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The harms of unattainable pedagogical exemplars on social media

Alkis Kotsonis ^a and Gerry Dunne ^b

^aSchool of Education, University of Glasgow, Glasgow, UK; ^bMarino Institute of Education, Trinity College Dublin, Dublin, Ireland

ABSTRACT

This paper scrutinizes the nature and scope of deleterious consequences arising from the pursuit of unattainable pedagogical exemplars on social media. We cash out this phenomenon using exemplarist theory to emphasize the fact that social media (e.g., Facebook, Instagram, TikTok) are platforms in which the vast majority of users present idealized and curated versions of themselves. We focus specifically on educational practitioners and show that attempting to emulate unattainable pedagogical exemplars has negative impacts on agents' emotional well-being: It can cause burnout and self-conflict, decrease motivation, and also inflict detrimental outcomes on agents' self-esteem. We conclude that attainable, relevant, relatable, and authentic exemplars are key to a successful exemplarist approach and that safeguarding against unattainable pedagogical exemplars is of paramount importance for the wellbeing of pedagogues, and by extension, the success of educational systems.

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1. Introductory remarks

Social media (such as Facebook, Instagram, Twitter and TikTok) have become part of our everyday lives and daily routines. Most of us post pictures, upload stories and share news on social media on a regular basis. There are also those of us who prefer to consume content (e.g., read news, watch clips) while on social media rather than create it. Still, despite differences and variations in use, more than half of the earth's global population is using social media, with users spending on average approximately two and a half hours on social media per day (Kemp, 2021).

Our aim in this paper is to highlight and examine a specific phenomenon taking place on social media, namely *the systematic presentation of unattainable pedagogical exemplars*.¹ As far as we are aware, this phenomenon and its consequences for educational practitioners (and education in general) have yet to be identified or studied (at least not in sufficient depth). Briefly put, we seek to pinpoint and examine instances in which certain social media profiles and pages (created and maintained by

CONTACT Alkis Kotsonis  alkiskotsonis@hotmail.com  University of Glasgow, 11 Eldon Street, St. Andrews Building, Glasgow G3 6NH, UK

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educational practitioners, people interested in pedagogy, etc.), share stories (in writing and/or in video) of praiseworthy pedagogical success, carefully framed in terms of pedagogical exemplarism. This persistent and systematic presentation of pedagogical exemplarism on social media arguably directly causes angst and/or discombobulation to educational practitioners who find themselves unable to replicate, or who do not succeed in replicating, the behavior/approach of the pedagogical exemplar depicted in these stories. This ‘failure’² of educational practitioners to replicate the highly idealized and curated behavior of the ideal pedagogical exemplar is to be expected given that most stories of pedagogical exemplarism shared on social media take place in staged and unrealistic educational environments (or in vacuo), while educational practitioners teach in real educational environments, with real students, many of whom do not readily conform to reductionist behaviorist principles. These educational encounters also take place in institutions with limited resources, and in some cases, minimal support. In other words, we argue that stories of ideal and unrealistic pedagogical exemplarism presented on social media are not accessible or attainable to educational practitioners (nor the actions/behaviors of such exemplars replicable by them) since they are not representative of the reality of everyday teaching practice. Hence, instead of inspiring educational practitioners (as is presumably their end goal), such stories end up causing harm to them. Being unable to replicate the actions/behavior of unattainable exemplars, some education practitioners experience guilt and are led to question their professional role or vocation. Others blame the circumstances, are demoralized and demotivated, and consequently, some end up doing the bare minimum.³

It is important to note that the sharing of stories of unattainable pedagogical exemplars is not unique to social media. Stories of unattainable educational exemplarism can also be found in other types of media—e.g., movies, newspapers, radio, and books. Still, in this paper, we focus on social media because of its pervasiveness and reach. The popularity and accessibility of social media have allowed stories of unattainable pedagogical exemplars to reach a global audience and have made the undesirable consequences of the sharing of such stories significantly more widespread and severe.

To achieve the aims of our paper, we proceed in the next section to briefly present and discuss Zagzebski’s (2015, 2017) exemplarism theory. This theory gives us the theoretical tools required to examine the mechanisms and consequences of this systematic presentation of unattainable pedagogical exemplars on social media. Then, in the main section of the paper, we proceed to examine unattainable pedagogical exemplars in depth. Among other things, we analyze the nature and roots of the phenomenon and discuss potential harms caused by it to educational practitioners. In the conclusion, we argue that attainable, relevant, relatable, and authentic educational exemplars are key to successful models of pedagogical exemplarism.

2. Exemplarist theory

Linda Zagzebski (2015, 2017) has recently developed and proposed a theory which seeks to examine and capture an important aspect of moral upbringing and development—i.e., moral exemplarism. Still, Zagzebski is by no means the first to highlight the importance of moral exemplarism for moral education. As a matter of fact, the history of

exemplarism can be traced back to ancient Greece (Vaccarezza, 2020), China and India (Kidd, 2018, 2020). However, Zagzebski is not only offering a modernized version of the theory but is also proposing that exemplarism should be considered as a distinct moral theory (rather than as an approach that supplements other moral theories such as virtue ethics⁴).

According to Zagzebski's moral exemplarist theory (2015, 2017), agents can, and often do, seek moral guidance from exemplars—i.e., people who they consider to possess a certain good quality/trait (or, at least, behave admirably in a specific domain). The two cornerstones of the exemplarist approach are (i) imitation and (ii) admiration. According to Zagzebski's exemplarist theory (2017), the emotion of admiration is key in helping us identify, and in leading us to emulate, exemplars. For her, if X admires another person Y, then X's emotion of admiration gives X reason to judge that Y possesses qualities that are *admirable*, and thus should emulate them (Zagzebski, 2017, p. 145). She argues, for example, that 'If I admire a person and reflectively endorse my admiration, I will rationally judge the person to be admirable in the relevant respect, and if I am right that emotions can be both epistemic and practical reasons, then my judgment that the person is admirable is a reason to emulate the admirable person, arising from my own critical self-reflection' (Zagzebski, 2017, p. 152). Zagzebski (2017, p. 47) believes that the emotion of admiration is reliable, leading us, in the vast majority of cases, to emulate agents who possess good moral qualities. Seeing as we both regard the emotion of emulation along the lines of Henderson (2022) as a virtue in its own right, it must be noted that we deviate from standard Aristotelian and neo-Aristotelian accounts (see Kristjánsson, 2006, 2015).

It might be important to notice that direct instruction is not a necessary component of the exemplarist approach.⁵ The agent does not need to have met the exemplar in person in order to admire them and imitate them—after all fictional characters can also play the role of exemplars. Consider the following example: Helen, who is not the most athletic person, walks by a small lake every day on her way to work. One day, Helen notices that there is a person in the middle of the lake. This person seems to be drowning and is crying out for help. At first, Helen seems hesitant to intervene. She does not know this person and there are other people around who seem more athletic than her. Still, Helen is a true admirer of the selfless heroes she sees in Hollywood movies. She admires their willingness to help everyone—even people who do not deserve it. In an instant, due to her admiration of selfless heroes, Helen changes her mind and decides that the best thing to do in this situation is to intervene—that is, to emulate the actions of the exemplars she admires (although she has never met them in person and has never received any sort of direct instruction from them). Without much further thought, Helen dives into the lake and saves the person from drowning.

The above is a crude example of moral exemplarism.⁶ It shows that an agent's admiration of the exemplar leads them to emulate the admirable qualities of this person. However, despite the merits of Zagzebski's (2015, 2017) exemplarist moral theory and its seemingly positive reception by scholars (especially those working on moral education⁷), the theory is not without its faults. Among other problems, moral exemplarism seems to perpetuate culture specific and gender specific understandings of morality (Kotsonis, 2020) and relies on the emotion of admiration which is not infallible (Watson & Wilson, 2019; Kotsonis, 2021—for a defence of exemplarism

theory from this objection see Croce, 2019, 2020). Nonetheless, irrespective of whether one understands moral exemplarism as a standalone theory or not, and irrespective of whether one disagrees with some of Zagzebski's arguments, it still remains the case that moral exemplarism seeks to capture the essence of a moral practice that existed long before the theory. In other words, one cannot deny that moral exemplarism is one of the cornerstones of moral education.

Still, our aim in this paper is not to defend or criticize moral exemplarism. Rather, we seek to employ some of its features and theoretical tools in an effort to understand and analyze the nature and consequences of systematic depictions of unattainable pedagogical exemplars and unrealistic instances⁸ of critical education on social media. Many pedagogical practitioners are led to admire these unattainable pedagogical exemplars and (if we are to follow Zagzebski's exemplarist theory) this admiration gives them reason to judge that these exemplars have qualities that are *admirable*, and thus should, and some of them do, try to emulate them. This, as we proceed to argue in the following section, brings about negative consequences for educational practitioners and education in general.

First, there are two main obstacles that face any sort of coherent and meaningful theory of exemplarism. The first of these concerns motivating the desire to emulate heroes. The second is that of the feasibility of emulating saints. Zagzebski tackles this concern, telling us:

Moral improvement comes in stages, and if we aim too high at the outset, we may set ourselves up for failure. Direct imitation of the exemplar may come only after a person has reached a certain level of moral development. Before that, we do better at imitating persons who are better than we are, but not so much better that we cannot clearly see the path to becoming like the exemplar. (2017, p. 25)

Reading Zagzebski this way, it seems clear that she recognises that her categories of moral exemplars might not facilitate, and in some cases, might actually mitigate against, the novice's path toward virtue.⁹ Han et al. (2017) showed that idealized historic exemplars are far less likely to succeed, pedagogically speaking, in terms of outcomes, than a more intuitive and sensible incremental approach, one we might refer to as the pursuit of relevant and attainable good-enough exemplars. Recent studies (Han & Dawson, 2023; Han et al., 2022) have shown that (a) relatability is important for promoting the agent's motivation to emulate the exemplar and that (b) attainability is important for boosting outcomes. Novices require achievable, relatable, and realisable exemplars. So do intermediate learners. There is no point pretending otherwise. In the case of Insta-teachers, we can see that this is not always the case. They are sanitised, highly idealized personas curated for social media. If exemplarism is to have any real meaningful role as an aim of education, something that is achievable, tangible (conceptually or empirically), and measurable—an aim that classroom pedagogy has success criteria for, it stands to reason that all exemplarist figures must be relevant, relatable, and attainable. They need to be within the grasp (cognitively and affectively) and proximate lived experience (cultural repository) of students (e.g., age and stage pedagogy). As the old adage goes: to teach Johnny maths, you've got to know maths and you've got to know Johnny. To this end, emulating exemplarist figures, in particular their aretai (excellence and perfectionism are not coextensive), needs to be within the reach of students. To put it another way—

novices new to exemplarism need to see that emulating exemplars lies within their reach, and not only this, but the contexts in which they are presented must be familiar to learners and align with their lived experience.

For exemplarism to have any sort of meaningful concrete educational import, we need to make sure that any and all perfectionist ideals underpinning the deployment of moral saints and moral heroes in service of moral education be broadened to include, as Michel Croce (2020) convincingly argues, (i) ‘Enkratic Exemplars’ and (ii) ‘Injustice Illuminators’. This requires a liberal account of exemplarism. By extension, it likewise necessitates a liberal pluralistic account, one that does not subscribe to procrustean enforcement of the general rule. Enkratic exemplars are those who act in accordance with reason but experience a feeling that is contrary to reason.¹⁰ In Aristotle’s ethics, *enkratês* are deemed morally inferior to virtue because the latter involves no internal conflict within the agent to act in accordance with reason. Croce offers a compelling argument as to why the educational import of the former matters. All-things-considered, a strong case could be made that students relate to *enkratês* better. After all, since they often struggle to do the right thing—they will, for obvious reasons, no doubt find this relatable. Not only relatable, arguably, but they might identify enkratic exemplars more accurate and authentic representations of non-ideal theory cashed out in real-world settings—of how the world/people/behaviour actually operate under non-ideal conditions, rather than what it ought to be like under the diktats of normative theory. On our view, ideal theory is the elephant in the room when it comes to rigid, unrealistic and unaccommodating models of exemplarism. In the words of Charles Mills (2017, p. 79), it captures, ‘a distortional complex of ideas, values, norms, and beliefs that reflects the non-representative interests and experiences of a small minority of the national population’. Ideal theory can be said to legitimate situations where members of elite or dominant demographic groups wilfully avoid situated knowledge about the lives/experiences and lifeworlds of oppressed or marginalized groups (see Freire, 1970; Frye, 1983; Woome, 2019). This form of ignorance can be strategically self-serving, enabling privileged groups to preserve psychologically comforting half-truths and untested assumptions, all the while escaping accountability. Insofar as the putatively ignorant members of such groups value these self-interested outcomes over ethical ones, their ignorance is conceivably ‘instrumentally rational’. Ideal theory thus focuses on ideals as they cash out in laboratory-controlled idealized conditions, far removed from the pesky inconvenience of non-ideal, unjust, sometimes unpredictable, social conditions.

To be sure—non-ideal social conditions constitute everyday reality for those outside x. That is what makes enkratic individuals suitable for moral exemplarity: they are human. They have flaws, they struggle; sometimes their emotions and irreducibly complex situational factors cloud their reason and tell them to take the wrong turn, do the wrong thing. In many respects, their struggles, their humanity, their flaws—indeed—their actions in spite of their flaws to still do the right thing—are what make them worthy of admiration. Imperfection is attainable. It can be improved upon. It is relatable. It doesn’t bring the anxiety of the pursuit of perfection or irreproachability. Struggling to do the right thing is human. Everyone struggles to do the right thing at times. For this reason, enkratic exemplars show us people and scenarios we can both identify with and learn from. Agents who act well even when it is neither natural nor easy for them, is proof-positive of the merits of relevance and attainability pre-requisites of exemplarism

(Han et al., 2017). To see an agent struggle to discern what is the right thing to do, in particular when two or more virtues collide or when ill-attuned emotions colonise rational deliberation, provides students with learning opportunities to overcome obstacles rooted in real-world interpersonally-charged scenarios and are far more closely aligned to their lifeworlds than the tired narratives of moral heroes and saints. The behaviour of enkratic individuals as well as Injustice Illuminators is admirable in certain respects and conducive to the moral development of those who admire them.¹¹

Another atypical case of moral exemplarity is that of Injustice Illuminators (Croce, 2020). These are people who shed light on relations of oppression in a community, such as ‘the invisibilization of certain phenomena, experiences, problems, and even entire subjectivities’ (Medina, 2013, p. 192). Like Croce (2020, p. 195), we agree that ‘epistemic heroes’ is not the correct term for such individuals. To use this term, risks reducing epistemic agency to behaviours which lie beyond the scope of moral enterprises. This is simply not the case. As Miranda Fricker (2007), Kirstie Dotson (2012), and Gerry Dunne (2023), and so many others point out, the giving and sharing of knowledge are fundamentally ethically-charged practices. Human beings are epistemic agents, but try as they might to escape, they are also moral agents. Not everyone is capable of being the Rosa Parks of their time. Not everyone is going to transform their realities and challenge injustice in such public formats. Many wins are small and incremental. Many wins are not seen. A gay person shutting down a homophobe on a bus might only garner the attention of a select few. But it is still an example of exemplarism. Medina’s (2013) account of moral heroes risks only legitimating or foregrounding those who manage to transform their realities on a macro level. But small wins matter too.

Injustice Illuminators ‘read the world’¹² to quote Freire in *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1972/1996). Through critical consciousness as praxis, *conscientização*, they have the ability to name their world, to identify what is morally and/or epistemically unjust, to call out and reverse exploitative or toxic relationships; to seek a way to challenge and move beyond oppressive social structures. They also have, based on their unique standpoint (see Toole, 2022), the capacity to engage in a humanist and libertarian pedagogy, one where oppressed ‘unveil the world of oppression and through praxis commit themselves to its transformation [...] in which the reality of oppression has already been transformed, this pedagogy ceases to belong to the oppressed and becomes a pedagogy of all people in the process of permanent liberation’ (Freire, 1970, p. 54). A liberal account, on Croce’s (2020) view, can accommodate the idea that Injustice Illuminators are moral exemplars to the extent that encounters with these figures motivate those who admire them to critically reflect on the problem highlighted, changing their attitudes towards the victims of injustice, and conceiving ways of ameliorating or tackling the injustice. Though Injustice Illuminators is not quite a term Freire would approve of, since, on his view, it is not enough to name injustice, agents need to actively seek to bring about a change, to battle for the future that they want to see, much like the See-Judge-Act method in liberation theology, all the same, there are clear parallels with the aims of liberatory education:

...where the teacher and the students both have to be learners, both have to be cognitive subjects, in spite of their being different. This for me is the first test of liberating education,

for teachers and students both to be critical agents in the act of knowing. (Freire, in Shor & Freire, 1987, p. 33)

One can see how a myopic, moreover, thin understanding of emulation, can lead to comparison anxiety for both pre-service pedagogues, and indeed, more experienced practitioners alike. Part of this problem stems from the proliferation of idealized curated selves on social media and the unrealistic burden people place on themselves to live up to these idealized exemplars. It is this phenomenon we turn to now.¹³

3. Idealized, curated selves & unattainable pedagogical exemplars

Many of us are, either knowingly or unknowingly, dopamine addicts. Digitally, many of us curate personas, some of which are distinct from the personas we embody or employ in real life. In many respects the idealized curated self is the product of a technological evolution, one which provides us with the canvas to refashion who we really are and replace it with what we would like to be (see e.g., Brunskill, 2013; Schlosser, 2020; Schouten et al., 2007). What we would like to be is liked, to be seen, to be considered a paragon of perfection and excellence, someone worthy of admiration and respect. Only perfection is rewarded with a dopamine bump in the shape of likes, hearts, retweets, followers and so forth (Burhan & Moradzadeh, 2020; Westbrook et al., 2021). Such idealized curated selves, our curated virtual selves, especially those presented on Tik-Tok and Instagram and Facebook are false representations of an idealized self—the digital embodiment of the self that is found within an avatar. Attempts to mitigate these trends in social media are ongoing but in some respects it is like punching a waterfall and there is much work to do to combat the harms associated with presenting perfectionism as real and attainable. One such attempt is the ‘be real’ movement which seeks to prevent celebrities and the like uploading heavily photo-shopped images of themselves, ones which make them look thinner or with flawless skin, or without stretch marks or cellulite or whatever. They counteract this exaltation of perfection by showing social media users what people really look like without makeup, without extensive photoshopping and so forth. Another attempt to counteract this pervasive cultural expectation is that of ‘Goblin mode’. The Oxford new word of the year 2022 refers to the pandemic-induced resistance to the perpetual normative expectation to keep up appearances, to be perfect. On TikTok, #goblinmode captures the symbolic antidote to #thatgirl—a highly curated aesthetic popular on TikTok where the lives of exemplars are chronicled in an attempt to show how perfect their lives and behavior are. With over 3bn views of videos using #thatgirl, many show influencers organizing refrigerators, tidying their houses fastidiously, taking part in Über elaborate skincare routines, practicing advanced yoga poses on the beach etc. With regard to this phenomenon of idealized curated selves and perfectionism, Chamath Palihapityal carves the problem at the joints well. She says:

We curate our lives around this perceived sense of perfection, because we are rewarded in these short term signals: Hearts, likes, and thumbs up. We conflate it with truth, and instead, what it is, is fake, brittle popularity that’s short term and leaves you more vacant and empty than before you did it.¹⁴

As chief architect of our own digital persona, the temptation to portray an idealized perfectionist dimension is almost too hard to resist. Chronicling or admitting flaws risk

negative comments. Vulnerability leaves us open to exploitation and exposure. Only perfectionism is beyond reproach. And so, our idealized curated selves are born: ‘that which no greater can be conceived fallacies’ colonises our individual and collective consciousness. What concerns us here is how this phenomenon plays out in professional communities of practice, in particular teacher communities of practice. This is not merely a descriptive enterprise. Here we also seek to lay bare the harms associated with those who seek to emulate these exemplars and fall short. We take an interest in the harms such emulative approaches to teaching cash out in real world conditions. To be sure—modelling is an integral part of professional practice, and this is very much the master-apprentice approach. Though it has its strengths, we foreground the harms associated with seeking to emulate unrealistic and unattainable pedagogical exemplars. By pedagogical exemplars, we mean those who other teachers turn to in order to perfect their practice—those worthy of admiration and emulation. Consider the following example: Jack is working as a primary teacher in the local community school. He loves his job, is confident in what he does, and is deeply motivated to be the best teacher possible. His dedication to the teaching profession leads him to follow certain exemplar pedagogue accounts on Instagram to stay updated on various novel teaching techniques and pedagogical approaches. One of these pages uploads videos chronicling stories of pedagogical success.¹⁵ For example, the page has recently shared a series of videos showing a primary teacher employing a problem-solving learning approach (Hmelo-Silver, 2004; Margetson, 1993) in the classroom with huge success, both in terms of student engagement and learning outcomes. The teacher is shown to introduce in class a specific problem that is rather challenging in terms of difficulty for students of that specific age group. The video also shows students working together in groups and, in the end, coming up with solutions and acquiring knowledge without receiving any direct instruction from the teacher. Jack is unaware that the videos are staged (they are not videos from real classes, they are scripted, students are pre-prepared, etc.). Admiring the qualities of the person in the videos, Jack decides to emulate the pedagogical method they are using. As is to be expected, doing so does not yield the results Jack had hoped for. Emulating the behavior of the exemplar, Jack presents to his students the same challenging problem as shown in the video. The problem is way above the level of Jack’s students (despite the fact that they are older than the students shown on the videos) and they do not respond well to it (they seem confused and uninterested). They also do not respond well to the problem-solving approach employed. Jack is disappointed with the outcome and tries to find out the reasons why the approach did not work. He cannot blame the students/children—after all, most if not all of them are very good students. So, he ends up blaming himself. He concludes that maybe he did not emulate the approach well and/or chose a method that was not a good match for the educational needs of this specific group of students.

After a few months, Jack watches another series of videos of critical pedagogical success shared on Instagram by the same account as before. This time the videos depict an exemplar using a different educational approach (than the series of videos before). He thinks that this time he will get it right—he will employ this approach in classroom with success and will make sure to modify it to match the needs of the students. Still, again the approach does not bring about the outcomes Jack had hoped for, despite the fact that he saw the exemplar employing it with ease and with the utmost success. This attempt to

emulate the behavior of unattainable pedagogical exemplars slowly but steadily takes a toll. He experiences feelings of guilt and inadequacy. Jack is admittedly a very good teacher but begins questioning his teaching abilities. This leads him to question his efficacy, even consider quitting his job.

The above example is a crude example of how the representation of unattainable pedagogical exemplars on social media can have disastrous consequences for educational practitioners and education in general. Our example relates to Wolf's (1982, p. 419) argument according to which aspiring to moral perfection '... does not constitute a model of personal well-being toward which it would be particularly rational or good or desirable for a human being to strive'.

4. Unattainable pedagogical exemplars: Negative impact on well-being & harm

This section looks to the importance of having attainable, relevant exemplars.¹⁶ As we have seen, education practitioners who seek to emulate or imitate unattainable and unrelatable pedagogical exemplars risk negatively impacting their well-being. We argue that the ubiquitous presence and pressure to follow and emulate such exemplars based on idealized curated professional personas is an ongoing harm perpetrated by social media, and something to be avoided at all costs.

By harm, we draw on the NIWB (Negative Influence on Well-Being Account), according to which, 'what it is for an event *e* to harm an individual *S* is for *e* to adversely affect *S*'s well-being' (Johansson & Risberg, 2023, p. 3). We argue that competitive races to perfectionism, by their very definition, result in negative influences on wellbeing. There are several ways in which this NIWB deleteriously impacts agents in the race to perfectionism. Idealized curated versions of users on social media are breeding grounds for others to formulate unhealthy comparisons based on feelings of inadequacy. As one would expect, and as was highlighted in the example of Jack discussed in the previous section, this causes self-conflict, it decreases motivation and has a detrimental effect on the agent's self-esteem (see Han et al., 2017—see also the cognitive dissonance theory: Elliot & Devine, 1994; Higgins, 1987; Sherman & Cohen, 2006), especially in individuals of demographics more susceptible to the vices of unfavourable and uncharitable social comparison. As already noted in section II, the unrelatability of idealized exemplars can have detrimental effects on the agent's motivation (Han & Dawson, 2023; Han et al., 2022)

A second way unattainable exemplars might negatively impact the wellbeing of those seeking to admire and emulate them is that such carefully curated personas (in our case idealized pedagogical exemplars on social media) habitually reinforce unhealthy behaviours such as poor work-life balance and excessive focus on appearance, unrealistic scenarios which are heavily edited and in no way representative of real-world experience. When people present only their best moments on social media, it can make others feel inadequate, a deviation from the expectations society place on individuals to be the best version of themselves possible. Some see this as pressure to follow suit, to properly fit what they perceive to be societal expectations. Individually and collectively, this form of habitual comparison anxiety, has detrimental effects on a person's wellbeing (Huang, 2022; Monin, 2007; Monin et al., 2008). There is also the

race for perfectionism, where the presentation of exemplarism is in many cases a form of false advertising. It is a clear example of misleading representation. As we have seen in our discussion of unattainable pedagogical exemplars, the idealized curated self on social media more often than not, does not reflect the reality of a person's life. Frequently, Instagram or Tik-Tok accounts only present those moments they want others to see, to like and to endorse (e.g., instances of pedagogical success). As a result, they excise all mention or even suggestion of non-ideal reality, of struggles or challenges they face, creating an unrealistic and misleading representation of themselves.

A final risk is that of burnout. 'Burnout' was first used in the 1970s by the psychoanalyst Herbert Freudenberger (1974) to capture the phenomenon of impairing exhaustion. The term is used for both describing a syndrome as well as a process (to burn out). We maintain that the process is just as important to understand as the syndrome, since the latter is much rarer than the former. According to Pines & Aronson (1988, pp. 9–10), burnout is:

...subjectively experienced as a state of physical, emotional, and mental exhaustion caused by long-term involvement in situations that are emotionally [draining] and demanding. The emotional demands are often caused by a combination of very high expectations and chronic situational stress. Burnout is accompanied by an array of symptoms including physical depletion, feelings of helplessness, hopelessness [and] disillusionment.

The emotional demands which engender burnout, as we have seen, are most often caused by a combination of chronic situational stresses, habitual comparison anxieties, unrealistic expectations and intentionally and unintentionally exploited vulnerabilities. Space precluded a thorough investigation, so focusing on social comparison theory briefly will strengthen our argument for present purposes. According to social comparison theory (Festinger, 1954—see also Gerber et al., 2018; Suls et al., 2002), people tend to evaluate their abilities and attitudes through comparing themselves to others. Unattainable and unrelatable exemplarism (which includes unattainable and unrelatable pedagogical exemplarism) is a case of upward social comparison. We compare ourselves with a person who we believe is better than us and we find ourselves lacking. We are unaware (or, at least, do not take into consideration) that we are comparing ourselves to an idealized and heavily curated image of another person situated in non-real idealized environments.

Social comparison theory, first proposed by psychologist Leon Festinger in 1954, is the idea that people evaluate their abilities and attitudes in relation to those of others in a process that plays a significant role in self-image and subjective wellbeing. According to the theory, it split into three types:

- Upward social comparison, where we compare ourselves with someone who we think is better than us (for example, who is a better teacher or mentor or principal or whatever).
- Downward social comparison, where we compare ourselves with someone who we think is somehow 'less' than us.

- Lateral social comparison, or comparing ourselves with someone who we think is more or less equal to us.

All three play different roles in our thought processes. Upward social comparison can make us work harder. This can be a good thing. But it might equally act as a catalyst for the erosive process of harbouring negative feelings about ourselves, especially in situations where our best efforts are invariably never quite good enough. Similarly, downward social comparison can make us feel better about ourselves. But it can equally, depending on the situation, make us feel superior to others and embody the vices of *superbia* (see Tanesini, 2021, for more on how such vices are instantiated). Most importantly, recent studies have shown that upward social comparisons on social media sites generate feelings of envy and often lead to depression, anxiety and loneliness (see Li, 2019; Pera, 2018; Reer et al., 2019; Verduyn et al., 2020). This negative impact on well-being due to social comparisons on social media is even more likely, if not somewhat inevitable, when we compare ourselves to idealized and heavily curated images of another person and fail to emulate them due to the fact that we are non-ideal agents living in a non-ideal world.

Self-determination theory can also be employed to highlight the harms arising from the pursuit of unattainable pedagogical exemplars on social media. This theory examines the social conditions that foster or obstruct ‘self-motivation and healthy psychological development’ (Ryan & Deci, 2000, p. 68) and highlights, with the support of empirical evidence, that relatedness, competence, and autonomy are three psychological needs that are crucial for long-lasting intrinsic motivation and, subsequently, human flourishing (Curren & Ryan, 2020; Krettenauer & Curren, 2020; Ryan & Deci, 2000, 2017). As noted by Krettenauer and Curren (2020, p. 276), ‘individuals need to experience their actions as self-initiated (autonomy), they need to feel able to effectively master their environment (competence), and they need to feel meaningfully connected with others (relatedness)’. The systematic presentation of unrelatable and unattainable pedagogical exemplars on social media is clearly a social condition that hinders self-motivation and healthy psychological development. As already highlighted in both this and the previous section, the pursuit of idealized pedagogical exemplars on social media does not facilitate feelings of relatedness (exemplars are idealized), autonomy (agents attempt to emulate the behavior of idealized exemplars) or competence (agents fail to emulate the actions of idealized exemplars).

In summary, the dangers of idealized curated selves on social media platforms are not to be underestimated. For teachers, in particular, there is always pressure not just to pursue excellence, but there is also an expectation to attain it. As such, they are never off the clock. The promulgation of social media accounts attempting to show you where you have gone wrong is often too much to resist, and as such it is vital teachers be not just made aware, but equipped socially, emotionally and cognitively, to deal with the risks, and what’s more, take steps to promote a more healthy, realistic, and honest portrayal of digital personas. Otherwise, we run the risk of burnout, demoralization, demotivation, low self-esteem, and internal self-conflict. Some teachers will experience guilt and might be led to question their suitability for the teaching profession. Others will blame their structural situational

factors, with some doing the bare minimum, mostly because they think that to do otherwise is to punch a waterfall, a Sisyphean task of sorts. What's more, the educational system will be worse off if we do not safeguard against idealized and unattainable pedagogical exemplarism: Some talented teachers will quit, while others will continue working in a role where they are reminded daily of not being quite good enough.

5. Concluding remarks

Our aim in this paper has been to present the phenomenon of unattainable exemplarism on social media and to highlight the harm that attempting to emulate unattainable exemplars inflicts on pedagogical practitioners. Our argument should not be taken to imply that we believe that exemplarism is always yielding negative results in all of its forms and versions. On the contrary, we strongly believe that pedagogical exemplars are key to improvement and pedagogical success. As in the case of the apprentice builder, the apprentice teacher learns from those who are more experienced and wiser than she is. But there is one condition: the exemplar needs to be attainable, relevant, relatable, and authentic—and not some idealized and heavily curated exemplar who is impossible to emulate in the real world.

Notes

1. Here we attempt to contribute to a long-standing debate in educational theory wherein several renowned educationists have long since championed role modelling, or learning from exemplars, as a method of virtuous character development (e.g., see Kristjánsson, 2015, 2018, 2019; Sanderse, 2013; Vaccarezza & Niccoli, 2019; Warnick, 2008). While there already exists a robust debate on emulation in the *Journal of Moral Education*, (see Athanassoulis, 2017; Kristjánsson, 2006; Osman, 2019; Sanderse, 2013), we attempt to address a lacuna in the literature, namely, provide an explanatory account of harms arising from the pursuit of unattainable pedagogical exemplars on social media.
2. Many do consider it a failure. What is more, they knowingly or unknowingly internalise such. As expected this can lead to feelings of low self-worth, negative comparison-anxiety and so on.
3. One could object that pedagogical exemplars are not moral ones: They possess skill rather than virtue. First of all, such an objection seems to go against the 'virtue as skill' thesis—a view defended by scholars such as Annas (1995, 2003) and Stichter (2011, 2016). But even if one disagrees with this thesis, we believe that what unattainable pedagogical exemplars on social media exemplify, and what aspiring teachers attempt to emulate, is the employment of a plethora of moral and intellectual virtues in teaching. After all, the ideal teacher needs to be practically wise, honest, courageous, open-minded, intellectually tenacious and so on so as to teach well, transfer virtues to students and ultimately enable them to reach human flourishing. In other words, we see teachers as epistemic-moral practitioners, so in terms of the teacher wanting to improve their practice, it's not just about exemplarist pedagogy (right means to right end), but also showing them (students) what it means to be a good person.
4. For instance, Annas (2004, pp. 68–69) has argued that moral exemplarism can be used as a supplementary theory to virtue ethics and provides a way out of the problem of explicit moral action guidance (Louden, 1984; Solomon, 1988). Zagzebski (2010, pp. 51–52) has also made a similar claim in one of her papers.

5. For instance, following Aristotle's paradigmatic example of exemplarism, a novice builder may receive direct instruction from the experienced builder on how to lay the bricks. However, this direct instruction is peripheral (and not a necessary component of) exemplarism. For Aristotle, the essence of exemplarism lies in the novice's imitation of the experienced builder's actions and the repetition of this imitation which leads to habituation—i.e., the imitated behavior becomes a habit for the novice agent.
6. We have 'borrowed' this example (which we have modified for the purposes of our argument) from Singer (2009).
7. See for example, Carr (2019), Croce (2019, 2020), Croce & Vaccarezza (2017), Engelen et al. (2018) Korsgaard (2019), and Vaccarezza & Niccoli (2019).
8. We are calling these representations 'unrealistic' because, in their vast majority, they depict instances of education success in vacuo and cannot be emulated because they are devoid of (and fail to appropriately consider) the structural elements and the subject-specific pedagogical contextualism that play a significant role in everyday pedagogical practice. For more on this, see section III.
9. Interestingly, Rorty (1984) stipulates that virtue includes action. On his view, 'virtue (arete) is that sort of active disposition (hexis) which sets a person to act or react in a mean, in situations involving choice (prohairesis), following reason (logos) as the person of practical wisdom (phronimos) does in matters concerning pathos and actions' (p. 535). This fits with the view put forward by Henderson (2022) which states that if emulation must include activity, it cannot be a purely virtuous emotion. Therefore, emulation is better categorised as a virtue (p. 6).
10. See, for example, Aristotle's distinction between the enkratic and the temperate agent: '... for both the continent man and the temperate man are such as to do nothing contrary to reason for the sake of the bodily pleasures, but the former has and the latter has not bad appetites, and the latter is such as not to feel pleasure contrary to reason, while the former is such as to feel pleasure but not to be led by it' (*EN*, VII, 1151b33-1152a3—translation by Ross (Ross & Brown, 2009)).
11. Taking into account that Aristotle was likely not—according to most current scholarship—a stage theorist about virtue development, we must add the caveat that emulating the enkratic is not typically a path to virtue, as the enkratic are not aspiring phronomoi. Whilst it is not impossible to progress from enkratia (continence) to phonetically-informed virtue, it is both unlikely and difficult. Our argument thus acknowledges that in proposing enkratic teachers as the ideal sources of emulation for other teachers, these teachers can at best aspire to become enkratic themselves.
12. As Freire (1970, p. 88), points out: 'to exist, humanly, is to name the world, to change it'. Later he goes on to say, 'Dialogue is the encounter between men, mediated by the world, in order to name the world. Hence, dialogue cannot occur between those who want to name the world and those who do not wish this naming—between those who deny others the right to speak their word and those whose right to speak has been denied them. Those who have been denied their primordial right to speak their word must first reclaim this right and prevent the continuation of this dehumanizing aggression'.
13. It might be important to note that the main features/ideas of moral exemplarism that we will employ for our examination of the phenomenon of unattainable pedagogical exemplars on social media in the remaining sections are the following: (i) agents can, and often do, seek moral guidance from exemplars, (ii) direct instruction is not a necessary component of the exemplarist approach, (iii) agents require achievable, relatable, and realizable exemplars.
14. Remarks delivered in 2017 to journalists about Facebook colonising our attention and effectively programming our cognitive patterns (Sini, 2017).
15. Definitions of pedagogical success may vary depending on one's understanding of the aims of education. Still, for the purposes of our argument, we use the term 'educational success' to

denote an approach that is well-received by the students (there is participation, etc.) and enables them to acquire knowledge.

16. For a list of some of the most influential pedagogy exemplars on Instagram see <https://classful.com/97-of-the-most-influential-teachers-on-instagram/>.

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Notes on contributors

Alkis Kotsonis is an associate tutor at the University of Glasgow (School of Education). His research lies at the intersection of epistemology and education, and focuses on the study of the concept of intellectual excellence and the development of new epistemological and educational theories of virtue.

Gerry Dunne is a lecturer in Philosophy of Education at Marino Institute of Education and a research fellow in Trinity College Dublin. He works primarily in the area of social epistemology, more specifically, vice epistemology and epistemic injustice.

ORCID

Alkis Kotsonis  <http://orcid.org/0000-0003-2097-2627>

Gerry Dunne  <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-0137-8027>

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