Imitating or Emulating?
How Exemplar Education Can Avoid Being Indoctrinating

Bart Engelen & Alfred Archer

Abstract

Despite renewed interest in the positive role exemplars can play in moral education, exemplar-based education has been criticized as illiberal and indoctrinating. In this chapter, we investigate these worries and show how a specific, twofold approach to exemplar narratives can help avoid them. According to opponents, exemplar education can involve indoctrination and impose specific moral values, since pupils are expected to act in ways that resemble exemplars. Even if pupils are encouraged to pick their own exemplars, this arguably still promotes moral deference instead of independent moral reasoning and critical thinking. We argue that a nuanced distinction between 'imitation' and 'emulation' helps avoid such worries. Rather than seeking to simply imitate their exemplars, pupils should be encouraged to take a more nuanced approach to emulation in which they engage with their exemplars, think about how they can promote the values, and embody the ideals and virtues that they identify and admire in them. This approach is supported by recent insights about which exemplars are more motivating and which risk backfiring due to 'do-gooder derogation'. It also leads to practical pointers for those who want to work with exemplars in character education without being charged of indoctrination.

Introduction

Recently there has been a renewed academic focus on and appreciation of the positive role that exemplars can play in moral education (Engelen et al. 2018; Kristjánsson 2006; Walker 2020; Zagzebski 2017). Exemplar education is often considered an effective and suitable way to inspire pupils to become better people instead of merely acquiring and refining knowledge and skills. By letting pupils engage with stories about activists like Martin Luther King or Malala Yousafzai, religious figures like Jesus or Buddha, people who showed courage in times of war or adversity, like the 13 Ukrainian border guards who told a Russian warship to go f*** itself, celebrities like Mr. Beast (whose online stunts include planting 25 million trees) or Emma Watson (an outspoken feminist), and philanthropists like MacKenzie Scott (who invests billions of dollars in nonprofits promoting racial equity, economic mobility, public health and climate change) or Allan Saldanha (who, like others who took the 'Give What We Can' pledge, donates more than half of his income to effective charities).

The rationale behind employing such stories in education is to trigger emotional responses (admiration, inspiration, elevation, and guilt for not living up to similar standards) and more cognitive reflections (about moral duties and why to go beyond them) that help pupils figure out what morality requires from them, what exactly it means to be virtuous, and in what way they themselves can strive to lead better lives.

However, exemplar-based moral education – like other forms of character education – has also faced criticisms. In this chapter, we investigate one fundamental objection, namely that it is indoctrinating pupils as it imposes specific moral views on them. We aim to show how a specific, twofold approach to exemplar narratives can help avoid these worries.

In Section 2, we explain the objection and apply it to exemplar education. In Section 3, we detail a specific approach to exemplars, which arguably avoids this objection. In Section 4, we argue that this approach is still haunted by a related but distinct objection, according to which exemplar education encourages an attitude of deference towards exemplars that is not conducive to the development of proper ethical reflection. In Section 5, we argue that a nuanced understanding of the distinction between imitation and emulating helps avoid that last objection. In Section 6, we argue why this approach aligns well with recent insights into the psychological and emotional mechanisms that play a key role here (admiration, inspiration, derogation, et cetera). In Section 7, we conclude by formulating some practical advice for how to integrate moral exemplars in classroom settings without running the risk of imposing specific views of the good life on pupils.

Why Exemplar Education Arguably Constitutes Indoctrination

The main aim of character education – whether at primary, secondary and tertiary level – is to improve the characters of pupils, typically by encouraging them to develop moral habits, dispositions and virtues, such as honesty, temperance, kindness, and (practical) wisdom. Educational tools like curricula, learning activities inside and outside the classroom, and teacher training are designed to facilitate pupils becoming better people (Lickona 1996).

For centuries now, character education has had both vocal proponents and staunch critics. Well-known objections – or "obstacles" as Berkowitz (1999) puts it – include widespread ambiguity and disagreement about what character is exactly, which values and virtues character education should promote, and what kind of educational activities are effective, systematic evidence of which is arguably lacking. In this chapter, we focus instead on the more fundamental and normative question of whether character education – more specifically exemplar-based character education – is desirable, legitimate, and appropriate. The question here is simple: "should schools teach character?" (Berkowitz 1999: 6). The key objection in this respect is that character education is indoctrinating and thus illiberal.

Why would it constitute a case of indoctrination? Moral and character education, the argument goes, imposes specific substantive moral values and virtues on pupils and thus violates their freedom and autonomy, i.e. their right and capacity to develop their own views of the good life. While encouraging pupils to become 'better people' seems uncontroversial, what that means varies both between and within cultures. Character education then faces a dilemma. Either it remains vague about what a good character is and thus what virtues it should promote, (but then it stops being proper character education) or it specifies those in more detail, often in a (semi-)religious or (neo-)Aristotelian vein (but then it becomes indoctrinating).

What characterizes indoctrination exactly? According to Eamon Callan and Dylan Arena (2010: 105), it concerns a kind of "intellectual distortion" driven by "an ill-considered or overzealous concern to inculcate particular beliefs or values", in our case moral values and beliefs concerning the good life and what morality requires. Instead of aiming for critical reflection, independence, intellectual humility, and open-mindedness, indoctrination is worrying as it produces – or aims to produce – a "close-mindedness that students are explicitly or implicitly taught to emulate" (Callan & Arena 2010: 116).

This is exactly what character education does, according to its critics. Lee Jerome and Ben Kisby (2019: 125-126), for example, criticize character education in Britain as "moralistic and "inherently repressive", as it assumes that "the teacher possesses the 'correct' answers to various moral and political questions towards which they guide students", thus failing to promote genuine critical reflection and moral growth amongst pupils.

The objection that frames character education as indoctrination implies that it is illiberal and problematically perfectionist. After all, it inculcates specific views of the good on pupils and assumes there is a set of goods that everyone (or at least every pupil enrolled in this or that school) should strive for. According to anti-perfectionists, moral education is at odds with the kind of ethical independence that education in liberal societies should strive to develop. This does not naively assume that pupils are free from influence, as Ronald Dworkin (2011: 371) points out:

> We cannot escape the influence of our ethical environment: we are subject to the examples, exhortations, and celebrations of other people's ideas about how to live. But we must insist that that environment be created under the aegis of ethical independence: that it be created organically by the decisions of millions of people with the freedom to make their own choices, not through political majorities imposing their decisions on everyone.

Education should enable pupils to think for themselves and not instill the views of political majorities or of whatever the religious or non-religious ideologies are of, whatever powers that be. As Michel Croce (2019: 296) puts it, "indoctrinatory educational strategies should be avoided because they inhibit children's capacity for moral reflection and thereby deprive them of the necessary abilities to evaluate the goodness of their moral conduct" (and I personally think hardly anyone involved in moral or character education would disagree with this). In liberal and pluralist societies, critics argue, we should respect each person's own views on the good life and education should try to stimulate pupils' reflective capacities to formulate, revise and act on their own views, thus leading their lives according to their own lights, not the teachers'. The only virtues that education should promote are political ones, such as tolerance, mutual understanding and autonomy, neither of which is to be understood as substantive views of the good life (Victoria Costa 2004). In liberal societies like ours, the argument goes, schools can and on most accounts should engage in civic or citizenship education, ensuring that pupils become good (i.e. independent) citizens, but should refrain from telling (or otherwise inculcating into) pupils what is right and wrong (Jerome & Kisby 2019: 115-118).

The objection to character education being an illiberal tool for indoctrination arguably also applies to exemplar education in which moral exemplars – like those mentioned above – are selected as role models that pupils should admire and take as moral guides. Such an education arguably also imposes specific kinds of moral values and visions of the good life on pupils. After all, pupils are expected to (at least try to) act in ways that resemble the virtuous deeds and characteristics of the exemplars at hand. But why these exemplars, these deeds, and these characteristics (and not others)? What if pupils have good reasons for disagreeing with Jesus' teachings or with the teacher's view that a morally good person is committed to philanthropy? Perhaps it makes good sense to incorporate Martin Luther King and Malcolm X as exemplars in education if we want to turn pupils into social justice campaigners. However, that might not be the kind of life pupils

themselves envision. Moreover, even if one succeeds in justifying the idea that social justice should matter for everyone, these two exemplars already offer quite different role models, embodying very different stances on the legitimacy of violence in protests and militancy. As such, picking one over the other will clearly push pupils in a certain direction, which can reasonably be labelled 'imposing' or 'indoctrinating'.

Kristján Kristjánsson (2006: 408) sums up the objection against exemplar education as follows.

> The idea seems to be this: you present a model for emulation, somehow lure students into finding it attractive, and lo and behold, they will emulate it by latching on to it and copying it. But one can hardly avoid understanding this to be a description of emulation as mere *imitation*.

Again, this is hardly the kind of open-minded, critical, and autonomous reflection that character education (should) aim to encourage in pupils. While we return to this key distinction between emulation and imitation later on (Section 5), let us first describe an approach that arguably avoids this objection (Section 3) before discussing a further objection that can be raised against it (Section 4).

An Approach that Arguably Avoids Indoctrination

In this Section, we detail a specific approach to exemplar education that can largely avoid worries of indoctrination and value imposition. The main gist of this is to have pupils pick *their own* exemplars. If pupils are asked and encouraged to think about whom they themselves admire, morally speaking, one obviously avoids the objection that teachers are imposing specific conceptions of the good, embodied by specific exemplars that they – or the educational system – (pre)selects. If there are pupils who do not admire Martin Luther King or Malala Yousafzai, but rather think of Elon Musk or Jordan Peterson as moral exemplars, that is up to them. Instead of trying to instill that social justice warriors somehow *are* more admirable, this approach starts with what pupils themselves think and feel about particular people.

We implemented this strategy in a 4-year long research project called 'What Would My Hero Do?' on exemplar narratives in a university setting.[1] At Tilburg University (The Netherlands), we developed a teaching module surrounding exemplar education that started out by asking around 1,000 students–both Dutch and international students, enrolled in Psychology or Business Economics Bachelor programs–whom they admired, morally speaking. The five most popular answers referred to people from their close surroundings, with the top 5 being mothers (clearly the most widely admired), specific friends, fathers, specific teachers, and grandfathers. Then came romantic partners, grandmas, and colleagues but also historical and contemporary figures such as Aletta Jacobs (one of the first Dutch female physicians and very active in the women's movement), Bill Gates, Emma Watson, Jordan Peterson, and Michelle Obama. Just outside the top 10 came Jesus, Nelson Mandela, and David Attenborough.

After introducing what morality and ethics entail and why some well-known people – like Malala or Greta Thunberg – arguably qualify as moral exemplars, students were asked to identify, write about and present their own moral exemplar, detailing who this person is and what makes them *morally* exemplary. Next, students were split up in two conditions. In the first, they were asked to

imagine how their exemplar would act in a specific situation (for example, when confronted by a sexist comment). In the second, they were asked to pick a situation in their personal life in which they were asked to try and *behave* like (they think) their exemplar would. While we found no systematically significant (condition, time, or interaction) effects of this intervention on emotional and psychological measures (like prosocialness, perspective taking, joy, compassion, et cetera), anecdotal evidence from students' responses and writings suggests they found the exercises useful and inspiring, encouraging them to think differently and more thoroughly about situations they recognized as morally laden.

The key aspect of our approach then was to encourage students to pick *their own* exemplars, to explore what makes them admirable and to think about what (they think) these exemplary people would do in specific situations. This arguably avoids charges of indoctrination and illiberal value imposition and encourages proper engagement with their exemplars.

1. Why Exemplar Education Arguably Promotes Moral Deference

That said, there is an additional objection to this approach, namely that it promotes an attitude of moral deference on the part of pupils, which is antithetical to the kind of open-minded, critical, and autonomous reflection that education should try to foster.

To see why the use of exemplars in moral education might be thought to promote moral deference, it is worth considering some of the ways in which exemplars have been claimed to have a useful role in moral education. Linda Zagzebski, for example, claims that admiration is useful in moral education because admiration, at least typically, involves a desire to emulate the person being admired. Emulation, according to Zagzebski (2017: 43), "is a form of imitation in which the emulated person is perceived as a model in some respect—a model of cooking, dancing, playing basketball, doing philosophy." In emulating someone, we attempt to be more like them in some specific respect. If I admire someone's ability as a cook, for example, I will take them as my model for cooking and try to cook in the way that they cook. The idea that moral exemplars serve as models to imitate has a long history. The Victorian author and reformist Samuel Smiles (1876: 82), for example, claimed that "Admiration of great men, living or dead, naturally evokes imitation of them in a greater or less degree". In the 13th century, the poet Thomasin von Zirclaere claimed that the way for a pupil to become virtuous was to "choose in his mind an excellent man and arrange his behavior according to that pattern" (cited in Jaeger 1994: 79-80). The idea here seems clear, we become better people by finding excellent people whose behavior we can copy. This idea was a clear source of inspiration for our second condition which asked students to try and *behave* like their exemplar.

As we have argued, when pupils can pick their own moral exemplars, this goes some way to avoid the worry that educators are imposing their values on pupils. However, this approach still seems to be one in which pupils are not properly determining their moral values for themselves. As Bryan Warnick (2008: 16) has argued, one of the worries that has been raised against imitating exemplars as a path to moral virtue is that imitation seems to be "a form of enslavement" and that "if someone were truly free, he or she could not be simply copying another person." It is perhaps a peculiar form of enslavement in this case, in which the enslaved get to choose their own master. Nevertheless, the objection is clear, when someone is simply copying the actions of another they are not acting freely, even if they chose who they would copy.

The reason for this is that this form of action is heteronomous rather than autonomous; it is one in which a person gives control over their actions to another rather than making their own decisions about how to act (Warnick 2008: 21). As Jean Jacques Rousseau (1762/1979: 20; cited in Warnick 2008: 20) argued, imitation is fundamentally about being "transported out of ourselves" and taking on the role of another person. By imitating another person, we fail to make our own decisions about how we should act based on our own judgements about appropriate courses of conduct in particular situations. When pupils are encouraged to simply copy their exemplar and act in whatever way they think their exemplar would act in each situation, they are not being encouraged or enabled to explore their own moral commitments and form their own moral judgements. Likewise, encouraging people to find their 'moral heroes', as we did, may implicitly be interpreted as an encouragement to find moral experts to defer to, rather than to figure out their own moral views and determine their own moral judgments.

There are two related further problems here. First, people who are motivated to perform moral actions in this way may perform the right actions but may fail to do so for the right reasons. For example, according to Immanuel Kant (1797/1983: 148), proper moral motivation involves a rational appreciation of what is morally required in the situation we are in. Someone who simply copies a moral exemplar is not motivated by this appreciation of the moral law but rather by other people's conduct (Warnick 2008: 21). While this is a distinctively Kantian account of moral motivation, it is a reasonable general moral view that people should be moved to perform an action by the considerations that make that action the right one to perform (Markovits 2010).[2] For example, if we find an injured person lying in the street, then the same reasons why helping that person would be the right thing to do should be the reasons why we are motivated to help that person. In this case, we might think the relevant reasons are reasons of care (they need help that we are able to give). Someone who helped the injured person in such a case because they had seen their moral exemplar perform similar actions in the past seems not to be motivated in the right kind of way. They should ideally be motivated out of a direct appreciation of the needs of the injured person, not from a desire to copy their exemplar. Copying one's moral exemplar, then, does not appear to be the right form of moral motivation for performing virtuous actions.

Second, by copying their moral exemplars, pupils likely overlook the many ways in which they are different from their exemplars. The first worry here is that moral exemplars likely have achieved a higher level of virtue than admiring pupils. As a result, emulation may constitute a dangerous form of what Bernard Williams calls "moral weightlifting" (1995: 190): trying to perform an action that is beyond one's moral capacities (Thomas et al. 2019). Consider a rather short-tempered, impatient man who admires the actions of a kind, compassionate, and patient person who works as a volunteer, caring for people with learning difficulties. If the impatient man tries to simply imitate his exemplar, he is likely to find himself failing. His inability to perform this work may have been easy to predict if rather than trying to imitate his exemplar, he had instead thought to consider the various ways in which he is *not* like his exemplar.

The second, related worry here is that the admirer may have a distinctive set of potential talents that will be left unfulfilled if they simply try to imitate those they admire. Take the case of Friedrich Nietzsche, who admired Arthur Schopenhauer greatly but came to disagree strongly with Schopenhauer's philosophical views. The right response was not for Nietzsche to try to imitate Schopenhauer and become like him but rather to try and develop his own potential. We don't,

according to Nietzsche, develop our own unique talents by copying other people. Instead, we must find out our own unique talents and develop these (Nietzsche 1874/1997 6.ii,1.iii-iv; Robertson 2019: 101). By encouraging pupils to imitate their exemplars, then, exemplar education asks them to ignore their own unique talents and to develop talents that are not within their reach. To return to our previous example, the impatient man who is ill-suited to work as a care-giving volunteer may have exactly the right qualities to become a firefighter or a mountain rescuer. By attempting to imitate his moral exemplar, he would put himself on a course for moral failure and fail to cultivate his particular moral talents as a result.

In this Section, we have argued that the kind of exemplar education that encourages pupils to imitate exemplars – even if these are identified by pupils – promotes an attitude of moral deference instead of one of critical and independent engagement. First, we have shown that imitating whom one admires is not necessarily conducive to genuinely virtuous action, i.e. to doing the right thing for the right reasons. Second, we have shown that it may actually lead to not doing the right thing at all.

Emulating, Not Imitating Exemplars

However, these worries about the imitation of moral exemplars do not count conclusively against the use of moral exemplars in moral education. We can accept that there are problems with an approach to moral education which relies too heavily on imitation without thinking that this shows that an exemplar-based approach to moral education is misguided altogether.

To see why this is the case, we need to understand the difference between *imitation* and *emulation*. While imitation involves someone attempting to achieve the same goal as the person they are imitating by performing the same actions, emulation involves trying to achieve the same goal though not necessarily by performing the same actions (Warnick 2008: 6). While imitating essentially involves copying or mimicking another person's actions, emulating can involve a broader attempt to find ways to succeed in similar (but not identical) ways.

This is important for exemplar education as an approach to exemplars that encourages pupils to emulate rather than simply imitate their exemplars, avoiding the worries we considered in Section 4. If pupils can be inspired to emulate their exemplars rather than imitate them, then they will be encouraged to consider what the valuable ends are that the exemplar is promoting and how they themselves can seek to achieve these same valuable ends. As Kristjánsson (2006: 41) has argued, the proper role of exemplars here is to "help you arrive at an articulate conception of what you value and want to strive towards". On this view, moral exemplars can help us determine for ourselves what our own moral ideals and values are and encourage us to find ways in which we too can embody these ideals.

Relatedly, one of us has argued that the motivational effects of admiring a moral exemplar are not limited to seeking to imitate or to emulate the exemplar. Admiration for moral exemplars focuses our attention on the moral values or ideals that the exemplar embodies and this is often accompanied by a desire to promote the value that we see in the exemplar (Archer 2019). However, there are ways of promoting this value that do not involve seeking to become an exemplar of that value, for instance by supporting and encouraging those that do seek to become exemplars. We might also be inspired by our admiration for the exemplar to develop different virtues from those

that they embody but that nevertheless will contribute to promoting the same valuable ends (Croce 2020).

To see the differences between these different ways in which someone might be motivated by a moral exemplar, let us consider an example. When someone admires Greta Thunberg's environmental activism, their attention will be directed to the value of sustainability and the importance of finding ways to protect the environment. Recognizing this value could inspire someone to try to copy Thunberg by engaging in the same actions that she has performed, going on school strikes, engaging in social media activism, and going on protests and making speeches. This can be seen as a form of imitation as it involves trying to achieve the same ends by performing the same kinds of action. Alternatively, someone inspired by Thunberg can try to become a climate activist themselves but not through performing the same actions. They may engage instead in more disruptive forms of civil disobedience such as chaining themselves to the goalpost during a football match or gluing themselves to roads. This could be a form of emulation, as the aim is to embody the ideal of a climate activist but not through performing the same acts that Thunberg performs. Finally, someone might be inspired by Thunberg's environmental commitments to seek to promote the value of sustainability without becoming an activist themselves. This could involve supporting activists through financial donations and voting for the green parties on election day. Or it could involve becoming a climate scientist or a rewilding officer. These forms of motivation may still arise from admiration for an exemplar but do not involve seeking to become an exemplar oneself. What this means for exemplar-based education is that pupils should be encouraged to take a more nuanced approach to their exemplars in which they are encouraged to emulate them in ways that do not merely involve imitation (Kristjánsson 2006; Moberg 2000) and also to think about how they can promote the values they admire in their exemplars in other ways (Archer 2019). Rather than encouraging pupils to simply imitate or copy their exemplar, pupils should instead (be encouraged to) investigate what makes their exemplar admirable and virtuous, what kind of moral ideals and virtues they embody and which skills, attitudes and knowledge they possess. In encouraging pupils to investigate these moral ideals and to seek to promote them, exemplar education can avoid the objection that it is encouraging the wrong kind of motivation for moral action. Moreover, by encouraging pupils not to simply mimic their moral exemplars but rather take heed of the fact they are not as exemplary as their exemplars and that they may possess talents that their exemplars do not, exemplar education can avoid the criticism that it is promoting the wrong kinds of actions.

The twofold approach that we developed to exemplar education encouraged pupils to take this kind of nuanced approach to their exemplars. Pupils were given a discussion exercise in which they were asked to identify the moral values that they think their exemplars embody. The aim here was to encourage pupils to focus not only on simply imitating exemplars but also to consider what makes them virtuous. In another exercise, we asked students to consider not only how their exemplar would act in a given situation but also how the pupils themselves would act. This encouraged the students to think carefully about the differences between their own levels of moral virtue and those of their exemplars. One could also consider asking pupils to consider other ways in which they could promote the moral values that are promoted by their exemplars.

In summary, exemplar education need not encourage a problematic form of moral deference. A nuanced approach to exemplars can encourage pupils to think critically about how best to respond

to exemplars in ways that go beyond simple mimicry. We have explained one way of doing this in our twofold approach to exemplar education.

Further Advantages of Our Approach to Exemplar Education

In this Section, we identify three further advantages of the twofold approach to exemplar education that we have set out, in which pupils 1) get to choose their own moral exemplars and 2) are encouraged to investigate, explore, and engage with them instead of merely imitate those exemplars.

A first advantage is that it encourages pupils to focus on exemplars towards whom they actually have positive emotional responses. Research has shown that admiration and related positive emotions such as elevation and inspiration are key factors in triggering a desire to emulate and an (intrinsic) motivation to lead better lives (Algoe & Haidt 2009; Han & Dawson 2023; Immordino-Yang & Sylvan 2010; Kristjánsson 2017). As such, these positive emotions drive character growth, a complex process in which cognitive activities like reasoning and reflecting are arguably necessary but definitely not sufficient.[3] If we want pupils to become better people, getting them emotionally involved is necessary and this is more likely to be successful when working with exemplars (that we can be sure) they admire, feel proud of and are inspired by.

This ties into a well-known distinction between different categories of moral exemplars. While a 'moral saint' is "a person whose every action is as morally good as possible, a person, that is, who is as morally worthy as can be" (Wolf 1982: 419), so someone excelling in and displaying all possible virtues, a 'moral hero' is admirable for only one specific trait. Moral saints are arguably not ideal role models for how to lead a moral life, exactly because their moral perfection seems unattainable, not imitable, way too demanding, and therefore demotivating for ordinary chumps like you and me (see also: Croce 2020). According to Linda Zagzebski (2017: 25), they might not even be particularly admirable in the first place. In contrast, less perfect moral heroes are, while still virtuous and admirable, much easier to relate and more likely to trigger positive emotions (and less likely to trigger negative responses, see below).

This brings us to a second advantage. When free to pick their own exemplars, a lot of pupils spontaneously choose attainable and relatable exemplars. As mentioned, the most popular exemplars in our own study were (grand)parents (26% of students chose relatives), friends and teachers (18% chose non-relatives close to themselves). In contrast to seemingly flawless exemplars – typical 'moral celebrities' that figure in quite conventional stories –, moms, dads, and friends are more accessible and attainable for pupils and, hence, more effective *as exemplars*. As Rebecca Stangl (2020) argues in her book 'Neither Heroes nor Saints', people can be genuinely good (what she calls 'ordinarily virtuous') without being perfect ('extraordinarily virtuous'). Imperfect but virtuous exemplars are psychologically closer to ourselves – at least to those of us who are not perfect moral saints ourselves – and thus much easier to relate to. This has also been confirmed in a study about exemplar stories in a classroom setting (Han et al. 2017), where so-called 'close-other exemplars', like parents and friends, were shown to more effectively promote moral elevation and prosocial behavior than historic figures and extraordinary exemplars do. Again, the former was shown to be perceived as more attainable and more relatable.

Experimental research confirms that (perceived) relatability (understood as exemplars with similar socio-cultural backgrounds than pupils) and – to a lesser extent – attainability (understood as the extent to which pupils deem exemplars 'emulatable') are key factors in exemplar stories effectively motivating pupils (Han et al. 2022). Stories were shown to have a bigger positive impact on pupils when the exemplar was made more relatable, for example by adding that they had the same national and cultural background as pupils (Han et al. 2022; Han & Dawson 2023). Now, instead of having to tweak and rewrite narratives about prepicked exemplars in attempts to make them as relatable as possible, which has obvious downsides and constraints, letting pupils pick themselves automatically leads to them engaging with whomever they find relatable and attainable.[4]

An interesting factor here is gender, another factor that can make an exemplar more relatable. In our own study, no less than 90% of male participants picked a male exemplar and 55% of female participants picked a female exemplar, which in part can be explained by systemic and structural factors that lead to more men ending up in visible positions (of power and esteem, for example) that are deemed 'exemplary'. Again, instead of trying to tailor exemplar stories to heterogenous student populations, giving pupils control over those stories quasi-automatically increases relatability.

This also reveals an obvious risk with letting students pick their own exemplars, namely that a trade-off between relatability and diversity can arise. If most of the selected exemplars closely resemble the characteristics of pupils, they will lack diversity in homogeneous school populations. This can reinforce existing inequities in positions of status and the attention given to people in those positions (by society at large, the media, history textbooks, etc.). When structural factors influence the opportunities for members of different groups to occupy places where they can grasp the public's attention, the amount of well-known and relatable exemplars that are available to people from different groups inevitably varies. When historically, a disproportionate amount of attention goes to men and/or to white people, other groups will have fewer relatable exemplars available to them.

While this is a real worry, as the above-mentioned difference between male and female participants also suggests, we were pleasantly surprised by the diversity of public figures that students picked as exemplars. These ranged from Dutch influencers (like Diede Joosten), sports people (like paralympic athlete Bibian Mentel), and historical figures (like Anne Frank) to a wide variety – in gender, race, ethnicity, background, expertise, domain, et cetera – of exemplary people from all over the world (like German student and anti-nazi activist Sophie Schnoll, Desmond Tutu, Bulgarian philanthropist Dobri Dobrev, and Vasily Arkhipov, the Soviet K-19 officer who prevented a nuclear torpedo launch).

A third advantage of this approach is that, by focusing on emulation rather than imitation, it encourages pupils to acquire and refine the skills needed to identify how they can develop their own moral capabilities, thereby avoiding the dangers of narratives about exemplars triggering backlash rather than admiration. An important risk involved in exemplar education is that stories of moral exemplars can trigger 'do-gooder derogation', a phenomenon in which people respond to the good deeds of others with resentment and hostility rather than admiration (Minson & Monin 2012). In some cases, this may lead people to be *less* motivated to develop their own virtues than they were before encountering the stories of moral exemplars (Monin et al. 2008). This

phenomenon appears to be more likely to occur when pupils take the behavior of the exemplars to pose an implicit challenge to pupils' views of themselves as morally good people and respond to this in a defensive way (Monin et al. 2008; Minson & Monin 2012; Han et al., 2017).

Encouraging pupils to pick their own exemplars seems to be an effective way of avoiding do-gooder derogation. When pupils pick their own exemplars, they are unlikely to pick people that they feel threatened by. Instead, we can expect them to pick exemplars who they actually admire and feel inspired by. In our own study, asking pupils to pick their own exemplar seemed to have exactly this effect, with pupils reporting positive emotions (such as admiration, adoration, awe pride and joy) much more frequently than negative emotions such as envy (only 2% of participants) and shame (only 1%). This suggests, then, that our twofold approach is an effective strategy for avoiding the risks of do-gooder derogation.

Conclusion

In this chapter, we have discussed how programs and teachers involved in character education can make fruitful use of moral exemplars without being charged of indoctrination. If the main worries lie with those programs and teachers preselecting moral exemplars and encouraging pupils to imitate their exemplary actions, we have argued that those worries can be avoided by having pupils – instead of teachers – pick their own exemplars and encourage pupils to emulate – rather than imitate – them or to consider other ways in which they might promote the values embodied by their exemplars. This twofold approach avoids the indoctrination objection, as pupils select their own exemplars rather than having moral values imposed upon them. It also avoids the moral deference objection, as pupils are encouraged to think critically about the values embodied by their exemplars and how they can promote those values in their own lives.

In addition to avoiding these two major worries with exemplar education, our twofold approach also makes it more likely that pupils will actually feel admiration and other positive emotional responses towards their exemplars and thus avoid potential reactance and do-gooder derogation. Evidence suggests that most pupils pick exemplars that they not only look up to but also can relate to and are motivated to emulate. If those involved in exemplar education then encourage pupils to actually and critically engage with their exemplars, for example by having them think about what it is they find admirable in them – their values, their commitments, specific aspects of their character, and so on – it can play a key role in stimulating the kind of active, non-deferential attitudes that spur genuine moral growth.

Our discussion in this chapter then highlights the importance of careful attention to the details of the specific ways in which exemplars are used in the classroom for both the theory and practice of exemplar education. Theoretically, we need to pay close attention to these details as important ethical objections will apply for some uses of exemplars in education but not for others. Practically, we need to pay attention to these details in order to use exemplars in actual classroom settings in ways that are both effective and morally justified.

Acknowledgements

Statement of ethics

The study 'What Would My Hero Do' received ethical clearance from the Research Ethics and Data Management Committee of Tilburg School of Humanities and Digital Sciences (identification code: REDC #2020/006).

Notes

[1] This work was supported by the John Templeton Foundation under Grant 61514 ('Exemplar Interventions to Develop Character'). We are also grateful to Wake Forest University for support of this research.

[2] Like Kant, Aristotle stresses the ethical importance of the right kinds of motivations and attitudes. We should not only do the right thing but do so "at the right time, with the right motive, and in the right way" (Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics* II.9, 1108b). Virtuous people 1) know that they are performing virtuous actions; 2) decide on those themselves and 3) use their rational capacities to figure out which moral principles are relevant and how to apply them to their situation (Khan 2005: 42).

[3] See Gunnar Jorgensen (2006) for a nuanced account of the views on moral development and moral reasoning – and the role that reason and emotion play in these – espoused by Lawrence Kohlberg and his supposed biggest critic, Carol Gilligan.

[4] One can only assume that the 49% students in our own study who picked famous and historical figures and the 6% who picked religious and fictional figures find those relatable and manage to distill something attainable from them. Popular 'celebrity exemplars' were, for example, Diede Joosten, a young Dutch influencer and entrepreneur who aims to inspire and support women to maintain a (physically and psychologically) healthy lifestyle and Jameela Jamil, a British actress (known for example from 'The Good Place') and activist who is critical of media industry standards and unhealthy body images and often speaks from personal experiences, for example with eating disorder. Those who do pick celebrities thus hardly ever pick moral saints, but rather opt for flawed exemplars (and anecdotal evidence suggests they often do so because exemplars recognize those flaws explicitly).

References

Algoe, S. B., & Haidt, J. 2009. "Witnessing excellence in action: The 'other-praising' emotions of elevation, gratitude, and admiration." *The Journal of Positive Psychology*, *4*, 105-127.

Archer, A. 2019. "Admiration and motivation." *Emotion Review*, *11*, 140-150.

Aristotle. 350 B.C.E. *Nicomachean Ethics*. Translated by W.D. Ross. Online: http://classics.mit.edu/Aristotle/nicomachaen.html.

Berkowitz, M. W. 1999. "Obstacles to teacher training in character education." *Action in Teacher Education*, *20*(4), 1-10.

Callan, E. & Arena, D. 2010. "Indoctrination. In: Harvey Siegel" (ed.). *The Oxford Handbook of Philosophy of Education*, 104-121 Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Croce, M. 2019. "Exemplarism in moral education: Problems with applicability and indoctrination." *Journal of Moral Education*, *48*(3), 291-302.

Croce, M. 2020. "Moral exemplars in education: A liberal account." *Ethics and Education, 15*(2), 186-199.

Dworkin, R. 2011. *Justice for Hedgehogs*. Cambridge (MA): Harvard University Press.

Engelen, B., Thomas, A., Archer, A. & van de Ven, N. 2018. "Exemplars and nudges: Combining two strategies for moral education." *Journal of Moral Education*, *47*(3), 346-365.

Han, H. & Dawson, K. J. 2023. "Relatable and attainable moral exemplars as sources for moral elevation and pleasantness." *Journal of Moral Education*. Online: https://doi.org/10.1080/03057240.2023.2173158.

Han, H., Kim, J., Jeong, C., & Cohen, G. L. 2017. "Attainable and relevant moral exemplars are more effective than extraordinary exemplars in promoting voluntary service engagement." *Frontiers in Psychology*, *8*, 283.

Han, H., Workman, C. I., May, J., Scholtens, P., Dawson, K. J., Glenn, A. L., & Meindl, P. 2022. "Which moral exemplars inspire prosociality?" *Philosophical Psychology*, *35*(7), 943-970.

Immordino-Yang, M. H. & Sylvan, L. 2010. "Admiration for virtue: Neuroscientific perspectives on a motivating emotion." *Contemporary Educational Psychology*, *35*, 110-115.

Jaeger, C. S. 1994. *The Envy of Angels: Cathedral Schools and Social Ideals in Medieval Europe, 950-1200*. Pennsylvania: University of Pennsylvania Press.

Jerome, L. & Kisby, B. 2019. *The rise of character education in Britain: Heroes, dragons and the myths of character*. Cham: Palgrave MacMillan.

Jorgensen, G. 2006. "Kohlberg and Gilligan: Duet or duel?" *Journal of Moral Education, 35*(2), 179-196.

Kant, I. 1797/1983. *Metaphysical Principles of Virtue*. Translated by: J. W. Ellington. In: *Immanuel Kant: Ethical Philosophy*. Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company.

Khan, C.-A. B. 2005. "Aristotle's moral expert: The phronimos." In: Rasmussen, L. (ed.) *Ethics Expertise: History, Contemporary Perspectives, and Applications*, 39-54 Dordrecht: Springer.

Kristjánsson, K. 2006. "Emulation and the use of role models in moral education." *Journal of Moral Education*, *35*, 37-49.

Kristjánsson, K. 2017. "Emotions targeting moral exemplarity: Making sense of the logical geography of admiration, emulation and elevation." *Theory and Research in Education*, *15*(1), 20-37.

Lickona, T. 1996. "Eleven principles of effective character Education." *Journal of Moral Education*, *25*(1), 93-100.

Markovits, J. (2010). "Acting for the Right Reasons." *The Philosophical Review, 119*(2), 201-224.

Moberg, D. 2000. "Role models and moral exemplars: How do employees acquire virtues by observing others?" *Business Ethics Quarterly*, *10*, 675-696.

Minson, J. A., & Monin, B. 2012. "Do-gooder derogation: Disparaging morally motivated minorities to defuse anticipated reproach." *Social Psychological and Personality Science*, *3*, 200-207.

Monin, B., Sawyer, P. J., & Marquez, M. J. 2008. "The rejection of moral rebels: Resenting those who do the right thing." *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 95(1), 76–93.

Nietzsche, F. 1874/1997. "Schopenhauer as educator." In: *Untimely Meditations*. Edited by D. Breazeale and translated by R. J. Hollingdale. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Robertson, S. 2019. "Nietzsche on admiration and admirableness." In: A. Archer & A. Grahle (eds.), *The Moral Psychology of Admiration*. London: Rowman & Littlefield, 95-109.

Rousseau, J. J. 1762/1979. *Emile: Or, on Education*. Translated by: A. Bloom. New York: Basic Books.

Smiles, S. 1876. *Character*. London: John Murray.

Stangl, R. 2020. *Neither Heroes nor Saints: Ordinary virtue, Extraordinary Virtue, and Self-Cultivation*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Thomas, A., Archer, A. & Engelen B. 2019. 'How admiring moral exemplars can ruin your life: The case of Conrad's "Lord Jim"'. In: A. Archer & A. Grahle (eds.), *The Moral Psychology of Admiration*. London: Rowman & Littlefield, 233-248.

Victoria Costa, M. 2004. "Rawlsian civic education: Political not minimal." *Journal of Applied Philosophy*, *21*, 1-14.

Walker, L. J. 2020. "The character of character: The 2019 Kohlberg Memorial Lecture." *Journal of Moral Education*, *49*(4), 381-395.

Warnick, B. R. 2008. *Imitation and education: A philosophical inquiry into learning by example*. New York: State University of New York Press.

Williams, B. 1995. Replies. In: J.E.J. Altham and Ross Harrison (eds.). *World, Mind, and Ethics: Essays on the ethical philosophy of Bernard Williams.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 185-224.

Wolf, S. 1982. "Moral saints." *The Journal of Philosophy*, *79*(8), 419-439.

Zagzebski, L. T. 2017. *Exemplarist moral theory*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.