



# Teaching virtuously: The formation of Christian teachers as a normative practice



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This article examines the formation of Christian teachers through the lens of the normative practice model, which understands teaching as a value-laden and relational activity. Teaching is not merely the transfer of knowledge or skills, but a moral enterprise directed towards the integral development of learners and teachers. From a virtue-ethical perspective, the article emphasises that character formation and the cultivation of virtues such as prudence, justice, courage and self-control are essential for developing a professional identity. This identity emerges from the interplay between personal convictions, professional norms and practical experience, and becomes visible in teachers' actions within complex pedagogical contexts. The article clarifies the concepts of 'normative practice', 'character formation' and 'professional identity', and applies them to the Christian teaching profession, highlighting the role of both the cardinal and theological virtues. The analysis shows that the education and professional development of Christian teachers cannot be reduced to technical competencies, but should foster a pedagogical environment that integrates moral practice, spiritual flourishing and professional reflection. This perspective underscores the teacher's role as a morally and relationally engaged professional contributing to the holistic development of learners. Methodologically, the article is based on a conceptual and philosophical analysis of the literature, integrating the normative practice model with virtue ethics.

**Contribution:** The article addresses a gap in the literature by demonstrating how this model can be integrated into teacher education, offering theoretical clarification and practical implications for Christian teacher education programmes and the strengthening of professional identity.

**Keywords:** character formation; Christian teacher education; normative practice; professional formation; virtue ethics.

## Introduction

In a society that is increasingly dominated by technology, systems and efficiency, it is insufficient to define professionalism solely on the basis of subject-specific knowledge and technical skills. For professionals in various fields – ranging from health care and the judiciary to education and social services – the quality of their practice is, to a decisive degree, determined by their ability to act in a morally responsible manner, to engage relationally and to act with practical wisdom. The development of a professional identity, in which personal values, professional competencies and practical experiences are integrated into professional conduct, constitutes a crucial condition for meeting these requirements. For this reason, the professional formation of teachers – the professional group aimed at in this article – is an essential component of teacher education. Recent studies emphasise that professional identity emerges from the dynamic interplay among various factors, such as biography, personal convictions and ideals (Kelchtermans 2023; Ruijters & Simons 2020; Shand 2023; Van der Zee 2023). Through reflective activities, collaboration with colleagues and participation in professional learning communities, student teachers are challenged to articulate their values and norms and to connect these with their professional responsibilities. In this way, they develop a moral compass that enables them to function adequately within the complexity of the educational context.

This article assumes that education cannot be understood as a neutral or value-free activity. Both the content and the form of education are influenced by broader cultural, political, ideological and religious contexts. Decisions concerning what is taught, how it is taught and which perspectives

are highlighted – and, consequently, what is excluded – are normatively charged. As Freire (1970) argues, education is, in essence, a political act. Emphasising neutrality in education often results in the confirmation and reproduction of existing power structures and inequalities. Similarly, Apple (2013) underscores that the curriculum functions as a selective tradition, shaped by political ideologies, economic interests, cultural norms and religious beliefs. This normative dimension, however, is not only manifested at the level of the curriculum but also in the teacher, as a person. Teachers bring their convictions, values and, sometimes, implicit biases into the classroom, influencing their pedagogical practice, their interactions with learners and the way they present subject matter (Giroux 2018). Van Crombrugge (2017) describes this situation as follows:

They do not only act from within that world, but also present it, and in their being and doing they bear witness to it. They testify, even before they persuade (if they wish to persuade at all). They are living examples, even before they provide reasons. (p. 298)

Recognising education as a normative practice inevitably raises the question of which values and norms orient teaching and how these are justified in contexts characterised by cultural, religious and ideological plurality. In such contexts, teachers are increasingly confronted with competing visions of the good life and of education's purpose, which places pressure on the moral foundations of professional practice and on the formation of a coherent professional identity. This situation calls for a more explicit examination of how normative orientations are articulated, justified and embodied within teacher formation.

Against this background, the focus on Christian teachers is neither incidental nor intended to exclude other perspectives. Instead, it offers a concrete case of educators who consciously ground their professional practice in a coherent moral and spiritual tradition. Examining teacher formation from this perspective enables an in-depth analysis of how convictions, professional norms and virtues can be integrated into a stable professional identity. While this analysis is rooted in a Christian framework, its relevance extends beyond this specific context, as many of the virtues discussed address challenges intrinsic to teaching in pluralistic societies.

The interconnectedness of education and worldview implies that teacher formation is not merely a technical or instrumental process aimed at acquiring skills and knowledge, but a normative practice. Building on earlier research (Jochemsen, Kuiper & De Muijnck 2006), we conceive the professional practice of teaching as an endeavour guided by values and norms, in which character formation plays a central role. In this article, we explore the implications of this conception by approaching teacher formation from the perspective of virtue ethics (see also Kunz 2025). The central research question is: *What is the significance of the conviction that teaching is a normative practice for the character formation of Christian teachers?* The focus on Christian teachers entails that, when values are discussed in this article, we primarily have Christian values in

mind. However, the relevance of this article extends beyond Christian teachers because most virtues are universal. For non-Christian teachers as well, professional formation involves integrating values into their professional practice.

We make our starting point by developing a theoretical and conceptual framework in which key concepts, such as 'normative practice', 'character formation' and 'professional identity', are defined and clarified. After that, we apply this framework to the formation of Christian teachers. Particular attention is given to the role of virtues in teacher character formation, the significance of a firm professional identity for the practice of these virtues and how these processes can be shaped in the context of Christian teacher education.

This study is methodologically grounded in a conceptual–philosophical analysis of selected literature in the fields of philosophy of education, theology and virtue ethics. The literature was chosen for its relevance to the normativity of professional practice, teacher formation and character formation. MacIntyre's concept of practice (2007) provides the philosophical foundation for understanding teaching as a value-laden practice oriented towards internal goods, while the normative practice model developed by Jochemsen et al. (2006) is employed as an analytical framework for examining how values and norms structure professional conduct. Building on MacIntyre's concept of practice, we emphasise the importance of the virtue-ethical dimension for professional conduct more emphatically than in Jochemsen's normative practice model.

## Theoretical and conceptual framework

In this section, we outline the conceptual foundations of our argument. We begin with MacIntyre's concept of practice, which emphasises that professional conduct entails more than the application of technical skills. It is a value-laden, socially embedded activity in which both internal and external goods are realised. Next, we introduce the normative practice model as an elaboration of MacIntyre's approach by conceptualising professional practice as an undertaking guided by values and norms, in which different types of norms are decisive. We then clarify how, in the process of character formation, these values and norms are internalised into virtues, enabling professionals to act with practical wisdom in complex situations. The fourth concept discussed in this section is professional identity, which is essential for professionals to act with prudence, justice, courage and self-control in a dynamic social context – one increasingly marked by global diversity and the resulting tensions that place pressure on civic trust, social solidarity and intergroup relationships. In the section following the discussion of professional identity, these concepts are applied to the formation of teachers.

### MacIntyre's concept of practice

According to the British philosopher Alasdair MacIntyre (1929–2025), a practice is a coherent and complex form of

socially embedded, cooperative human activity directed towards the realisation of specific goals and values (MacIntyre 2007). Within a practice, participants come together not only to achieve something but also to imbue their actions with moral meaning. In his work, MacIntyre distinguishes between two kinds of goals that may be pursued within a practice: internal goods and external goods.

Internal goods are intrinsically tied to the practice itself and can only be attained through the exercise of that particular practice. They embody the quality and significance of the activity as it is ideally carried out and are not transferable to other practices. An internal good can only be understood with reference to the norms, standards and traditions of the practice in which it arises. The quality of internal goods is assessed by standards recognised within the practice – standards that guide judgements about what counts as ‘good action’. By contrast, external goods include things such as status, financial rewards or social recognition. These goods are not bound to any single practice and can, in principle, be acquired through other means. They are also highly competitive, and when they dominate, they may distract from the pursuit of internal goods. When professionals are primarily motivated by external rewards, the practice risks losing its moral orientation and degenerating into a merely instrumental activity lacking substantive integrity (MacIntyre 2007).

Within this dynamic, the importance of virtues becomes evident. Virtues are internalised values, cultivated by habituation and manifested in the exercise of practical wisdom. They protect the practice from becoming superficial and help maintain commitment to its values and norms. Virtues, therefore, are indispensable for the formation of a professional identity that not only withstands external pressure but also provides direction in morally complex situations. To act wisely, professionals must reflect on what it means to pursue ‘the good’ within their field and develop insight into the nature of the internal goods that make their practice valuable and into the ways in which they can contribute to them. At the same time, they should be aware of potential impediments, such as a one-sided focus on external rewards, organisational constraints or cultural expectations that conflict with the ethical core of their profession. Responsibly engaging with such moral complexity constitutes an essential dimension of professional formation and acting with integrity in a diverse and dynamic society.

MacIntyre (2007) illustrates his concept of practice, among other examples, through the field of medicine. Medicine is a paradigmatic case of a complex, socially organised activity in which specific internal goods are realised, such as making accurate diagnoses, selecting appropriate treatments, curing illnesses and alleviating suffering. These goods are inseparable from the practice itself and can only be attained through sustained training, dedication and engagement within the medical community. The practice of medicine is also bound by standards of excellence, including the accuracy of diagnoses, the effectiveness and safety of treatments,

ethical responsibility in patient care and the quality of communication with patients and colleagues. These standards are shaped and sustained by the tradition of medicine and critical dialogue among practitioners about what constitutes good medical practice. They are also subject to continuous development through ongoing reflection on what it means to act well. Alongside these internal goods and standards, medicine also involves external goods, such as income, prestige, status and influence within the medical field. While such external goods may be attractive, they are not constitutive of the practice itself and can even jeopardise its proper functioning when they become the dominant motive of practitioners.

### Normative practice model

In the normative practice model, MacIntyre’s concept of practice is applied to a framework for moral reflection on professional conduct. It provides guidance for analysing, justifying, shaping and improving practices. The model offers tools for recognising and managing tension between three core aspects of professional work: the system world, which emphasises rules and efficiency; the lifeworld, where humanity and meaning are central; and normative professional values, which constitute the moral compass of professionals. By clarifying the balance between these dimensions, the model serves as a bridge between moral theory and the everyday reality of professional practice (Van Ewijk & Kunneman 2015).

Within the normative practice model, the term ‘profession’ is understood as a practice imbued with values and regulated by established norms. It concerns not merely the performance of structured tasks with specific skills, but is, instead, a dynamic process orientated towards a particular moral direction (Jochemsen et al. 2006). The model underscores that professional practice is guided by values that normatively orientate professional action. As will become evident later in this article, virtues must also be incorporated into the model. This emphasis resonates closely with the tradition of virtue ethics, in which the cultivation of the practitioner’s character takes precedence over actions and rules. A central question for professionals, therefore, is which virtues they must embody – who they must be – to act following the norms governing their practice. In line with MacIntyre (2007), professional practice is thus conceived as a moral enterprise in which practitioners develop and cultivate virtues such as courage, temperance, justice and practical wisdom to act adequately within the complex context of their profession.

The model first distinguishes a *constitutive dimension*, consisting of three types of norms. Foundational norms encompass subject knowledge, practical competencies and professional skills, with a focus on precision, expertise and a commitment to ongoing learning. Qualifying norms determine the specific purpose or telos of the profession, such as promoting well-being, justice or educational development, and demand virtues such as commitment, justice and caring. Lastly, conditioning norms pertain to the social, legal and

economic conditions under which the profession is exercised, and imply, for example, justice, social responsibility and collegial solidarity (Glas 2009; Jochemsen et al. 2006).

In addition, the model distinguishes a *regulative dimension*, which concerns the direction in which a professional practice develops. This direction is determined by a guiding ideal, shaped by convictions, values and a shared social or professional ethos (Jochemsen et al. 2006). The regulative dimension clarifies how norms are embodied, linking structure and content to the broader meaning of professional conduct. Importantly, the model does not prescribe which specific ideals should be paramount in a given practice, thereby inviting continuous moral reflection on what constitutes good professional action (Glas 2009).

Although the normative practice model offers a nuanced account of professional practice in terms of values, norms and guiding ideals, it remains ethically underdetermined insofar as it does not explicitly theorise how the acting professional embodies these norms. The model clarifies *what* ought to guide professional conduct. Still, it does not sufficiently explain *how* professionals become capable of acting accordingly in situations where norms compete, remain indeterminate or require contextual interpretation. In such cases, professional action cannot be reduced to rule-following or normative orientation alone but presupposes stable moral dispositions that enable discernment, commitment and responsible judgement. A virtue-ethical perspective renders this formative dimension explicit by understanding virtues as the internalisation of professional norms within the practitioner's character. From this perspective, virtues do not function as an external ethical supplement to the normative practice model, but as a necessary condition for its realisation in concrete practice, particularly in professions such as teaching, where action is inherently relational, situational and morally charged.

## Character formation

Character formation is fundamental to professional identity because it anchors professional practice in virtues rather than in mere compliance with external norms. Within the framework of the normative practice model, the regulative dimension of professional life requires not only that one fulfils duties but also that one acts out of inner moral conviction. Virtues such as prudence, courage, justice and self-control provide the foundation for this moral orientation. They enable professionals to exercise responsibility not only by following rules but also by embodying integrity in their daily work.

This cultivation of character is best understood through the lens of virtue ethics: it concerns not just what professionals do, but also who they are and how they want to carry responsibility. Character formation, therefore, extends beyond professional identity, yet professional identity cannot develop without it. A professional identity without such moral grounding risks remaining superficial, whereas a

well-formed character allows practitioners to act wisely in complex circumstances.

As Smith (2009) emphasises, virtues are not acquired through abstract reasoning, but through practice, imitation and habituation, that is, through repeated action that gradually inscribes moral dispositions into one's character. This learning process unfolds in concrete professional contexts, shaped by shared norms and standards of excellence (Kuiper 2019; MacIntyre 2007). By participating in these practices, reflecting on choices and learning from colleagues and role models, professionals develop the practical wisdom needed to discern the good in particular situations.

In this sense, character formation is both personal and collective: it is about the individual's moral orientation and responsibility, but always within the broader horizon of professional communities. The stronger this moral grounding, the more resilient and credible the professional identity becomes.

## Formation of professional identity

Since character formation concerns the shaping of the whole person rather than merely the correct performance of a profession, it provides the foundation for the development of professional identity. This identity refers to a professional's conception of their vocation and their understanding of it (Kelchtermans 2023). It concerns how individuals perceive themselves in connection with the profession they practise. This self-conception is shaped not only by technical competencies or disciplinary knowledge but, above all, through interaction among personal values, experiences in professional practice and the shared values and norms of the professional community. When professionals possess a well-developed self-conception that is aligned with the values and norms of their profession, they are better equipped to act in complex or morally charged situations. Professional identity also enables them to adapt to changing circumstances within their field.

Professional practice presupposes ongoing exercise and reflection, through which professionals can critically evaluate and improve their actions. Schön (1983) distinguishes between reflection-in-action and reflection-on-action. *Reflection-in-action* occurs in the moment itself, for instance, when a teacher in the classroom makes an immediate decision on how to respond to an unexpected situation. *Reflection-on-action*, by contrast, takes place retrospectively, when the professional has had the opportunity to consider their actions and the consequences thereof. Reflection is essential to the development of a professional identity, as it enables professionals to learn from their experiences and adjust their conduct accordingly. This process of continuous reflection and recalibration is particularly significant in professions where situations are often unpredictable and complex. Reflection enables individuals to engage with that complexity and grow in professional competence and self-understanding.

The necessity of reflection also arises from the context in which professionals work. This context encompasses not only the physical environment of the workplace but also the social and cultural context within which the profession is practised. In addition, societal developments, such as shifting conceptions of citizenship education or technological innovations, play a significant role in shaping professional identity. Professionals must continually adapt to these changes and adjust their practice accordingly. This conduct requires a well-developed self-conception and the capacity to respond to new challenges with both flexibility and integrity.

## The formation of Christian teachers

Building on the clarification of the concepts and notions relevant to addressing the research question in the previous section, this section examines what the conviction of teaching as a normative practice implies for the formation of Christian teachers. First, the normative practice model is applied to the field of education, after which its implications for the character formation of teachers, and thus for the development of their professional identity, are explored.

### Teaching as a normative practice

MacIntyre (2002) does not regard teaching as a practice. According to him, teachers are engaged in a multitude of practices to which teaching contributes. Dunne (2003) and Noddings (2003), however, argue that teaching is a practice in its own right, rather than merely a means of introducing learners to other practices. One of the central questions in this approach concerns the 'internal good' associated with teaching as an autonomous practice. According to Noddings (2003), the responsibility that teachers assume for the holistic development of their learners constitutes the fundamental internal good of teaching. This development encompasses not only intellectual growth but also the emotional, moral and spiritual well-being of learners. It highlights the importance of teaching as a relational practice, one that fosters an environment of care and trust in which both teachers and learners can flourish. Within this relational dynamic, the significance of education extends beyond the content taught; it lies in the relationship between the teacher and the learner, as well as the shared journey of learning and discovery. This view resonates with Meijer's (1997) triadic structure of education, in which the roles of teacher, learner and educational content are equally important (see also De Muynck & Kunz 2021). Because the practice of teaching has both relational and moral dimensions, teachers require not only subject-matter expertise but also the cultivation of virtues and, consequently, the formation of character (De Muynck 2006).

Within the normative practice model (Jochemsen et al. 2006), a practice is understood as a professional activity that moves in a particular direction, guided by an ideal. From this perspective, Christian education can be understood as a normative practice, as the actions of teachers are rooted in fundamental moral norms and directed towards a

value-laden telos: that learners may become virtuous citizens of the kingdom of God (De Muynck 2016). This value-laden aim touches upon the deeper layers of learners' personhood formation, including identity, moral integrity and a sense of responsibility. Christian education aims to foster the holistic formation of learners, encompassing intellectual, moral, social and personal growth. Christian teachers situate this telos within the framework of God's creation and His mandate to humanity. They participate in God's work of creation and re-creation by guiding learners in their growth and development as human beings, in the light of God's presence in the world (Bass & Dykstra 2000; Dykstra & Bass 2008). The aim of Christian education requires teachers to be deeply committed to the development of each learner. They function as guides on learners' life journeys (De Muynck & Kunz 2021; Ter Horst 1995), helping them to find their way in accordance with God's calling and accompanying them in their search for wisdom and truth (Van der Walt et al. 2018). The Christian faith provides meaning and orientation to this search.

### Normative practice and character formation

Teaching is, therefore, a practice in the sense given to it by MacIntyre. When the practice of teaching is subsequently analysed through the lens of the normative practice model, it becomes clear that it is a practice imbued with values and norms, and directed towards an ideal, for example, an idea of the good life (Biesta 2015; Vos 2020). To participate responsibly in such a practice, teachers must first have a well-developed character. In other words, acting by the foundational, qualifying and conditioning norms of the profession requires, first and foremost, a virtuous character. Such character is a prerequisite for responsible professional practice and is cultivated through the integration of virtues into human conduct – a process that involves both practice and reflection (Smith 2009). This process requires personal commitment and unfolds within the context of a shared professional practice governed by specific values and norms (MacIntyre 2007; Smith & Smith 2011). In this way, character formation contributes to the integral formation of personhood in teachers, who, through their practice, become morally trustworthy and relationally engaged professionals (Carr 2007; Kunz 2025). Although character formation and virtues are not explicitly articulated in the normative practice model, they undoubtedly play a fundamental role in it.

The fact that character formation is inseparably bound to normativity arises from the implicit and, at times, explicit moral demand placed upon teachers by educational practice. As participants in the normative practice of education, teachers are called not only to know the relevant values and norms but also to embody them. This appeal can only be addressed through the habituation of virtue, which equips the teacher to act not merely according to rules in morally complex situations, but also to do what is good, following the telos of the practice (Biesta 2015; Kunz 2025; MacIntyre 2007; Van der Zee 2023). For this reason, a teacher must possess practical wisdom [*phronèsis*] (Nullens 2006; Van der Zee 2023).

Biesta (2015) stresses that, in this context, education is not concerned solely with qualification (knowledge and skills) and socialisation (initiation into social and cultural frameworks) but also with subjectification, that is, the formation of learners into unique, autonomous persons. This third domain requires a teacher with a formed character, one capable of contributing to the personal and moral development of learners precisely by serving as a credible example (Carr 2007; Kunz 2025). Character formation, from this perspective, is not a secondary requirement but the moral foundation of the teacher's professional practice.

For the character formation of teachers, the classical cardinal virtues – prudence, justice, courage and self-control – are indispensable. They provide the moral framework required to respond responsibly to the concrete and often complex situations of the classroom. Prudence enables teachers to make wise judgements in pedagogically sensitive contexts; courage equips them to enact justice in difficult circumstances instead of turning away; justice ensures the fair treatment of all learners; and self-control fosters a balanced and integrated life orientation. In Christian education, besides these cardinal virtues, the theological virtues of faith, hope and love are decisive (1 Cor. 13). These provide spiritual depth to professional action: faith anchors the teacher's work in trust in God; hope enables perseverance in broken situations; and love forms the fundamental disposition towards learners (Kunz 2025; Van Crombrugge 2006; Wright 2007). Christian education is explicitly directed towards the formation of learners as individuals who live in obedience to God and love their neighbour (De Muynck 2016). This moral and religious orientation renders character formation for teachers not merely desirable but constitutive of their professional competence (Carr 2006; Kelchtermans 2023).

### Normative practice and professional identity

The normative practice model reveals that teaching is a value-laden, ideal-orientated practice in which teachers do not merely fulfil functional roles but are addressed as persons, regarding who they are (the formation of their character and the virtues they embody) and how they act (professionally, following the norms of the practice). In addition to the model, we regard character formation as the foundation of professional development. In concrete educational practice, the teacher develops moral competence for action, rooted in virtues such as prudence, justice and love. This character formation is not an isolated process; it directly contributes to the formation of a professional identity. That identity arises through the ongoing interplay between the teacher's personally formed moral compass, their convictions, the professional norms of educational practice and concrete professional experiences (Kelchtermans 2023; Ruijters & Simons 2020). The three functions of education, as distinguished by Biesta (2015), presuppose a professional self-understanding in which moral and pedagogical sensitivity play a decisive role. Teachers should

know how to act responsibly in situations where these functions come into tension, for example, when cultural norms conflict with learners' desire for personal growth. This know-how requires reflection, both during and after action (Schön 1983), and a continuous alignment between personal convictions, professional norms and the ultimate pedagogical telos.

Our interpretation of the normative practice model thus makes clear that professional identity cannot be separated from character formation: it is precisely through practice, reflection and moral engagement within a shared practice that teachers grow into credible and relationally engaged professionals. Where character formation shapes the moral *habitus* that undergirds action, professional identity provides the structural framework that gives direction to such action. This relationship is reciprocal: a well-formed character makes professional identity possible, while an explicit identity offers conditions for further development of character (Biesta 2015; Carr 2006). When a school community shares a normative orientation, it creates an environment that fosters the development of a collective professional identity. This collective *phronêsis* promotes not only moral stability but also pedagogical resilience in the face of societal and organisational pressures (Biesta 2022; Glas 2019).

Against this background, in which professional identity is rooted in moral and pedagogical sensitivity, the cardinal and theological virtues again emerge as crucial points of orientation. The cardinal virtues provide the practical orientation necessary to act adequately within the concrete realities of the classroom and school community. In contrast, the theological virtues direct the professional self towards a transcendent ideal that gives meaning to daily practice. The integration of these virtues into professional self-understanding fosters the development of a professional identity that is both morally stable and spiritually grounded (Carr 2006; Kristjánsson 2022). Here too, the normativity of professional practice does not create a neutral context but, instead, a value-laden space in which the teacher is addressed in their responsibility as an agent within the practice. This moral call demands not mere conformity to rules or protocols, but inner conviction, moral sensitivity and virtuous action. The teacher is thereby formed not only as a competent professional but also as a person who acts from a well-developed moral compass, and, in doing so, becomes an example for learners (De Muynck & Kunz 2021; Smith & Smith 2011).

Within Christian education, this dynamic acquires a particular depth. The development of a professional identity is shaped here by the ideal of faith that orientates education towards the kingdom of God. Christian teachers form their identity within the tension between personal calling and professional normativity, whereby the guiding ideal is not merely externally imposed but becomes deeply embedded in the teacher's self-understanding (Kunz 2025; Waterink 1958). This integration of personal faith and professional

responsibility means that the Christian teacher develops into not merely a technically competent professional but a person who acts from inner conviction, spiritual reflection and moral reliability. Character formation and professional identity, in this context, cannot be conceived separately; both are normatively situated within a practice that is orientated towards the whole of personhood formation. Christian teachers are thus called to continuous reflection on their pedagogical vocation, not merely as implementers of educational objectives but as the embodiment of an educational ideal that encompasses the whole of human existence. In this sense, Christian teachers are themselves figures of identification, whose presence and conduct bear witness to the faith, hope and love in which Christian education finds its deepest roots.

## Recommendations

The analysis of education as a normative practice has shown that character formation and professional identity are essential conditions for the professional practice of Christian teachers. From this perspective, professional formation cannot be reduced to the transmission of knowledge or the acquisition of skills; instead, it should be embedded within a broader pedagogical and moral orientation. The implications of this approach require explicit articulation in the form of recommendations. The following recommendations are directed towards teacher education, the practice of teachers in training, the institutional framework of schools and teachers already active in the classroom:

- For teacher education, character formation should not be treated as an additional component of the curriculum, but as a constitutive element of the whole teacher education. Teacher education programmes should create a pedagogical climate in which moral exercise, spiritual reflection and professional development are integrated. This climate presupposes the deliberate embedding of virtue ethics, professional norms and reflection on the moral dimensions of educational practice within subjects and learning pathways. It also requires an academic culture in which students are encouraged to critically examine their convictions and motivations for action, and in which professional formation is understood as a process of personhood formation within a normative professional practice.
- For student teachers, the normative character of education implies that the development of subject competence must go hand in hand with character formation in the sense of acquiring the virtues necessary for morally responsible action. This formation requires an attitude of self-reflection and openness to moral and pedagogical learning, whereby practical experiences are not used solely for the development of technical competencies but also for ethical and spiritual deepening. Teacher education should support this development by providing structured opportunities for reflection and by fostering moral sensitivity regarding the pedagogical relationship and the broader societal role of the profession.

- For school leadership and other educational settings, it is crucial to recognise and facilitate the normative dimension of academic practice. This entails fostering a school culture that allows for professional reflection, pedagogical dialogue and open discussion of moral issues in teachers' practice. School leaders play a pivotal role in supporting professional learning communities that strengthen both the individual and the collective ethos. Organisational policies should also be aligned with the promotion of virtues such as responsibility, care and integrity in the daily functioning of the school team.
- For teachers in practice, recognising education as a normative practice means that their professional conduct is determined by not only disciplinary and didactic competences but also the moral orientation and integrity of their person. The ongoing development of a professional identity, in which personal convictions, professional norms and practical experiences converge, requires active reflection on pedagogical situations and a willingness to provide moral accountability. Within Christian education, this dimension assumes a specific meaning, as the theological and cardinal virtues guide professional conduct and contribute to a credible embodiment of the pedagogical ideal.

## Conclusion

The central research question of this article was: *What significance does the conviction that teaching is a normative practice have for the character formation of Christian teachers?* As we have argued, answering this question requires a careful consideration of what it means to be morally formed within a pedagogical context in accordance with a shared faith perspective. Recognising education as a normative practice implies that character formation cannot be understood as an optional supplement to professional development, but should, instead, be seen as a constitutive condition for exercising the vocation of a Christian teacher.

When teaching is understood as a practice in the MacIntyrean sense – that is, as a socially embedded, value-orientated activity with its internal goods – it becomes evident that the teacher is not merely a transmitter of knowledge, but primarily a moral agent. According to this view, subject teachers do not mainly practise their academic discipline when they teach; instead, they act as teachers. An economics teacher, for instance, is not functioning as an economist in that moment, but as a teacher. In this role, they not only transmit economic knowledge and skills but also foster the integral development of their learners. In Christian education, this normative dimension assumes a specific shape: pedagogical practice is sustained by the theological virtues of faith, hope and love, and is directed towards the formation of the learner in the perspective of the kingdom of God. This ethically and religiously charged ideal demands of teachers not only professional competence but also moral steadfastness, pedagogical sensitivity and spiritual reflection.

The implications for the preparation of Christian teachers are far-reaching. If character formation is fundamental to

professional life within a normative practice, then teacher education should foster a pedagogical climate in which moral exercise, spiritual deepening and professional reflection converge. This idea calls for curricula that allow space for not only theological and ethical reflection but also the cultivation of virtuous (wise) action, guided reflection on practical experiences and the deliberate use of educational situations as opportunities for moral learning. Personhood formation thus becomes an existential endeavour: teacher education challenges prospective teachers to understand themselves as moral subjects within a community collectively seeking what is good, just and loving in education.

By regarding teaching as a normative practice, the character formation of Christian teachers becomes visible as a pedagogical and spiritual process that unfolds both individually and collectively. It is a process that equips teachers not only to *desire* the good but also to *do* it, with wisdom and with love.

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The authors declare that they have no financial or personal relationships that may have inappropriately influenced them in writing this article.

### CRedit authorship contribution

Nicolaas A. Broer: Conceptualisation, Methodology, Project administration, Writing - original draft. Abraham J. Kunz: Conceptualisation, Writing - review and editing. All authors reviewed the article, contributed to the discussion of results, approved the final version for submission and publication, and take responsibility for the integrity of its findings.

### Ethical considerations

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### Data availability

The authors confirm that the data supporting this study and its findings are available within the article.

### Disclaimer

The views and opinions expressed in this article are those of the authors and are the product of professional research. It does not necessarily reflect the official policy or position

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