moral development. Now, philosophers interested in virtue and emulation generally do not consider what kind of modelling may support students' moral development. And educationalists who recommend teachers to be role models often do not think about whether and how modelled behaviour is interpreted, valued and used by students. Because these bodies of literature have remained largely separate, certain options are not explored and certain questions not asked. For example, moral educationalists do not seem to recognise that teacher modelling is not always effective. The flip side of this is that students may imitate and emulate teachers' behaviour also when teachers are not aware of this.

The remainder of this paper is an attempt to discuss teacher modelling and the effects on students' moral development in an integrated way. Helpful are two criteria that remained in the background so far: teacher modelling can be intentional (or not) and effective (or not). Modelling is *intentional* when teachers have a reason to model certain behaviours or attitudes to students. In moral education, these reasons have something to do with the moral growth that they want to bring about in students. Modelling is *effective* when students emulate the moral behaviour that teachers display in the classroom. When these two criteria are plotted against each other, we get four different combinations of intentional/unintentional and effective/non-effective modelling. These four options will be illustrated through the modelling by and emulation of four imaginary teachers, Abel, Barbara, Chris and Deborah.

Unintentional and ineffective teacher modelling

Abel is a teacher who displays virtues like care, love, and friendliness in his interactions with students and colleagues, but he does not realise that his moral behaviour may influence students' moral development. He wants to be a caring teacher but has not considered the idea that being caring may be a goal for his students as well. In his case, students do not recognise, admire or emulate his caring for and about them either, for example because they consider it so normal that it doesn't stand out, or because they want to be tough instead of caring.

Unintentional and effective teacher modelling.

Barbara is a teacher who, like Abel, is not very much aware of the moral messages she communicates through what she says and does. She has a great sense of humour and is very open-minded. While these virtues contribute to a classroom climate in which students can learn, she doesn't see students' moral education as part of her professional ambitions. Despite this, Barbara's students do admire and emulate her open-mindedness. At their graduation, several students confide to her that her open-mindedness made an impression on them, and years later, Barbara meets a former student who tell her that her example changed the direction of his life.

Intentional and ineffective teacher modelling

Abel and Barbara have two colleagues who use modelling intentionally as part of a school-wide character education project. When supervising classroom dialogues on controversial issues, Chris always models the virtue of respect in order to morally educate his students. He intervenes in a respectful way, explains and justifies his choices, and helps students how to think about what it means for them to be respectful during a dialogue. However, students just continue to give their unvarnished opinions and do not admire or emulate his respectful attitude.

Intentional and effective teacher modelling

Finally, Chris' colleague Deborah uses modelling intentionally too, and in her case, students do actually recognise, admire and emulate these virtues. She sets out to encourage students' self-knowledge by having them reflect on their personal traits and moral qualities and how these may help them to deal with future challenges. She does so by sharing stories about her own personality and character, and how they both helped and hindered her to chart her own path in life. Deborah's example inspires students to develop their own self-knowledge.

Before we derive some insights from these four options for moral education in schools, three limitations of the framework will be pointed out. First, we used a virtue ethical perspective on moral education, and within it, we focussed on teachers as models of *virtue*, and not as models of vice or of character states lying between virtue and vice (Sanderse, 2015). Acknowledging that teachers are rarely paragons of virtue would make an overview more complex and truer to life. Second, we compared (un)intentionality with (in)effectiveness as two aspects of teacher modelling. Another approach would be to evaluate whether teachers' moral educational intentions are in line with *students'* intentions to learn how to live a good life (see Sanderse, 2024). Third, it needs to be pointed out that these four examples illustrate conceptual possibilities, i.e. they are conceivable, but they are not necessarily probable. Empirical research would have to be conducted to find out whether these possibilities exist in educational practice.

Conclusion

By way of conclusion, I formulate three insights for moral education in schools on the basis of these combinations of (un)intentional and (in)effective modelling.

Firstly, the overview showed that teacher modelling can, in principle, be both intentional and effective (in the case of Deborah), but it made also clear that there are different options. For example, the loftiness of teachers' intentions and their attempts to model virtues to students does not guarantee that students will recognise, let alone admire or emulate their virtuous behaviour (see e.g. Willems et al. 2012). In addition, students can admire and emulate teachers while remaining blissfully ignorant about the influence they are having on children.

Secondly, we have seen that in some cases (those of Deborah and Abel) the intentions with and effects of modelling are aligned, while in other cases (Chris and Barbara) such a match is lacking. Note, however, that a match may not always be a good thing. For example, Abel's modelling is both unintentional and ineffective. While we may be tempted to conclude that if Abel doesn't want to model virtues, it doesn't matter that he doesn't reach any children, the situation can be more complex. For example, if Abel teaches at a school that sees students' character education as part of its mission, parents and management may not be happy with his unintentional and ineffective approach.

Thirdly, we saw two cases in which teachers' intentions with and the effects of modelling on students were not aligned. These options raise the question whether, from the point of view of moral education, one of them is more desirable than the other. Would one rather have a teacher, like Chris, who models intentionally but with no effect, or a teacher like Barbara, who models unintentionally but is still emulated by her students? Fenstermacher (2001, p. 649) has argued that teachers' moral behaviour in the classroom "would probably not concern us if it were not for its serving as a model, as a something the students will see and believe proper, or imitate, or accept as a standard for how things should be". There is something in this: modelling does not seem to make much sense if no one is paying attention.

On the other hand, if teachers do not have the intention that their moral behaviour promotes students' moral growth, students run the risk of being socialised instead of receiving a moral education. In the words of Carr (2023, p. 77): "while role modelling has often been all too highly effective, many of the most successful of past and present-day political, religious, and other role modellers have been people of quite deplorable moral character". While this conundrum cannot be resolved here, we shouldn't forget that Deborah's example showed that we can conceive of teachers who are an effective role model *on the basis* of the intention to contribute to children's moral education.

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