

## The Thick-Skinned Teacher: Stoicism in the Classroom

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# *The Thick-Skinned Teacher: Stoicism in the Classroom*<sup>1</sup>

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I recently attended a professional development workshop for high school teachers, and we were asked to share ideas about the characteristics of a great teacher. People offered a range of responses: great teachers are experts in the subject they teach, are passionate about their subject, create strong classroom structure, and articulate clear expectations. They are caring, encouraging, engaging, enthusiastic, fair, and firm. When I was asked, I thought only of what seemed to me to be the quality proving useful in some of my more challenging encounters with teenagers: a thick skin.

I am in the midst of the reverse of Trent's professional journey. He taught in high schools and then later anchored his scholarly interests "in how people learn to understand and cope with life's more trying realities." I taught and wrote about philosophy and education in universities, but now teach full time in a high school. I brought my scholarly interests to bear in helping *me* cope with one of life's more trying realities: the high school classroom.

Like Trent, I have been thinking about stoicism often lately, and I was thinking about it during that professional development session. Trent mentions early in this paper that he helps his students "get to grips with what it would look like to be the sort of teacher who shows up facing the 'difficult' aspects of teaching without being 'discouraged' by them." He goes on to discuss how we would all benefit from a new orientation nowadays, "finding the strength to try to make things better for our fellow travelers." Philosophers of education, he argues, should develop the themes of acknowledgement and affinity, helping people develop these stoic principles.

Trent shows that those themes prove foundational for our ability to encounter and engage others. Trent suggests that affinity and acknowledgement are educational ideals – ideals far more meaningful than those we are told to reach through pedagogical alignment or other educational buzzwords.

In many ways, I'm an ideal respondent to Trent's paper. Like Trent, I have found the modern stoics like Donald Robertson (2019) and William Irvine (2008) to be compelling guides to living well. But those sympathies place me too close to Trent's side. In this response, therefore, I focus on the subject he mentions briefly before turning to broad stoic themes in philosophy of education: what value is stoicism for teachers?

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<sup>1</sup> Editors' note: This article is a response to Davis, T. "It's Not Going to Be Okay": Stoic Wisdom for a Difficult World. *Philosophical Inquiry in Education*, 31(1), 19-27, published in the same issue.

## The Teacher as Stoic: Or How Stoicism Can Help Teachers

It is no secret that teachers face trying circumstances. Beyond the unfortunately common physical assaults they endure, students ignore, insult, mock, and undermine their teachers. And that is just to mention some of the challenges they encounter with students. Teachers are also subject to harsh treatment at the hands of parents, administrators, and school boards.

Someone listening to teachers describing their experiences might conclude that the most remarkable of their abilities is perseverance in the face of what would cause outrage in other workplaces; many strong teachers have developed a thick skin. They focus on the things they can control when working with humans whose prefrontal cortex is still in the process of development, who are hormone-fueled, and who are bent on liberating themselves from the tyranny of school authority figures. Indeed, teachers' thick skin is not only valuable for themselves, but also for their students. The ability to maintain one's equanimity in face of challenging circumstances helps create classroom environments more conducive to learning; there is one less unpredictable variable at play when a teacher manages to stay above the fray, focused on the task of helping form human beings.

That is a brief and general case for stoicism's value in the classroom today. But the Stoics of antiquity devoted considerable time to thinking about how Stoic teachers should approach their students, and I next turn to that topic.

## The Stoic Teacher: Stoic Insights into Teaching

Stoicism has long maintained a fundamentally educational stance. Stoics are always at work at self-education. But Stoics were not lone wolves – they took seriously the education of others. Marcus Aurelius – who tried to live by stoic principles but was not a stoic teacher – reminded himself that he had two choices: tolerate others or teach (*didaske*) them (Meditations 8.59).

There are some intriguing statements about what studying under a Stoic teacher was like, and many of these statements present a similar idea: Stoic education was not intended to be a pleasurable experience. Much like Socrates' mission to unsettle, confuse, and frustrate his interlocutors – to make them question their beliefs and knowledge – Stoic teachers sought to make students unhappy with themselves. Seneca's letter, which has come down under the title "On Choosing our Teachers," emphasizes both the importance of finding good teachers (52.3) and of finding teachers who seeks to improve themselves and others rather than promoting and enriching themselves. Seneca writes, "What is baser than philosophy courting applause? Does the sick man praise the surgeon while he is operating? In silence and with reverent awe submit to the cure" (52.9-10). Musonius Rufus, Epictetus' teacher, says virtually the same things: a true philosopher shouldn't be applauded after he speaks, but should rather be greeted with silence because the audience is ashamed (Musonius Rufus, "Sayings, 49.3"). Epictetus too said something similar: "the philosopher's school, ye men, is a surgery: you ought not to go out of it with pleasure, but with pain. For you are not in sound health when you enter" (Discourses III.xxiii.29).

There was a debate in antiquity about how educators should recruit and retain students. Should they appeal to students to entice them, or should they try to repel them so that only the truly committed students would want to study with them (see Rihill 2003)? As Hieronymus put it, "just as with the Scythians, those who are in flight shoot as well as those who pursue, so among philosophers, some catch their disciples by pursuing them, some by fleeing from them" (Diogenes Laertius 9.112). Plato's sophists make alluring promises about the value of studying with them. Plato's Socrates, on the other hand, routinely alienates and upsets his interlocutors. (Plato's Socrates successfully recruits students only rarely in the Platonic corpus.)

The Stoics were in the Socratic camp. Epictetus describes how Musonius Rufus "used to turn people away most of the time, using that as a test to distinguish the gifted from the ungifted... the more

one tried to beat him off, the more he inclined towards the object to which his nature carries him” (Epictetus Discourses III.6.10).

One would be hard pressed to think about a less timely model for teaching today—an era in which educators do their best to make their lessons engaging and exciting as they fight a quixotic battle for their students’ attention against the Sirens of social media. However, the Stoics demonstrate that they were concerned with the psychology of learning and had developed a stance on how best to motivate students, to lead them to desire to learn. To attain the ideals that Trent Davis discusses – to help people attain equanimity in their lives through acknowledgment and affinity – we must figure out how to help students embrace their own educational journeys.

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Avi I. Mintz ([avi@newlane.edu](mailto:avi@newlane.edu)) has broad interests in the history of educational philosophy and has published work on ancient Greek and progressive educational thought. He is the author of *Plato: Images, Aims, and Practices of Education* and the editor of *The History of Western Philosophy of Education in Antiquity*.