

# Blending Stoicism with Ethics Education Can Raise a Happier Society

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*Stoicism, a philosophy that kept both a slave and an emperor sane, is embraced as a useful philosophy today, two and a half millennia after it first surfaced. Adding it to the educational syllabus via ethics classes can bring ample benefit to students' lives, **Luke Fenech** tells **THINK**.*

Stoicism is a Hellenistic philosophy founded by Zeno of Citium in the 3rd century BC and further developed in Rome in the first century after the birth of Jesus Christ. Stoicism stresses the significance of virtuous living and accepting the unalterable as a foundation of a happy life. It suggests people should focus on developing their moral character and living in accordance with nature, which includes accepting the world as it is and recognising that some things are outside of our control. Another essential pillar of Stoicism is practising self-control and restraint.

The primary sources of Stoicism are the writings of the ancient Stoic philosophers, two of the best-known of whom are Epictetus and Marcus Aurelius. In particular, Epictetus emphasised the importance of self-

control and the need to focus on one's own actions and thoughts rather than external events. He believed that people should strive to live in accordance with nature and accept whatever is beyond our control. Marcus Aurelius wrote extensively about the importance of self-discipline, self-improvement, and being guided by reason rather than emotion. His milestone work on stoicism, *Meditations*, was never written for publication – it was rather his journal to remind himself always on how to conduct his life.

The backgrounds of these two Stoic philosophers offer an intriguing insight into the potential power of the ideology in relation to helping people navigate life. Epictetus was born a slave, and although no hard evidence has been uncovered, it is still widely thought that he had been crippled by his owner. Once freed, sometime after Nero's

death, he left Greece for Rome, where he taught philosophy. Marcus Aurelius, an emperor, inhabited the furthest end from Epictetus's position on the social spectrum. Marcus Aurelius led the Roman Empire, which at its height, included most of Europe, the Middle East, and North Africa. The emperor led this giant for almost two decades, from 161 AD until his death in 180 AD.

## **STOICISM AND EDUCATION IN CONTEMPORARY TIMES**

To little surprise, being such a versatile philosophy, Stoicism is living its renaissance in the 21st century. In fact, it has spread like wildfire thanks to the abundance of limitless information that the advent of the internet has brought to humanity. However, beyond pop culture, Stoicism is also seeping into the Maltese public education system, with a special connection to 



ethics classes. Teaching and Learning Master's student Luke Fenech reveals this through his exhaustive research.

'My journey to studying Stoicism began with reading Marcus Aurelius's *Meditations*, which led me to explore other philosophical readings. Although my academic interests lie in the philosophy of education and the social sciences, I have found Stoicism to be a useful lens through which to examine contemporary educational theory and ethics education. One of my major findings is the interpretation of ethics education as a Stoic endeavour, due to its concern with the examined life and the care of the self and others,' Fenech tells **THINK**.

In 2014, local schools in Malta experienced a problem where an increasing number of students were opting out of religious knowledge classes, resulting in a group of idle pupils who were not attending any class during the religion lesson,

Fenech recalls. This issue was solved by the introduction of ethics education at primary and secondary levels, which served as a substitute for religious knowledge and led to a high demand for ethics educators, requiring teachers who specialised in other areas to fill the supply gaps.

Although people often believe the two subjects of religion and ethics to be in opposition, in fact, both teach core morals, albeit using different vehicles. Fenech, a Roman Catholic and ethics educator, confirms that the two subjects do not hinder each other but in fact may supplement each other when examining the idea of how to live with virtue and principle.

Ethics education in Malta spans several years. In Year 1, students talk about self-examination and empathy. In Year 2, students explore the value of friendship, conceptualise the classroom as a moral community, and learn about treating each other well. Year 3 opens

up the world for them via discussions on environmental protection, global citizenship, respecting property, and being a good neighbour. As students mature, by Year 4, they start being introduced to the values of justice, respect, courage, trust, and moderation. Year 5 dives into diversity, values, tolerance, and free will, while in Year 6, they discuss faith, reason, moral values, beliefs of different religions, and the notion of conscience.

In middle school, as teenagers slowly transform into adolescents, they discuss duties and obligations, animal rights, freedom, consequences and motives, morality as law, virtues, narcissism and self-obsession, hate speech, cyberbullying, the intimate-self, ethical dilemmas, and responsible life choices. Adding Stoicism directly into this mix and making people aware of the ideology's teachings and its usefulness in modern life further elevates the educational experience of students.



**Luke Fenech**  
*Photo by James Moffett*

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## **MEMENTO FOR LIFELONG LEARNING**

'The relationship between Stoicism and education is significant, as Stoicism's philosophy of education is formed through a spectrum of thinking on the attainment of knowledge and human development. This is fundamental to the current philosophy of both education students and theorists of education. Moreover, Stoicism's theory and practice of education are dependent on the three doctrines of ethics, logic, and physics, as well as the three practical disciplines of action, assent, and desire. Stoicism is considered a lifelong education, a commitment to self-transformation, and a philosophy of care, both for the self and others,' Fenech tells **THINK**.

On the whole, Fenech believes that the current education system has some shortcomings, such as the prioritisation of STEM (Science, Technology,

Engineering, and Mathematics) subjects over the arts and humanities.

'These shortcomings can also be improved by applying Stoicism to education, as its philosophy emphasises introspection. Moreover, it considers factors such as education as a lifelong endeavour, cosmopolitanism, the use of journaling and writing practices, and critical engagement with the outside world. This includes the importance of critique and dissent in oppressive conditions,' Fenech adds.

The researcher also warns about how Stoicism is being interpreted in many different ways in the modern world, with a lot of self-made life coaches approaching the philosophy with capitalist spectacle, using it as a 'get-rich-quick' philosophy for entrepreneurs. 'This is miseducational rather than educational. Ridding it from its capitalist cloak, Stoicism can be useful to educators, policymakers, and students, as my thesis has shown,' Fenech says.

'Only the educated are free,' claims Epictetus. It is hard to argue against that. Stoicism and education share a lifelong commitment to self-transformation, the care of the self and others, and the examined life. Stoicism's philosophy of education emphasises the attainment of knowledge and human development, which is significant to the current philosophy of education students and theorists of education.

By applying Stoicism to education, we can improve some of the shortcomings of current education systems globally and promote critical engagement and dialogue in a highly polarised society. The sanctity of an individual's opinion only applies if it is expressed based on solid arguments and if the beholder is ready to be swayed by better reasoned counter-opinions. Without the openness to revise our own beliefs, we, as humans, cannot progress for the better. **T**



A typical royal ride of the newly crowned Queen Elizabeth II with her husband Prince Philip in Malta in the 1950s. Local children in school, scouts, and guides uniforms are seen in this shot taken in Floriana. Such institutions used to herd the young at manifestations of loyalty at an early age. The Maltese flag, left, still displays the George Cross on a blue tile as devised by the colonialist monarch.

*Photo courtesy of Prime Ministers Collection, National Archives*