

Atli Harðarson

It takes time: Stories about the education of teachers

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God dag – Καλημέρα

My presentation here today is entitled “**It takes time: Stories about the education of teachers**” and it is about how people learn to be good teachers.

A little more than two years ago I and Kostas Magos, who is our host here in Volos, interviewed fifteen kindergarten and primary school teachers, seven of them in Iceland and eight here in Thessaly. In the following months we wrote two papers that were based on these interviews. In the autumn of 2021, they were both published in academic journals.

The teachers we interviewed all had more than ten years of teaching experience, most of them more than twenty years. We found them by asking around for experienced teachers who were seen by their principals and peers as successful. Hence, our sample was fifteen individuals who people in their local communities saw as effective, experienced, and good teachers.

We asked them to tell us how they learned to teach.

Initially we assumed that teaching belongs to a type of occupation where good and successful work depends to some extent on moral character, on being a good person, compassionate, patient, and even-handed. We did, however, not expect our diverse group of teachers, from two countries with different traditions of schooling, to tell almost the same story about their ethical and professional development. Nevertheless, that is what they did.

Before I tell you more about what the fifteen teachers said about their professional education and professional development, I think it may be helpful to say a few words about Aristotle, a Greek philosopher who was born in Makedonia in 384 BC. He grew up there and his hometown, Stageira, has been excavated and if you go up there to the north you can see the agora and parts of the ancient buildings.

As a young scientist and researcher Aristotle lived for a while in Lesbos, where Kostas is from, and later in Athens. He died in Chalkis in Evia (about midway between here and Athens) in 322 BC. His works are about biology, politics, psychology, rhetoric, logic, ethics, and many other subjects. Ever since the golden age of ancient Greek philosophy these works have been rediscovered again and again and found relevant and important. His ideas influenced Christian theology in the thirteenth century, the founders of British empiricism in the seventeenth century, the philosophy of Hegel and Marx in the nineteenth century, and in the last fifty years or so philosophical ethics, especially in the English-speaking world, has gone through a renewal where one of the works of Aristotle has been the main source of inspiration. This work is called *Ethica Nicomacheia*. It is a marvellous work. I hope you read it – and read it slowly.

When modern moral philosophy had been drawing increasingly upon this good old book for some years people working within education started to notice that the Aristotelian conceptions, that had

been dressed up and modified to meet present needs and concerns, could be used to understand various aspects of teacher education and the professionalism of teachers.

The ethics of Aristotle is often described as virtue ethics because the emphasis is on character traits that make people live well, flourish and be both happy and good. Among such traits discussed by Aristotle are courage, temperance, justice, honesty, generosity, magnanimity, and gentleness. All these virtues include simultaneously proper emotional dispositions and intellectual abilities to find out what is good and right to do under the circumstances at hand.

This is a holistic approach where the emotions and the intellect are seen as one integrated whole and moral development as simultaneously making our emotions more intelligent and our reasonings more warm-hearted and sensitive. The intellectual and emotional aspects of a virtuous character go hand in hand. Aristotle thought that when we become better, we also become wiser and each gain in wisdom also adds to our goodness. He saw this as a process that begins in early childhood and continues through adult life.

Young children acquire basic moral goodness, mostly through habituation and imitation of role models. Later in life, people learn to reason and deliberate about ethical and political issues. As they gradually gain practical wisdom, their ethical virtues reach greater perfection.

(Some of you may know about other theories of moral development, for instance the one propounded by Lawrence Kohlberg in the middle of last century. Kohlberg's theory is different from Aristotle's in that he saw moral development as reaching a final stage in young adulthood, and, also in that his theory is primarily about increasing ability to understand and to reason about what is right and what is wrong. The emotions play only a minor role in Kohlberg's theory whereas for Aristotle increasing emotional maturity is half the story.)

On Aristotle's view moral development is a lifelong process and if all goes well, then we continue to grow wiser and better so long as we live. I said, if all goes well. Aristotle did not think that was always the case. He believed that in order to cultivate moral wisdom, what he called *phronesis*, we need opportunities to exercise such wisdom. We do not have many such opportunities unless we are free to participate in discussions and decision making of some import. He thought that people grew good and wise through "political participation" that is participation in deliberation about the common good – such participation can be on the larger stage of national politics. It can also be in a small community such as a town, a volunteer organisation, or a workplace such as, say, a school.

Why am I telling you all this?

It is because the stories that the fifteen teachers told us are in accord with a broadly Aristotelian notion of moral development that begins early in life and takes a long time, where the latter stages require autonomy and opportunities to engage in deliberations about human affairs.

All the teachers we interviewed had three to five years of teacher education at a tertiary level. Reflecting on how they learned to teach, however, they all described a process of education that was much longer than their years in college or university.

Asked about their formal teacher education, they all said that it was only a part of their professional education, for some of them only a very small part. Reflecting on their lifelong learning, more than

half of the teachers mentioned role models from their own childhood. Some of them also mentioned experiences from their childhood and teenage years and, in our interviews, there are stories of growing up with people who cared about education or worked with disabled persons or minorities. There are also stories of participation in sports, coaching, and work with children.

So, virtuous conduct and social responsibility were learned at an early age. The first part of their moral education was very much like the habituation described by Aristotle.

When asked about what they had learned after they started working as teachers, they all talked about the importance of learning from cooperation with other teachers. Much of the life-long informal education that they talked about, when they were asked how they learned to teach, was, broadly speaking, moral education. They understood professionalism in ethical terms, and they all agreed that to be a good teacher one needs to be a good person. They also referred, albeit in some cases obliquely, to the need for professional autonomy, and talked about the importance of being trusted, granted freedom to experiment, and opportunities to engage in discussions with colleagues. Those who elaborated on the intellectual aspects of ethical character talked about the ability to read all sorts of circumstances. What they said is at least reminiscent of how Aristotle described practical wisdom.

Some mentioned virtues like patience, some talked about how they learned to care, or simply to become better persons. Talking about their professional development and how they learned to teach, the teachers often mentioned the importance of being trusted and granted freedom to experiment. Most of them said they had opportunities to innovate and to influence both school curriculum and school administration. It was obvious that they cherished their autonomy. This need for deliberating together, developing their professional competence through discussions with colleagues is a conspicuous common theme in the fifteen interviews. The teachers talked about deliberation as simultaneously vital to their own professional and moral development, and as a way to improve their practice.

This also fits Aristotle's model because they learned moral wisdom through exercise of practical reason over many years.

What can we learn from this?

I think the two main lessons to be learned from this is that as teachers we should cherish our autonomy, be willing to participate in discussions and be responsible for the good of the school, and the children. The other lesson is that our professional education is never completed. It continues into old age.

If all goes wrong old age can bring bitterness and cynicism. But if we live well, it can also bring wisdom and goodness.

May that be your lot and mine.

Thank you for listening.

Takk så mye – Ευχαριστώ πολύ