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**Collaborative learning and moral reasoning in the Religious
Education classroom. A case study of a year 8 class**

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Abstract

This case study of a year 8 class explores if collaborative learning could help year 8 pupils develop both their moral reasoning skills and increase their retention of RE subject knowledge. The research assumes that knowledge is epistemologically grounded in a 'knowledge rich' curriculum with 'moral reasoning' understood through a Kohlbergian framework of moral development, in contrast to postmodern or character-based approaches. Through observation of pupils' engagement with collaborative learning, analysis of group and individually produced answers, and qualitative analysis of Kohlbergian style moral dilemmas to investigate the extent to which pupils engaged with collaborative learning tasks, retained knowledge of RE subject knowledge (Christian ethics) and developed their moral reasoning skills. Overall, findings suggest that collaborative learning could help some pupils learn and retain subject knowledge. However, collaborative learning was largely ineffectual at helping pupils develop their moral reasoning skills, with pupils limited to pre-conventional and conventional stages of moral reasoning.

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Introduction

The following case study of a year 8 class explores how collaborative learning might enable pupils to both develop their moral reasoning skills and their Religious Education (RE) subject knowledge (in this case, subject knowledge of Christian ethics). This project was conducted within the context of two recent changes in the English education system. First, the movement towards a ‘knowledge-rich’ curriculum as reflected in the curriculum statements and aims of both my first and second initial teacher training professional placements. The second, an increased focus upon the Spiritual, Moral, Social and Cultural development of pupils, as both the Office for Standards in Education (Ofsted) and the National Curriculum have placed a greater emphasis on schools’ statutory responsibility for spiritual, moral, social and cultural development (SMSC) as reflected in the new 2019 Ofsted inspection guidelines.

Thus, the problem for all teachers (as SMSC is a cross-curricular), but especially teachers of RE, is this question: how can teachers teach subject content (and pupils learn it) as an imperative of a knowledge-rich curriculum, but also develop the pupils’ moral reasoning? Therefore, it is vital for my continued professional development and the profession generally to understand how to consolidate pupils’ knowledge, but also positively impact upon one tradition of moral education, moral reasoning. This tradition of moral reasoning can broadly be understood as an examination of the process by which an individual makes a moral decision in response to an ethical dilemma.

In what follows, I attempt to offer a potential solution to the problem through collaborative learning. First, I explore recent literature regarding the movement towards a knowledge-rich curriculum, collaborative learning and the renewed focus on moral development, in which, I justify my use of Kohlbergian moral reasoning, rather than more recent postmodern and character based approaches to moral development. Overall, highlighting the parallels between collaborative learning and

Kohlberg's Socratic, dialogue-based approach to moral reasoning. Second, I outline my research design and methodology, justifying my case study approach, the choice of a year 8 class, the topic of moral decision making in Christianity, and outline my series of lessons. Finally, I recount and discuss my findings, and suggest that my research tentatively points towards collaborative learning having little impact on pupils' moral reasoning abilities, but some limited benefits regarding knowledge consolidation.

Literature review

This literature review covers three important aspects of my research project. First, I will explore the literature and context surrounding the current movement in education towards a knowledge-rich curriculum and increased focus on moral and character education. Following this, I will outline how well-structured collaborative learning and Kohlberg's moral reasoning could enable pupils to both consolidate taught knowledge and develop their moral reasoning in the RE classroom.

Knowledge-rich curriculum and moral development

Recently, there has been a movement towards a 'knowledge-rich curriculum'. A knowledge-rich curriculum has two central components. First, the primacy of knowledge and second, the retention and consolidation of knowledge (Sherrington, 2018). As Educationalist and knowledge-rich advocate Daisy Christodoulou accuses the 'progressive' education community of peddling various 'myths' that she sees as rooted in in the English education system. These myths range from the notion that 'facts prevent understanding', to 'teacher-led instruction is passive' to 'teaching knowledge is indoctrination' (Christodoulou, 2014, p.7). Instead, a knowledge-rich curriculum places pupil learning and consolidating of knowledge as the foundation of teaching, in which skills derive from acquiring knowledge.

Christodoulou's work has received the plaudits from Michael Gove, education secretary from 2010-2014 (Gove, 2013a, 2013b, 2014). Indeed, this notion of a knowledge-rich curriculum is reflected in the 2014 National Curriculum which states, 'the national curriculum provides pupils with an introduction to the essential knowledge that they need to be educated citizens' (*National Curriculum in England: Framework for Key Stages 1 to 4*, 2014, p.3.1) and has influenced post Gove education strategy (Gibb, 2017; Morgan, 2015).

The second aspect of a knowledge-rich curriculum focuses on the retention and consolidation of knowledge. As Sherrington writes, a knowledge-rich curriculum:

is not simply a set of encounters from which children form ad hoc memories; it is designed to be remembered in detail – to be stored in our students’ long-term memories so that they can later build on it, forming ever wider and deeper schemas (Sherrington, 2018).

Sherrington, following the principles of Rosenshine, argues that information can be moved from pupil’s short to long term memory through frequently reviewing material using different retrieval approaches to build schemas. Thus, knowledge consolidation involves the consolidation of taught by making information that pupils need to learn clear, but ensuring that ‘students think for themselves’ (Sherrington, 2019, p.40). For Sherrington, retrieval practice an integral part of each lesson. In his writing, Sherrington uses examples from history, mathematics and science, but not RE. Nevertheless, McKavanagh explores how knowledge-rich retention could apply to the RE classroom, McKavanagh suggests retrieval practice should progress to pupils looking at old information and applying it in new scenarios (McKavanagh, 2019).

While Christodoulou and others do not expand on what a ‘knowledge rich’ approach to RE would entail, however, the language of the Commission for Religion and Worldviews does mirror the language of ‘knowledge-rich’ educationalists. The Commission states that ‘RE should be enacted to ensure that learning in this area remains academically rigorous and a knowledge-rich preparation for life in a world of great religion and belief diversity’ (Commission on Religious Education, 2018, p.i).

However, the aim here is not to critique the knowledge-rich epistemology. Instead, I am exploring how to consolidate and morally develop pupils within the framework of a knowledge-rich curriculum. A knowledge-rich curriculum assumes that knowledge is, as Chirstodolou states, ‘pieces stored in the memory’ (Christodoulou, 2014, p.19) and therefore knowledge consolidation is about the extent to which these pieces remain stored through frequent retrieval practice (Sherringham, 2018). This view suggests epistemology in RE no different to knowledge taught in another subject. The knowledge-rich epistemology contrasts with established literature in Religious Education such as Grimmit’s constructivism (Grimmitt, 2000), Wright’s critical realism (Wright, 1996) or Jarmy’s critique of the knowledge-rich epistemology (Jarmy, 2019).

At the same time, there has been a resurgent focus on moral education within schools and in particular RE. Moral development has historically been an important element of the English curriculum (*Education Act*, 2002; Teece, 2011). Indeed, RE as subject is regarded as offering ‘a unique

contribution to the spiritual, moral, social and cultural development of pupils and supports wider community cohesion.’ (Department of children, schools and families, 2010, p.4). But as Barnes argues, since the fall of confessional religious education, and the subsequent Schools Council 1971 Working Paper 76’s advocacy of the separation of moral education from religious education, Smartian phenomenological pedagogy is characterised by a distinct downplaying of moral education in RE (Barnes, 2011).

However, the 2019 Ofsted education inspection framework places greater emphasis on ‘character education’ and points towards a renewed importance upon moral development within RE (Ofsted, 2019a). As a teacher of RE, it has therefore become increasingly important to be able to deliver a knowledge-rich education, but also develop pupils morally. In what follows, I will explore the literature surrounding both collaborative learning and moral reasoning and suggest that collaborative learning and Kohlbergian moral reasoning could unite the two competing aims of knowledge-rich and moral development in RE.

Collaborative learning

Van Leeuwen and Janssen define collaborative learning as ‘instructional arrangements that involve two or more students working together on a shared learning goal’ (van Leeuwen & Janssen, 2019, p.71). Numerous studies across a range of academic disciplines suggest that collaborative learning can have a positive impact on pupils’ interaction with their classmates through working in groups (Lou et al., 1996; Johnson & Johnson, 2009), and improved academic performance through collaborative learning compared to pupils completing independent tasks (Kyndt et al., 2013). Although, there is no current research into collaborative learning in the secondary RE classroom, there are some parallels between dialogic learning and collaborative learning as dialogic learning requires collaboration between pupils (Alexander, 2017). Dialogic learning has been explored both theoretically in the RE classroom (Jarmy, 2019) and in the classroom itself (Vrikki, Brindley, Abedin, & Riga, 2019).

Over the past 26 years there has been a vast amount of literature regarding what constitutes effective collaborative learning. An analysis of literature over this period suggests that collaborative learning can be effective if several factors are considered. The design of collaborative learning tasks, setting of groups, and the role of the teacher during collaborative tasks.

The Education Endowment Foundation (EEF) argues that collaborative learning is cost effective and ‘the impact on learning is consistently positive’ (EEF, 2018b). The EEF argues that the evidence for collaborative learning is strong, stating that ‘there are ten meta-analyses, with five conducted in the last ten years, which suggest that collaborative learning strategies can improve learning’. Although the EEF is aware that impact of collaborative learning does differ ‘there is no clear explanation of why this spread occurs’ (EEF, 2018a).

Nevertheless, the EEF does stress that effective collaborative learning requires ‘structured’ and ‘well-designed tasks’ which allow pupils to communicate and engage with learning result in ‘the best gains’. Although the EEF does not explain what constitutes a ‘well-designed tasks’ and if pupils ‘gain’ in terms of just knowledge recall or other gains such as social skills (EEF, 2018a, 2018b).

The focus on the design of tasks as vital for the effectiveness of collaborative learning is shared by (Cohen, 1994) who argues that open ended group tasks result in greater pupil cooperation because there is more room for discussion and debate regarding the ‘correct’ answer. Indeed, R.M. Gillies’ meta-analysis of five studies of collaborative learning in primary and early secondary schools in Australia suggests that ‘children in the structured groups demonstrated more cooperative and less non-cooperative behaviours than their peers in the unstructured groups’(Gillies, 2003, p.45).

In her more recent work, Gillies provides greater detail regarding what she means by ‘structured collaborative learning’ by building upon the ‘social interdependence’ theory of Johnson and Johnson (Johnson & Johnson, 1999, 2009). For Gillies, well-structured collaborative learning requires five key components and if these five aspects are followed then pupils will improve both their learning and their social co-operation skills (Gillies, 2014, 2016). First, ‘positive interdependence’ requires pupils to need to work together to complete the task (for example, through assigning roles of individual) (Gillies, 2014). Second, pupils need to be willing to work together ‘for the group to achieve its goal’ (Gillies, 2016, p.41), this includes pupils questioning each other and evaluating points raised by different members of the group, Gillies argues that this improves pupils understanding of subject content. Third, Gillies reinforces that pupils must be individually accountable. For the final two components, Gillies puts greater emphasis on these than Johnson and Johnson, these are that pupils must learn how to work collaboratively through being taught or the skills needed being ‘negotiated’ for older pupils (Gillies, 2016, p.41). Finally, Gillies states that pupils must have the opportunity to evaluate their own and others group performance (Gillies, 2014, 2016).

Finally, Kirschner (2018) like Gillies, explores collaborative learning from a psychological perspective and suggests that effective collaborative learning focuses upon the structure of activities and the ‘cognitive load’ of the individual pupil. Interestingly, Kirschner (2018) do suggest that this might mean that for some lower attaining pupils collaborative learning might not be effective (Kirschner, Sweller, Kirschner & Zambrano, 2018).

However, it is not just the structure of task that is important for effective collaborative learning, but also that pupils are grouped appropriately. Bertucci (2010) concluded that pupil attainment was higher in groups of up to four compared to pupils’ working individually (Bertucci, Conte, Johnson & Johnson, 2010). Cohen explores what are the appropriate conditions for the use of small groups in the classroom. Cohen’s analysis focused on empirical studies of collaborative learning which changes one factor in which collaborative learning was carried out. Cohen found that mixed ability groups improved pupil learning compared to same ability groupings (Cohen, 1994). Furthermore, Lou et al.’s meta-analysis of class based, face to face collaborative learning in the US elementary and high schools found that low ability pupils learnt more in groups of different abilities, and this was in contrast to middle ability pupils who progressed more in same ability groups, while mixed ability groups made no difference to higher ability pupils. Lou et al. reasoned that lower ability pupils perform well in mixed ability groupings because higher ability peers can explain and help them (Lou et al., 1996).

For those who are critical of collaborative learning, there is an assumption that the teacher plays a limited role during collaborative tasks (Christodoulou, 2014). However, as Gillies makes clear, teachers must make the appropriate decisions during collaborative tasks and support pupils when necessary (Gillies, 2003, 2004, 2014, 2016). Recently, Van Leeuwen and Janssen’s systematic review of the role of the teacher in primary and secondary collaborative learning argued that ‘it is important that teachers focus their guidance on the content space at the meta level (e.g., giving feedback on students’ strategies or helping students plan their task progress)’ and ‘on the relational space in general’ (e.g. giving feedback on students’ collaboration process or helping students resolve conflicts) (van Leeuwen & Janssen, 2019, p.84).

Moral reasoning

The final part of this literature review is concerned with moral reasoning and RE. In what follows, I will explore two contrasting pedagogical approaches to moral education within RE and recent

research into character education, and ultimately, advocate that Kohlberg's moral reasoning as a useful approach towards exploring the moral reasoning abilities of children within the RE classroom.

Pedagogical approaches to RE have attempted to incorporate the two aims of RE, knowledge and SMSC. Most notably, Michael Grimmitt's distinction between 'learning about' (knowledge) and 'learning from' religion which focuses not on the subject content of religion, but rather the pupils own response to and reflection upon taught religious phenomena (Grimmitt, 1987). The Grimmittian pedagogical approach is highly influential. In fact, Grimmitt's attainment targets are still the attainment targets of the Cambridgeshire Agreed Syllabus (Cambridgeshire County Council, 2018). Although, these targets have been criticised for being confusing for teachers (Teece, 2010).

Another approach to moral development, which to some extent, is a continuation of Grimmitt's approach, is the postmodern pedagogy of Clive and Jane Erricker (C. Erricker, 2010). Erricker and Erricker argue that all knowledge is relative and therefore RE should focus on the narratives of the children (C. Erricker & Erricker, 2000). Following this, Jane Erricker criticises the 'state' of moral education through focusing on analysis of the Hampshire 1998 Agreed Syllabus. Erricker argues that it focuses heavily on the development of 'skills' such as 'empathy', but that this is tantamount to 'moral indoctrination', as 'the children are morally educated without any discussion of the ideas as moral education *per se*. The children are morally indoctrinated as they are religiously educated and the values are implicit' (J. Erricker, 2000, p.84).

Jane Erricker then argues that this approach to moral education is rooted in the 'Kantian, Kohlbergian and Piagetian ideas of rational, detached, abstracting, morally mature subject' (J. Erricker, 2000, p.85). Erricker criticise Kohlbergian moral reasoning because it negates the development of 'relationships and communities' and focuses instead on attaining the 'truth' of moral situations and is centred upon a Rawlsian account of justice and Kantian morality (J. Erricker, 2000, p.102). Erricker and Erricker conclude that Kohlberg and others wrongly understand the self as 'autonomous' and 'self-sufficient' and morality is based upon 'abstract rules and objective justice'. Instead, Erricker and Erricker argue that the self is constructed 'through narrative' and that moral education should reflect this (C. Erricker & Erricker, 2000, p.116).

Although Kohlbergian moral reasoning has been criticised (Benhabib, 1992; Gilligan, 1982), I suggest that through explaining Kohlberg's moral reasoning, Erricker and Erricker misunderstand Kohlberg.

Following from Piaget and Vygotsky, Kohlberg (Kohlberg, 1981, 1984) explored the development of children, in Kohlberg's case the moral development of children. Kohlberg argued that children of all cultures can develop morally, making increasingly complex reasons for making moral decisions as they develop from post-conventional to conventional to post-conventional stages of moral reasoning. For Kohlberg there are six stages of moral development (although Kohlberg suggests that only those trained in philosophy are able to attain this final stage and later work only includes five stages), with individuals moving from one stage to the next.

The first stage two stages constitute pre-conventional level of moral reasoning and are marked by a heavy focus on individual egotism. At these stages moral reasoning, a young child makes moral decisions based upon their individual needs and wants such as avoiding punishment (the first stage) and ensuring their own individual happiness (the second stage). Kohlberg likens this stage to a 'marketplace' which is not concerned with grander notions of justice, but of 'you scratch my back and I'll scratch yours' morality (Kohlberg & Hersch, 1977, p.55). At conventional level (the third and fourth stage) moral reasoning focuses less on the self and rather on the approval of friends and family (the third stage) and the law (the fourth stage) in which 'morality extends beyond friends and family to the people of the individual's nation and culture' (Mathes, 2019, p.2). Finally, the post-conventional level (the fifth and sixth level), involves an abstraction of thought, the fifth stage involves moral decisions made from a utilitarian outlook which can sometimes conflict with societal laws and norms, and stage six is focused on universal ethical principles, these principles include 'justice', as Kohlberg writes: 'they are not concrete moral rules like the Ten Commandments. At heart, these are universal principles of justice, of the reciprocity and equality of human rights, and of respect for the dignity of human beings as individual persons' (Kohlberg & Hersch, 1977, p.55).

In response to Erricker and Erricker, it is true that Kohlberg's uses a Cognitive-Developmental approach to moral develop and this approach assumes that the self is as 'a single concept of self' (Kohlberg, 1984, p. 9). It is also correct that Kohlberg is not a postmodern relativist like Erricker and Erricker, understanding moral relativity as an 'error' (Kohlberg, 1981, p.105). Although, Kohlberg is aware that the self changes and is not detached but dependent on the world around us. As Kohlberg writes, 'developmental changes in the social self reflect parallel changes in conceptions of the social world' (Kohlberg, 1984, p.9) and Kohlberg adopts Rawlsian 'reflective equilibrium' in which our moral views evolve around a central principle of justice (Kohlberg, 1981). Also, Kohlberg gives the

example of dreams which young children equate with reality, but cultural and parental influence allows for children to understand dreams as not real (Kohlberg, 1984, p.21).

Furthermore, while Kohlberg understands the self to exist, his approach is far from selfish; in fact, Kohlberg understands egotism to represent lower level moral reasoning. Indeed, movement from pre-conventional to post-conventional levels of moral reasoning reflects a movement from the vantage point of a 'concrete individual perspective' to 'member-of-society'. Kohlberg uses the example of Joe to illustrate his view, Joe is operating at stage 4 moral reasoning in which is view that 'keeping the law' is preferable due to it being 'good of society as a whole' (Kohlberg, 1984, p.177). Even post-conventional levels of moral reasoning, although abstract and 'cognitively complex' in their moral thinking is rooted in notions of justice, which are for Kohlberg involves 'role taking' as learn to 'take the view of others conceived as subject' (Kohlberg, 1981, p.141). Finally, in stage 6 moral reasoning the focus shifts to abstract moral principles, but these principles are still grounded in 'respect for the dignity of persons' (Kohlberg & Hersch, 1977, p.55).

Despite its criticisms, Kohlberg's theory of moral reasoning has been validated by neo-Kohlbergian thinkers who have developed and expounded upon Kohlberg's thought (van den Enden, Boom, Brugman, & Thoma, 2019). Ultimately, my reason for using a Kohlbergian approach is because, as a RE teacher, Kohlberg offers a practical model for me to qualitatively assess the moral reasoning of pupils through analysis of their written answers in response to ethical dilemmas.

Further, I think Kohlberg moral reasoning is not incongruous with non-confessional RE (non-confessional RE being Religious Education that is undertaken in a non-denominational faith context. Confessional RE being RE that takes place within a faith context, for example in a Catholic school). Yet Kohlberg can be understood as sceptical of religion in moral reasoning, viewing complete adherence to religious moral standards such as the 10 Commandments as limiting the individual to a conventional moral reasoning. In addition to not regarding religious people as more capable of greater moral reasoning than the non-religious (Kohlberg, 1981). Moreover, not only does Kohlbergian justice does not require religion, in fact, Kohlberg advocates 'moral education in the public schools that centred on principles of justice, independent of religion' (Kohlberg & Power, 1981, p.311).

However, it is important to note the Kohlberg does not see religious believers as unable to attain post-conventional moral reasoning (albeit religious belief does not make you more likely to attain post-conventional moral stages). While Kohlberg dismisses divine command theory (simply put, divine

commandment theory is the view that an action is good if it corresponds to the will of God) as it is opposed to Kohlberg's view that 'principles of justice must be forged in questioning' (Kohlberg & Power, 1981, p.314). Kohlberg does not reject natural law because it is based on universal principles. Further, he understands Socrates and the Christian civil rights activist, Martin Luther King as 'exemplars of education for justice' (Kohlberg & Power, 1981, p.318).

Regarding moral education in school, while Kohlberg suggests that moral education should be independent of religion, he is responding to a different context than the English non-confessional RE classroom. Kohlberg's most famous discussion of moral education in schools, is his essay, 'moral education and the public schools: A developmental view', in which Kohlberg writes in response to attorney general William Ball's advocacy of state funding of religious schools (Kohlberg, 1981). The context is akin to confessional RE in voluntary-aided school, not moral education in a non-confessional RE classroom.

Further, Kohlberg offers a progressive view of moral reasoning in which moral reasoning measurable, and it has similarities to recent Ofsted publications regarding curriculum design which emphasise the development of knowledge and skills as pupils moved through the key stages (Ofsted, 2018, 2019a, 2019b). Likewise, pupils' moral reasoning could also develop within this curriculum framework through the key stages moving from the pre-conventional to the conventional and the post conventional as pupils continue through the RE curriculum.

Moreover, Kohlberg's moral reasoning does not attempt to give children a set of moral virtues, and therefore differs from character-based approaches to moral development which derive from Aristotelian virtue ethics (Felderhof & Thompson, 2014) rather than the Kantian foundations of Kohlberg. Instead, Kohlberg is less concerned with what pupils think but the reasoning behind their moral decision making. Therefore, Kohlberg's approach to moral reasoning avoids indoctrinating children with an arbitrary set of moral principles (Kohlberg, 1981) nor does it conflict with the religious identification of the child. Both of these factors are important factors to consider within the context of non-confessional RE.

Finally, at most importantly, there are parallels between Kohlbergian moral reasoning and collaborative learning. This is because Kohlberg advocated the teaching of moral reasoning as involving collaborative dialogue. As Kohlberg writes that moral development is aided by parents and teachers exposing, supporting and clarifying, as they expose children to arguments and moral

dilemmas for which they might disagree ‘with their peers’ (Kohlberg, 1981, pp. 47–48). Kohlberg supported his view through his study of a junior high school in which 50% of pupils moved up one stage of moral reasoning and 10% up two stages through collaborative discussion (Blatt & Kohlberg, 1975).

This literature review has highlighted two important points: the first is that collaborative learning can be beneficial for both pupils’ educational attainment and social development, although further research needs to be conducted into collaborative learning in the RE classroom. Second, the moral reasoning of children can be explored through using Kohlberg’s six stages of moral development within the RE classroom because if collaborative learning is successful, then pupils will discuss together and be exposed to other points of view, allowing for pupils’ moral reasoning to move beyond egotism and possibly to conventional and post-conventional levels.

Research design

Following the literature review, two research questions have arisen. These questions have formed the basis of my research design, scheme of work and findings. First, is ‘how can structured collaborative learning help pupils consolidate knowledge within a knowledge-rich curriculum?’. This first question might not seem essential considering the title of my longer-school based research project, but moral reasoning within a knowledge-rich curriculum is not very useful if pupils are not consolidating knowledge. The second research question is ‘how can structured collaborative learning, within a knowledge-rich curriculum, help pupils develop their moral reasoning skills?’.

I explored both research questions through a case study of a year 8 class, I focused my analysis of collaborative learning, knowledge consolidation and moral development on three groups. My research takes the form of a case study because it attempts ‘to...interpret the uniqueness of real individuals and situations’ (Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2007, p.85), through exploring a key method of teaching (collaborative learning) within the classroom. Although my research differs from the typical case study because my lessons, were knowledge rich, but were structured unorthodoxly with lessons split into ‘content’ (knowledge rich) and ‘ethics’ (collaborative) lessons.

I focused on the teaching of Christianity (and the topic of moral decision making in Christianity in particular), not only because Christianity is an essential part of local RE syllabuses (Religious Education Council, 2013; UK Government, 1988), but because there has been a wealth of recent

scholarship criticising how Christianity is taught in schools. Most notably, Wright's critical realist approach to Christianity responds to a Smartian phenomenology which, for Wright, reduces Christianity to an uncritical, reductive set of categories (Wright, 1993). Similarly, Copley argues that Christianity is taught without focusing on addressing the key theological notions behind Christian texts (Copley, 2005). My decision to teach Christianity systematically is due to teaching in a 'knowledge rich' fashion, and thus wanting pupils to develop an understanding of the rich diversity of Christian ethics rather than a broad brush, thematic approach which can be reductive and confusing for pupils (Barnes, 2009). Finally, the focus on teaching year 8 is because there tends to be a dip in academic performance in year 8, in part, due to classwork not being considered interesting or engaging enough (O'Grady, 2003).

My research explores pupils collaborative learning and moral reasoning within a knowledge-rich curriculum. The lessons taught were split into 'content' lessons which involves teacher led, knowledge-rich 'content' lessons about moral decision making in Christianity, followed by 'ethics' lessons which involved pupils collaboratively exploring an ethical dilemma. This decision to split my lessons into two distinctive types of lesson was influenced by my observation of history lessons as my first professional placement in which lessons were split into reading focused lessons in which pupils learnt knowledge, and writing lessons in which pupils consolidated previously learnt knowledge.

For the purposes of this research, I have triangulated my data by using a range of research methods which I will analyse in my findings.

1. My observation of the collaborative learning of the three groups (nine pupils in total). My own observations were unstructured and allowed me to see not just how pupils were engaging with collaborative learning tasks. For example, if pupils were more engaged when discussing Christianity or discussing the ethical dilemma. Also, my own observations, as they were unstructured, were more practical than a structured observation, thus enabling me to both teach the lesson and observe.
2. My mentor observed how these groups performed collaborative tasks. Unlike my observations, my mentor was given a proforma with my mentor completing the proforma as my mentor observed the groups. The structured observation gave my mentor a focus for observation.

3. Qualitative analysis of consolidation of knowledge and moral reasoning through examination of pupils' collaborative work.

4. Analysis of pupils' individually produced answers to both see if pupils had consolidated previous learning and to qualitatively analyse to the moral reasoning of pupil answers. This entailed inferring the level of moral reasoning by comparing responses with selected Kohlberg's writings on moral reasoning (Kohlberg & Hersch, 1977; Kohlberg, 1981, 1984), and due to the topic, Kohlberg's analysis of capital punishment (Kohlberg & Elfenbein, 1975, 1981).

Finally, my research worked within British Education Research Association (BERA) ethical guidelines. I completed the University of Cambridge Faculty of Education Ethics Form with my subject lecturer and school mentor acting as gatekeepers. In line with BERA guidelines I have ensured that all pupils, teachers and my school are anonymous, considered the welfare of pupils before approaching participants and made conscious efforts to inform pupils of the nature of the study prior to their participation (BERA, 2018).

Outline of the sequence of lessons

I planned a sequence of six lessons on the topic of 'how do Christians make moral decisions?'. The aim of these lessons was not to represent a radical departure from a 'normal' scheme of work, and therefore show progression of knowledge and skills as required by Ofsted (Spielman, 2018). Due to COVID-19 and the subsequent closure of schools, I was only able to teach three out of the six lessons. However, to understand the orientation of my scheme of work, I will outline the sequence of all six lessons.

The first lesson was an introduction to the topic. I gave pupils both an outline of the new topic and a keywords sheet (as normal for my second professional placement school when introducing a new topic). The lesson itself focused on pupils exploring the reasons why they hold particular ethical views e.g. due to experiences, authority, law, parents, friends, social media. This incorporates Kohlberg's focus, not on what pupils would do but their rationale for acting morally (Kohlberg, 1981). Finally, pupils considered what they thought made effective collaborative learning, in line with Gillies and Johnson and Johnson's view that effective collaborative learning requires pupils to know what is required of them when working collaboratively (Gillies, 2016).

In the second lesson (the first ‘content’ lesson), pupils learnt about what the Hebrew Bible is and why it is important for Christians. The aim of this lesson was to focus heavily on scripture, the Ten Commandments, with pupils engaging with the primary text, as this is often lacking in the study of Christianity within Religious Education (Copley, 2005). Pupils explored the content of the Ten Commandments and why Moses is important for Christians. To end, pupils will learn about how Christians today use the Old Testament to make moral decisions. Ultimately, the aim of this lesson is for pupils to have the knowledge they need to then work collaboratively in the next lesson, in which they will apply what they have learnt to an ethical dilemma.

The third lesson is the first ‘ethics’ lesson, in which pupils, in mixed ability groups, explored the ethical dilemma and considered how Christians might use the Ten Commandments in a given situation. The lesson began with a recap of what was learnt in the previous lesson incorporating a selection of the techniques for knowledge retention outlined by both Sherrington and Kavanaugh. Following this, pupils explored the issue of the death penalty - the arguments for and against. Then pupils looked in groups looked at an ethical dilemma based upon Kohlberg’s famous Heinz dilemma:

Imagine you are the Prime Minister who is seeking re-election and only you have the power to bring the death penalty back. The UK abolished the death penalty in 1969, but a woman has murdered a group of people because they stole from her. The woman’s crime is considered to be so evil that 70% of your voters want the death penalty to be brought back so that the woman can be executed rather than spend the rest of her life in prison. Also, your closest friends, family and members of parliament believe that the death penalty should be reinstated.

The tasks that followed incorporated the Gillies’ five elements of structured collaborative learning. In their preassigned groups of three, pupils were each given a letter, a, b or c which corresponded to their designated role for each group activity. Pupils then completed several short, timed, activities, and worked collaboratively to complete an A3 worksheet with the minimum work expectation set that all groups will complete all the activities. The timings of each activity were short so that pupils must work together to complete all the activities set. First, pupil a in the group read through the ethical dilemma while pupil b highlights the key terms and pupil c bullet points what the dilemma is about. Second, pupil considered what a Christian might do in the given situation, pupil b considered what they will do, and pupil c wrote what a and b have said on the A3 sheet. Third, pupils discussed the dilemma and as a group, decided what they would do. Fourth, pupils were given some extra arguments for and against capital punishment and each member of the group will consider if this extra

information impacts upon their view. Following this, pupils will individually write two paragraphs in their books explaining what they would do in the ethical scenario and what a Christian might do and why. Finally, as a plenary, pupils considered how well they had worked collaboratively and what they could have done better to improve.

The following lessons in the scheme of work were supposed to be structured similarly to the second and third but had to be abandoned due to Covid-19 and the disruption to school. These lessons were focused on how some Christians might use Jesus' teaching to make moral decisions, with pupil applying their knowledge to the ethical dilemma of homelessness.

Findings and analysis

How can structured collaborative learning help pupils consolidate knowledge within a knowledge-rich curriculum?

For this research question, I analysed both pupils' collaborative group work and pupils' individual group answers. Table 1 shows the groups that were the focus of my findings. The attainment pathway was used by my PP2 school use to stream pupils based upon internal assessment and Key Stage 2 data as well as recent academic performance.

Group	Pupil	Attainment pathway
1	A	Developing
	B	Secure
	C	Developing (SEND)
2	D	Exceptional
	E	Secure (SEND)
	F	Advanced
3	G	Exceptional
	H	Exceptional
	I	Secure

Table 1: Attainment pathways of pupils in groups 1,2,3

My observations of pupils' collaborative learning

My observations focused not just on how well pupils were working collaboratively, but if pupils tended to work more collaboratively when consolidating knowledge of Christian moral decision making or if they worked more when discussing how they would respond to the ethical dilemma. Naturally, ascertaining what is meant by 'working collaboratively' is not easy. Pupils talking or discussing might appear to demonstrate working collaboratively, however, it could simply show one or two pupils' domineering presence.

For the purpose of my research, I understood 'working collaboratively' as the combination of three key elements. 1) All pupils being involved in the discussion of the tasks, with all members of the group allowed to voice their opinion. 2) Collaborative working also involves pupils in a group vocally responding and building upon each other's points. 3) Each pupil carrying out the task they have been assigned to do.

Overall, my observation showed that group 1 and 2 did not work collaboratively on either the knowledge consolidation or ethical dilemma task, although group 2 did complete the tasks set they worked almost completely in silence, completing the tasks without discussion. However, group 3 worked collaboratively with group 3 pupils discussing their responses as I had planned. However, more effective collaboration was observed when pupils discussed the ethical dilemma and not the task related to how Christians' make moral decisions. In regard to the later, one pupil tended to make a claim and the others to agree with the former discussion, all pupils in group 3 voiced different opinions and engaged in a detailed discussion.

Both Group 1 and group 2 failed to work collaboratively, thus supporting Gillies' view that collaboratively learning must be taught and practiced and pupils must want to work collaboratively (Gillies, 2016). However, both groups did not work collaboratively for different reasons. Gillies can account for group 1's actions, group 1 did not work collaboratively for the entire lesson as because they were unhappy with the group and the roles they had been assigned, and as a result, no member of the group took ownership for the writing task. Gillies would suggest that group 1 are not motivated to work collaboratively (Gillies, 2016). In contrast, while group 2 were also not motivated to work collaboratively and but did complete the tasks in the roles assigned but were non-communicative during both the knowledge consolidation and ethical dilemma tasks. This suggests a limitation to

Gillies' view as she does not account for a situation of almost semi-collaboration that shows partial motivation to complete work as instructed.

In contrast, group 3 did work collaboratively. While pupil H (the highest attaining pupils) did intimately dominate the discussion of what a Christian might do in the scenario, pupil I and J did also collaborate, but to affirm pupil H's position rather than to develop upon or counter it. However, greater collaboration and building on ideas was shown by group 3 when the collaborative tasks focused not on Christianity but on pupils developing their own view on capital punishment in response to the ethical dilemma. The increased collaboration shown by group 3 could support Cohen's view that pupils collaborate more when given open ended questions.

Pupils' collaborative written work: Christian moral decision making

The aim of the written collaborative tasks was to consolidate previous learning about Christian moral decision through applying knowledge to a new context, capital punishment (Sherrington, 2018; McKavanagh, 2019). Through analysis of each group's written work, I suggest that groups which worked collaboratively seemed to recall and consolidate more knowledge. In turn, supporting the claims made by Gillies.

Group 1, due to a lack of collaboration, did not produce any collaborative written work at all and it was unclear if they had consolidated any previously learnt knowledge. Group 2, pupil D wrote, without the support of the rest of the group, that 'they [Christians] would not bring it [capital punishment] back because they are told not to kill'. This pupil clearly identified that some Christians might be opposed to capital punishment because some Christian sources of authority condone murder but did not reference any sources of authority or the 10 Commandments. In group 3, pupil I wrote the response to question 2a, group 3 wrote that 'they [Christians] would forgive them [those who commit murder] because killing someone is against the 10 Commandments so even though she killed we still shouldn't kill her'. This answer shows greater knowledge consolidation than the previous group, it is more detailed and references the 10 Commandments.

Pupils' individually produced written responses

Like the group written tasks, analysis of each pupils' individual response to what a Christian would do in response to the ethical dilemma suggest that pupils who had worked more collaboratively in the

group activities had a better consolidation of subject content. Thus, supporting research by Gillies and Johnson & Johnson. However, the fact that only one group worked collaboratively as instructed points to a limitation of using collaborative learning to consolidate knowledge.

Pupils in group 1 produced answers which showed little engagement with either the ethical dilemma or previous learning. Notably, Pupil A wrote how Christians would help by putting the woman in ‘a psycho place’. Pupil B showed some understanding that Christians ‘can’t hurt people’, and therefore would not reinstate capital punishment. However, pupil B’s answer does not mention why Christians ‘can’t hurt people’, there is no reference to the Ten Commandments, instead, Christians would give ‘them a bad punishment’. Overall, pupil B’s response suggests a limited consolidation of subject content regarding Christian moral decision making.

Pupil C’s view of how a Christian would respond to the moral dilemma differed from pupil A and B. Pupil C wrote that ‘they [Christians] think they should bring back the death penalty and kill people that committed a murder’. Pupil C does not explain why a Christian might have that view and does not reference previous learning regarding moral decision making in Christianity.

The second group produced highly individualised responses, most likely due to their limited communication during collaborative tasks. These responses showed a range of consolidation of previous learning. For example, pupil D, that a Christian would be opposed to the death penalty because it would be ‘sinning God’ to kill someone. The notion that, for Christians, it is sinful to kill is not wrong, but pupil D does not show that they have consolidated knowledge of the Ten Commandments.

In contrast to pupil D and the pupils in group 1, pupils E and F both wrote answers which showed further consolidation of knowledge through reference to the Ten Commandments. Pupil E wrote a rounded Christian response to capital punishment, writing that a Christian would be opposed to capital punishment if they were following the Ten commandments because ‘they [Christians] can’t harm others’ likewise, pupil F wrote that a Christian would not reinstate the death penalty ‘because it goes against the Ten commandments’, pupil F then goes on to quote the Ten Commandments. As with pupil D, pupil F does not explain why the Ten Commandments might be important for Christians.

Group 3's responses suggested greater knowledge consolidation than pupils' in the other groups. All three pupils made clear reference to the Ten Commandments as reasons why some Christians might oppose capital punishment. Although all three pupils failed to consider why the Ten Commandments might be important for some Christians.

How can structured collaborative learning, within a knowledge-rich curriculum, help pupils develop their moral reasoning skills?

Mentor observation of collaborative learning

My mentor's observations confirmed both my own observations (but in a more systematic fashion), and Gillies claims regarding collaborative learning. My mentor observed how group 1 were never on task, and in fact one pupil who was in another group joined the group, and they 'focused on other things'. Contrastingly, group 2 engaged in very little verbal collaborative working, but did share the written tasks as instructed. Lastly, group 3, originally one pupil was doing the work, this was when the collaborative task was related to Christianity and the Ten commandments, but when the tasks were related more so to ethics, the other pupils began to get involved and begin to work collaboratively. In the end, unlike group 2 in which pupils were only building on each other's ideas 'in written work', group 3 did so 'both verbally and in their written work'.

Collaborative written work: pupils' own responses to the ethical dilemma

Group 1 did not write anything. Group 2, however, independently completed activities rather than working as a group. The result was that they were unable to complete some of the tasks due to timing, although group 2 were able write what they would do collectively, as a group, they would 'bring it [capital punishment] back because it will mean this lady is no longer a problem and encourage other people not to do crimes'. However, due to the lack of verbal communication, it is unlikely that this 'group' decision reflected a collaborative decision. Group 3's answer was interesting as it deviated from the ethical dilemma (despite being told that answers had to be strictly related to the ethical dilemma itself), pupils wrote how they would 'take her to America and get her charged for her crime there which would end up in a death penalty and if we did this then we wouldn't have to bring the death penalty back'. However, this answer did show evidence of some collaboration to produce a response.

Pupils' own individual responses to the ethical dilemma

Kohlberg suggests that collaborative talk can enable pupils to reach higher levels of moral reasoning. However, an analysis of individual pupil responses to the ethical dilemma suggests that, in my example, collaborative learning has little impact on helping pupils develop moral reasoning skills.

All answers from group 1 showed pre-conventional moral reasoning because they all as did not engage and deviated from the ethical dilemma despite being told explicitly not to. All three answers showed pre-conventional moral reasoning. Pupil A wrote that they 'let the lady suffer in pain because she deserves it as she killed a group of people' and similarly, pupil C wrote that capital punishment is right because 'loads of people murder' and they just [get] prison for life'. Both answers show clear stage 1 reasoning as their rationale for the woman's pain is 'proportional to the badness of the act' (Kohlberg & Elfenbein, 1981, p.257). Pupil B argued that the woman should not be executed but rather enslaved because 'taking someone's life is bad' and that capital punishment does not serve a function as 'they won't learn from their mistakes', but pupil B does not consider why it is important for the women to learn from her mistakes and therefore is limited to pre-conventional moral reasoning (Kohlberg & Elfenbein, 1981, p.260).

In group 2, pupil D showed pre-conventional moral reasoning while pupils E and F's answers suggested movement towards conventional moral reasoning. Pupil D frames capital punishment in terms of determinant, that the woman should be executed because 'bad people would feel intimidated by it'. Pupil D's moral reasoning was understood 'in terms of preventing repetition of the crime by the criminal', however, the answer is still framed from viewpoint of the individual and does not consider the motive of the woman (Kohlberg & Elfenbein, 1981).

Contrastingly, Pupil F and pupil E's answers suggested a movement towards conventional stages of moral reasoning. Pupil F wrote that it is wrong to reinstate the death penalty because, 'it is better for her to sit in her cell and regret what she did rather than have no remorse and be killed'. Pupil F is starting to consider what might be best for the woman and a society which values criminals thinking about the motive behind her actions and how she consequently might be feeling, as shown through pupil F's assumption that the woman does not feel remorse but might do if she is spared death, and given time to consider her actions. Similarly, pupil E's conventional response which suggests they were unable to decide if the women should be executed because 'I don't have all the information I need'. While pupil E is unclear regarding what more information, they would require to make an

informed decision, there is an awareness of the complexity of the situation and that motive, or greater context is needed. Pupil E shows, as Kohlberg writes, ‘death is deserved depends on the motives of the criminal’ (Kohlberg & Elfenbein, 1981, p.261).

Finally, in group 3 pupil answers showed conventional and pre-conventional levels of moral reasoning. Pupil G’s argument that ‘I would not reinstate the death penalty’ and instead ‘I would give her a life sentence in prison and help her learn not to kill – teach [the] 10 Commandments’, demonstrates clear stage 3 moral reasoning with pupil G living up to societal expectations of rehabilitation (Kohlberg, 1984) and reliance on the Ten Commandments as a moral guide.

Contrastingly, Pupil H and I’s written responses show pre-conventional moral reasoning. Pupil H wrote that the solution would be to send the woman to the United States rather than in England because ‘no one in their right mind would kill other people’. Pupil H’s response is egocentric, with an inability to understand how anyone could kill another individual (Kohlberg & Hersch, 1977). Similarly, pupil I’s wrote that they would reinstate the death penalty ‘because people aren’t afraid of prison anymore and when we let them out of prison they commit another crime’, pupil I assumes that the woman would be more afraid of death than prison which is not a strong enough deterrent, with the deterrent of capital punishment necessary to prevent further crimes. This answer shows clear stage 2 moral reasoning. As Kohlberg writes, ‘deterrence and rehabilitation are conceived in terms of preventing repetition of the crime...’ (Kohlberg & Elfenbein, 1981, p.260).

Discussion

Overall, following the analysis of the results in the previous section, structured collaborative learning could be seen to help some pupils consolidate previously taught knowledge. Group 3 whom my mentor and I observed working collaboratively most effectively showed greater consolidation of knowledge than group 2 and group 1. Group 1’s lack of collaboration might be due to the group having no high attaining pupils and thus no one to take ownership and delegate tasks, as Cohen suggests (Cohen, 1994) or the collaborative task was cognitively overloading for these pupils, and therefore my findings may support Kirschner’s view that collaborative learning might not an effective for the lowest attaining pupils (Kirschner et al., 2018).

In contrast, group 3 contained a greater number of highest attaining ‘exceptional’ pupils, this might point to why these pupils worked collaboratively because the key information was in the long term

memory and therefore pupils could apply it to the task (Sherrington, 2018). The fact that one of the pupils in group 3 only had a ‘secure’ attainment level, but consolidated the same amount of knowledge as both exceptional pupils, suggests that collaborative learning might have been beneficial for this pupil because they were supported by the higher attaining pupils. This contrasts with Lou et al’s view that middle attaining pupils’ benefit from same ability groups (Lou et al., 1996). However, future research might benefit from semi-structured interviews with pupils to find out if pupils themselves found collaborative learning useful in their consolidation of knowledge.

However, pupils in group 2 and 3 both showed similar levels of moral reasoning, generally higher than group 1, but this does not suggest that pupils who worked collaborative necessarily showed greater moral reasoning. Instead, it suggests that groups who explored the ethical dilemma and completed the tasks, whether collaboratively or not, generally demonstrated higher moral reasoning skills. Of course, there is only one set of data and more examples could render more concrete conclusions regarding the relationship between collaborative learning and moral reasoning.

Nevertheless, my research has impacted on my professional practice as it has allowed me to consider how both knowledge and moral reasoning can be attained within the classroom. On reflection, it would have been of benefit to be able to collect at least two sets of data to see if pupils’ collaborative learning and moral reasoning skills had developed through practice. If that had been the case, I might have been able to reach more definitive conclusions – this could be achieved through further research.

Although, on reflection, it is important to consider the limitations of my approach and my teaching. Possibly by focusing on the Ten Commandments, it is no surprise that pupils’ moral reasoning, was at best, limited to convention responses. Indeed, Kohlberg himself saw the Ten Commandments as legal values which limit individuals to conventional reasoning. In turn, my focus on the Ten Commandments, although accessible for many pupils, reduced Christian ethics to merely divine commandment theory, and ignored the nuance of Christian ethical thought. Thus, rather than my lessons representing an acknowledgement of Wright’s critical realism or Copley’s focus on theology, I arguably stripped Christian ethics of both its nuance and its rich history.

Also, on reflection, if effective collaborative learning must incorporate the five elements stated by Gillies then this results in practical difficulties. The collaborative tasks took hours to plan and coming up with designated roles which were imperative for the success of the group, coupled with individual accountability was challenging. From my limited experience, successful collaborative learning using

Gillies' approach would take a considerable amount of practice, knowledge of a class and Continuing Professional Development (CPD). It would be tempting to suggest that this is highly impractical and unrealistic for most classroom teachers.

It is not only just practical, but also political difficulties when it comes to collaborative learning in the classroom. Despite showing that collaborative learning might help some pupils consolidate previously taught knowledge, I am sceptical of the extent to which collaborative learning and moral reasoning would be likely to occur within a knowledge-rich classroom. Not because it is ineffective, but because collaborative learning is opposed by knowledge-rich advocates who instead prefer 'traditional', teacher led learning and direct instruction. Christodoulou and others see collaborative learning as symptomatic of a 'progressive' approach to education which ultimately does not give pupils the knowledge they need (Christodoulou, 2014).

Finally, I end by considering some of the possible implications for future research. Future research would benefit from greater time with a class (and/or classes) teaching them how to work collaboratively. Furthermore, it would be fascinating to see research linking moral reasoning and another largely undeveloped area of RE research, self-assessment. For example, Pupils themselves could assess their own moral reasoning by using Kohlberg's stages as a reference. Likewise, it would be fascinating to see the relationship between collaborative learning and moral reasoning in other contexts such as confessional faith schools, and/or pupils from different ethnic groups and socio-economic backgrounds. My research was sadly cut short due to the COVID-19 pandemic and the subsequent closure of schools. The closure of schools and the increasing necessity of online learning means it would be interesting to see how collaborative learning and moral learning might work in the online context.

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