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ABSTRACT

This paper is about the use of literary work for character education. It focuses on the following question:

How can *Laxdaela Saga* be used as a vehicle of character education for teenagers?

The answer is partially based on a review of literature from a neo-Aristotelian framework and Kantian conception of morality and partially on qualitative and quantitative data collected in three schools where *Laxdaela Saga* was taught for six weeks. The participating teachers found that an emphasis on moral issues was not a digression but supported them in teaching the story and helped the students understand it.

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Icelandic Sagas; teaching literature; character education; moral vocabulary; moral virtues

1. Introduction

This paper describes an intervention research which was carried out in ninth and tenth grade classes (14–15 years old students) in three elementary schools in Iceland in the fall of 2017 focusing on teaching morality through the reading and discussion of classical literature. The research intersects literature teaching and moral education as fields of practice and research. In this paper the focus is more on the moral education part of the project.

Reasons having to do both with socio-political conditions and educational policy in Iceland led to the decision to carry out this project. In 2008 Iceland suffered an economic crash so dramatic that Paul Krugman, a Nobel prize winner in economics, described it as "one of the great economic disaster stories of all time" (Krugman, 2010). In less than a week, almost the entire banking system had collapsed. When people began to recover after the initial shock, and evidence of widespread corruption, criminal behaviour, and incompetence among bankers, public officials, and politicians began to surface, claims of deteriorating morality became ever louder; the collapse of the financial system was not seen as the core problem but a symptom of deeper social and moral issues (Bernburg, 2016; Jónsson, 2018). A Special Investigating Commission, formed by the Icelandic Parliament, saw a deep-seated lack of ethical structures in Icelandic society as significantly contributing to the crisis.

Among the lessons that the Parliament drew from this report was that ethics and critical thinking had to become an integral part of the school curricula from primary education up through university. Various initiatives followed, such as a programme focusing on strengthening teaching in ethics and critical thinking in schools (Haraldsdóttir, 2011). Concrete actions were also taken in individual school districts (Haraldsdóttir, 2015) or in individual schools, but those were often dependent on enthusiastic individuals who had little external support or resources.

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The Ministry of Education, Science and Culture initiated a thorough revision of the national curricula for preschools (2–6 years), compulsory schools (6–16 years) and upper secondary schools (16–19 years) with a strong emphasis on moral and political values. The new curricula, published in 2011, defined six fundamental pillars of education: (1) Democracy and human rights; (2) Equality; (3) Literacy; (4) Creativity; (5) Sustainable development; and (6) Health and welfare. These pillars explicitly supported moral education (Hannesdóttir, 2013; Jónsson, 2018; Ministry of Education, Science and Culture, 2015).

Picking up the initiative from the new curricula, Atli Harðarson and Ólafur Páll Jónsson at the School of Education, University of Iceland, planned a research project where they would, in cooperation with class teachers in lower secondary schools (grades 8–10), develop means for moral education within literary education. A post-doc, Róbert Jack, and a Ph.D. student, Þóra Björg Sigurðardóttir, became part of a research team with a specialist in methodology from the Research Institute at the School of Education, Sigrún Sif Jóelsdóttir, joining the team to carry out quantitative data analyses.

The empirical part of the research was carried out in close cooperation with five classroom teachers in three compulsory schools who, with their students in ninth and tenth grades, read a shortened version of *Laxdaela Saga* over the period of six weeks, using supplementary material developed by the research team. The specific question which the research aims at answering is the following:

(1) How can *Laxdaela Saga* be used as a vehicle of character education for teenagers?

After describing the research project (section2), we go through our philosophical understanding of character education and some of the methodological considerations on which the project rests (Section 3); we then discuss the data which we collected and how it reflects on the research question (Section 4) and draw out what we consider the most important results (Section 5). Finally, we compare some of our results to those of a similar research conducted in England and offer some thoughts on its limitations but also on its less tangible but possible benefits (Section 6).

2. The research project

Our project was modelled on previous work at the Jubilee Centre for Character and Virtues at the University of Birmingham in England, not least the Knightly Virtues[1] project (Arthur, Harrison, Carr, Kristjánsson, & Davison, 2014; Carr & Harrison, 2015). There, material for teaching classical literature to pupils aged 9–11 was written with an aim of using literature to develop moral vocabulary and moral sensibility, while, at the same time, using class discussion about the morality of the main characters of the stories to deepen students' understanding of the stories themselves. Apart from differences of locations, our project differed from the Knightly Virtues project in two important aspects: First, our students were older, 14–15 years; second, we worked with a text that was much longer and more complicated than the adaptations used in the Knightly Virtues projects. Despite these differences, we benefitted substantially from the Knightly Virtue project.

In the spring of 2016, we advertised for schools to participate in the project and ended up collaborating with two urban schools and one small rural school. In collaboration with the teachers of Icelandic in these schools, we decided to work with a simplified version of *Laxdaela Saga*. (Karlsson, 2017, available at: https://vefir.mms.is/flettibaekur/namsefni/LAXDAELAsaga/. English version of the original: http://sagadb.org/laxdaela_saga.en). In that version, some of the original language has been simplified and the length of the text is around one-third of the original, which is over 200 pages.

The sagas form a group of stories – around 40 in all – most of which take place around and shortly after the settlement of Iceland in the ninth century but were first written down in the thirteenth

[1]See https://www.jubileecentre.ac.uk/1576/projects/previous-work/knightly-virtues.

century. Most of the stories are rather short (between 50 and 100 pages) and treat only of a few characters. Several are, however, significantly longer (over 200 pages) and are considered among the masterpieces of Icelandic literature, for example, the *Saga of Egill*, the *Saga of Njáll*, the *Saga of Grettir*, and *Laxdaela Saga*. Even if more than 700 years old, the sagas may be read without special training by modern Icelanders, although contemporary spelling makes them more readable and annotations may be needed. In the last grades (eighth to tenth grade) of elementary schools, students usually read one long saga in a simplified version (often *Laxdaela Saga*) and at least one unabridged short saga.

Laxdaela Saga takes place from around 890 until 1130. It tells the story of the first settlers in the district of Dalir in West Iceland and their descendants for several generations. The three protagonists of the saga are Guðrún and two men who loved her: Bolli, who became her third husband, and Kjartan, a close friend, cousin and foster brother of Bolli. As the plot develops, Guðrún drives Bolli to kill Kjartan.

The project was developed in close cooperation with the five participating teachers. We were conscious of not overburdening the teachers with additional work and our intervention did not require any structural change, such as revision of timetables. We originally intended the teachers to contribute more to the writing of the teaching material, but, in the end, it was more or less written by the research team (Jack, 2018) although in a dialogue with the teachers. Through the teaching material and our expressed preference for dialogical methods over direct instruction, we influenced the content of the teaching but without prescribing any particular teaching plan, methods or style. Our teaching material included some exercises and educational tasks, but we insisted that these were mere suggestions and encouraged the teachers to adapt them to their own approach and convenience. We emphasized that we were not coming to the schools as experts in teaching (which we are not) but, simply, as moral philosophers interested in helping the teachers to infuse their teaching with moral content. For these reasons, we did not bring any kind of handbook or predesigned teaching manual to the table. Rather, we wanted to support the teachers in their ordinary work (in this case reading a saga with the students) by helping them to adopt a different emphasis from what they were used to.

The students, 54 boys and 52 girls in the ninth and tenth grades, were tested before and after the class work on *Laxdaela Saga*, measuring whether their comprehension of moral vocabulary had increased and whether they were more competent in applying moral terms to situation of moral significance, both in their own lives and in fictional contexts. The same tests were administered to a control group, comprised of 27 boys and 34 girls, in a fourth school in the same town as the two urban schools. In addition to the quantitative data from the tests, we collected three kinds of qualitative data: (1) we visited classes and wrote field reports, (2) we took two individual interviews with each of the five teachers involved, and (3) we conducted four interviews with focus groups of six to seven students.

The teachers, whose careers varied from 2 to 30 years and whose teaching styles were very different, were all positive about the moral approach to the saga and found the supporting material helpful. In their view, using moral vocabulary to dig into the story was not a digression nor took it attention away from the story itself. Quite to the contrary, they all said that this approach supported them in teaching the story and helped the students connect to it and understand what it was about.

3. Moral development and moral vocabulary

The research project was based on theories in ethics and moral development drawn from neo-Aristotelianism or virtue ethics. Virtue ethics differs from utilitarianism or Kantian ethics in focusing on character, i.e., how one should be, rather than on actions, rules, or moral laws, i.e., what one ought to do. Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics* continues to be a source of inspiration within this field of research, although recent knowledge from psychology and other fields has also had a great impact (Kristjánsson, 2012, 2015). Aristotle discussed virtues which were held in high esteem in his time such as courage, moderation, justice and wisdom, but contemporary virtue theorists have also

focused on virtues which Aristotle did not discuss, such as benevolence and care, (Hursthouse, 1999) and virtues that concern specifically the human-nature relationship (Hursthouse, 2007; Jordan & Kristjánsson, 2016).

Virtue ethics began to gain momentum around 1970 but paid little attention to education until the end of the century (Carr & Steutel, 1999). Thus, when the educational policy began to include virtue or character education among the goals of schooling, those were ill-defined and without much foothold in theory (Arthur, 2003a). Among the first extensive treatments of virtue ethics in education were books by Carr (1991) and Steutel (1997), followed by work by, for instance, James Arthur (2003a, 2003b), Karen Bohlin (2005), and Kristján Kristjánsson (2007). In the last decade research on moral education within this tradition has really taken off with contributions from people such as Kristján Kristjánsson (2010, 2013, 2015, 2018), David Carr (2016), Wouter Sanderse (2012), and James Arthur (2003a, 2003b), all working at the Jubilee Centre for Character and Virtues. Hugh Sockett (2012), Karen Bohlin (2014), Nancy Snow (2014; 2014 January), Julia Annas (2014), and Curren and Kotzee (2014) have also made important contributions to the field along with many others.

Although approaches within contemporary virtue ethics differ, most virtue theorists would agree with Kristjánsson (2018) that part of moral virtue is an ability to realize what, in given circumstances, is of moral value. Ideally, it would also involve the ability to describe in one's own words what makes a certain deed good or bad. Sanderse (2012) even claims that the ability to discuss virtues and vices is part of moral development. There has been more controversy among virtue theorists on whether, and how, virtue might be evaluated. Kristjánsson (2015) claims that not all aspects of moral virtue can be measured and Arthur, Harrison, and Davison (2015) claim that while some cognitive aspects of moral virtue can be measured, such measurements do not show whether students have developed all aspects of the virtues.

In a different tone, and perhaps also of a different opinion, Nancy Snow emphasizes the importance of measuring virtue to understand progress better:

> We who struggle to be virtuous – who don't always know how to be kind or generous, who have selfish or foolish tendencies, who act impulsively or without sufficient sensitivity, and whose virtue is imperfect and fragile, need to know how to become virtuous as well as how to sustain and strengthen our virtue. Not "better living through chemistry," but, "more virtuous living through psychology," is what we, the "not very virtuous," need. (Snow, 2014, January, p. 4)

Snow goes on to describe different aspects of virtues and how they can be measured using psychological methods. Noel A. Card (2017) discusses some challenges in measuring character or virtue but, after discussing the fundamental psychometric properties of good measures, describes two different cases: measures of gratitude and humility. We agree with Snow that if we want to become more virtuous, we should hope that there is some way of knowing whether we are progressing; and we also agree with Card that some virtues may be measurable with a reasonable degree of reliability and validity. These theoretical issues are, however, different from the issue of measuring virtue in the context of compulsory education. It is important to gather information about the quality of the teaching and the progress of the students but, still, we believe that daily educational activities in schools should not be turned into psychometric experiments.

In our project, we aimed only at measuring the understanding of moral vocabulary, using instruments that we considered minimally intrusive and least controversial. Other aspects of moral virtue, such as motivation or willingness to act according to virtue, are more difficult to measure in ordinary school settings. There are at least five different kinds of reasons for this:

(1) Moral qualities often express themselves in circumstances that cannot be reproduced within schools. To know whether persons are truly brave, or whether they only claim to be so, one would have to see how they would respond to an imminent threat. And to see whether they show resilience and endurance in the face of hardship, schools would have to make them face circumstances that they are not entitled to deliberately produce.

(2) Some aspects of moral virtue are not readily testable. During a driving test, one can pretend to be careful and considerate but then be anything but that once the license is in hand. However, one cannot pretend to be good at parking a car, without being good at parking. In an ordinary school setting, it may be difficult or even impossible to get around this problem.
(3) The fruits of moral education may not be immediately visible but only show in the long run. Any social phenomena that bears fruit only after a long time falls outside the scope of school evaluation, which often is bound to the time frame of weeks or months. Moreover, such phenomena also fall outside the scope of empirical measurements of cause–effect relations more generally, as it is impossible to control for extraneous factors.
(4) The evaluation of moral qualities concerns very personal and private matters such as attitudes, dispositions, and world-views. Some moral qualities are controversial, and a students may be harmed by a systematic collection of data concerning them. Also, qualities such as independence, self-realization, and criticality – all of which are important for democratic education – may run contrary to a school environment based on respect for order, rules, and law. Furthermore, feminists and others have criticized schools for being too protective of discriminatory traditions (Martin, 2002), and by including morality as a factor of evaluation, tradition and dominant ideology may get an even firmer grip on school life than they already have.
(5) Similar to (4), but with a focus on the teachers rather than the students, we note that by making morality a factor of evaluation, the freedom of the teachers to challenge conventional morality and dominant ideology might be curbed. One thing is to respect current social norms, another to include them in criteria for evaluation. An example in point is the following description by bell hooks:

> School was the place of ecstasy – pleasure and danger. To be changed by ideas was pure pleasure. But to learn ideas that ran counter to values and beliefs learned at home was to place oneself at risk, to enter the danger zone. Home was the place where I was forced to conform to someone else's image of who and what I should be. School was the place where I could forget that self and, through ideas, reinvent myself. (1994, p. 3)

If morality had been among the factors that were evaluated, it is doubtful that hooks' teachers could have allowed the students to "enter the danger zone".

In short, although it is difficult or even impossible to measure many aspects of moral development in schools, it is possible to measure students' mastery of moral vocabulary. Moreover, we believe that enhancing students' understanding of moral vocabulary is an important task for schools.

Emphasis on moral vocabulary is not idiosyncratic to neo-Aristotelians but is shared by the Kantian moral tradition, which dominated work on moral education before virtue ethics became the main trend. While the key concept in Aristotelian ethics is *virtue*, the key concepts in Kantian ethics are *good will* and *duty*. This, however, does not mean that Kant thought little of moral virtues. In his book *Metaphysik der Sitten* (The Metaphysics of Morals), he emphasized that those who are guided by good will must contribute to their own perfection and the happiness of others (Cureton & Hill, 2014; Kant, 1919, p. 225). This perfection consisted, according to Kant, not least in the acquisition of moral virtue.

Lawrence Kohlberg, whose pioneering work shaped the field of moral education during the latter half of the twentieth century, was influenced by Kantian ethics, the sociology of Émile Durkheim, and the psychology of Jean Piaget (Kohlberg, 1981). In his earlier work, Kohlberg developed a descriptive theory about stages of moral development from infancy to adulthood. Later in his career, he began to apply his ideas to work in schools. Research by him and his co-workers around 1980 indicated that adolescents might improve their moral development by engaging in discussions about moral issues, not least if the discussion would invoke concepts and principles that belonged to the next stage above that of the students (Power, Higgins, & Kohlberg, 1989).

Like neo-Aristotelians, Kohlberg argues that understanding moral concepts, and the ability to engage in moral dialogue and reflection, plays an important role in moral development. Participation in such dialogue requires that people have the vocabulary necessary for describing moral reality and

can express their reasons for choosing one action rather than some other. Thus, despite the differences between these two traditions, they both consider an understanding of moral vocabulary and the ability to engage in discussion about moral issues as being of fundamental importance.

Much is still to be learned about the relationship between understanding moral reasoning and the willingness to act according to virtue or moral laws. Recent research on the matter exemplifies two different positions: those who emphasize cognitive understanding of what is right or wrong and those who give more relevance to emotions and feelings. Michael Hand (2017) argues in favour of the first position, basing his view on the idea of morality as a social contract, according to which morality is based on rules which all reasonable people are bound to agree on and adopt, in order to be able to live peacefully together despite different philosophies of life. Nomy Arpaly and Timothy Schroeder, who base their ideas on recent research in psychology and brain research, argue for the second position. They maintain that the moral value of people's actions depends on the kinds of desires that are at play. Accordingly, people can be led on by virtuous desires without being conscious of the reasons which would justify their actions (Arpaly, 2002; Arpaly & Schroeder, 2014). Although these authors maintain that good morality depends more on desires for what is good than on reason and understanding, they say that the distinction between good and bad desires derives from the reasons behind them. Such *reasons* can be expressed and become the subject of discussion.

A recent study in British schools supports the view that adolescents choose their actions based on conventions or feelings without being able to express their reasons or articulate them in words. Walker, Thoma, Jones, and Kristjánsson (2017) say that adolescents seem to choose the right actions without being able to give reasons for those choices. They say that the ability to give reasons – to express with words why they did what they did – develops later than the habits or customs which help people to act rightly. This fits well with what Aristotle (1984) says in the *Nicomachean Ethics*, namely that practical wisdom – or *phronesis* – which is a cognitive or intellectual virtue, develops after people have habitually adopted good customs and appropriate emotional responses.

This study in British schools does not undermine the importance of rich moral vocabulary, and neither do the arguments of Arpaly and Schroeder (2014). Although children learn moral behaviour to a large extent before they can enter into discussions about moral reasons, they will sometimes have to reflect on their own position, criticize their own desires, and contemplate alternatives when different emotions pull in opposite directions, or when they disagree with their friends about some moral issue. It is difficult to reflect critically on one's own life and discuss whether one way of living is better than another, without moral vocabulary. We might, for example, have to distinguish between valuing and appreciating good things, on the one hand, and being greedy, on the other; or between being caring and being intrusive or patronizing. Distinctions like these are difficult to make and discuss without being in command of the appropriate vocabulary. Even when people are moved to benevolent behaviour by good desires, which they may not be able to describe in words or give reasons for, it is probably beneficial to be able to reflect on one's reasons and express them in words.

4. Methods and data collection

Based on the above reflections and current curricula and practical conditions in lower secondary schools, our research project probed the question how *Laxdaela Saga* could be used to teach adolescents moral vocabulary.

After selecting three schools to work with (two urban, one rural), we began meeting in October 2016 with the teachers of Icelandic who would participate in the project. That winter we met four times, for around two hours each time, with five teachers in the two urban schools. (One of those teachers had to take a leave for reasons not having to do with the research and did not participate in the teaching phase). The teacher from the rural school participated in one of those meetings, and the team of researchers visited her once at her school. During these meetings, it was decided to use the simplified version of *Laxdaela Saga* and to read it over the period of six weeks, from the end of

Table 1. The participating teachers and the qualitative data collected.

Teacher	School	School location number of students	Work experience in years	Interview 1. Date, length	Interview 2. Date, length	Classroom observations. Date, length
A	1	Urban 300–400	2	18.10.2017, 54 min.	23.01.2018, 49 min.	18.10.2017, 2 × 40 min.
B	2	Urban 300–400	26	18.10.2017, 70 min.	23.01.2018, 41 min.	18.10.2017, 2 × 40 min.
C	3	Rural <20	9	5.10.2017, 92 min.	10.02.2018, 43 min.	None.
D	2	Urban 300–400	30	18.10.2017, 28 min.	23.01.2018, 18 min.	18.10.2017, 2 × 40 min.
E	1	Urban 300–400	17	18.10.2017, 41 min.	23.01.2018, 25 min.	18.10.2017, 1 × 40 min.

September until the beginning of November the coming fall (2017). We then met twice with the teachers during the school year 2017–2018, first during the fall term, when the teachers were roughly half-way into the teaching project. At that time, we interviewed each teacher, took interviews with focus groups of students, and sat in classes writing field notes. The second visit was in January of 2018 when we interviewed the teachers again (see Table 1).

The first round of interviews with the teachers took place during the experimental period. They were between 28 and 92 min long and semi-structured. We did not ask prepared questions but used a frame (see appendix) since there was certain information that we wanted to obtain, such as their work experience, their use of the teaching material, teaching methods and student's participation and reception. In the second round, the interviews were considerably shorter. We used the same frame but this time we also probed about the things that the teachers had reported in the first round. We also asked the teachers to look back on the six weeks intervention and evaluate their whole experience.

The four focus group interviews, 40 min each, took place at the same time as the first round of interviews. They were also semi-structured in the sense that we used a frame but not a prepared questionnaire. We asked both general questions, such as whether the students were reading any literary texts and what specifically they were reading. Then we asked the students to tell us what they were doing in the classes when they were reading *Laxdæla Saga*, whether they had learned new words and if so, which words. In the end, we asked open questions about *Laxdæla Saga* and the teaching material, teaching methods, and the space for discussion and disagreement in class.

All the interviews were recorded, transcribed verbatim and then analysed using established qualitative methods (Bogdan & Biklen, 2003; Charmaz, 2014; Creswell, 2018).

We also collected quantitative data on the students' understanding of moral vocabulary and their ability to use it in moral discourse. This data was collected by having the participating students complete a test before and after the teaching of the saga. As a control group, students in the same age group in a school located in the same school district as the two larger participating schools, took the same tests at the same times. In that school the teachers of Icelandic did not know anything about our work, nor had we any information about what they were doing in terms of teaching literature.

To minimize the risk of biased measure, we composed two similar tests which we labelled "Test A" and "Test B". Around the middle of September, before the teaching of the saga, half of the students in the participating schools and half of the students in the control group took Test A while the other half took test B. After the teaching period, around the middle of November, those who had taken Test A before took Test B, and vice versa. For the purpose of analysis, we only used tests from those students who completed both.

The tests consisted of (a) fill-in exercise measuring understanding of vocabulary, (b) questions about short texts (stories or excerpts from sagas), (c) questions about virtues important for certain

Table 2. Number and gender of participating students.

	Boys	Girls	Total
Experimental group	54	52	106
Control group	27	34	61
Total	81	86	167

professions, (d) one question about a definition of a virtue concept and (e) a question where the students were asked to mention a person who they thought was exemplary and explain why.

In the fill-in exercise, the students had to select an appropriate word from a list of words. On one of the tests the list consisted of words which might be translated into English in the following way:

> benevolence, vengefulness, rage, moderation, arrogance, malice, boastfulness, stinginess, dishonesty, forgiving, grit, considerateness, wisdom, resilience, generosity.

The students were asked to select words from the list and fill in an exercise such as the one below:

> Moderate people rarely show _____ or _____.
> Self-discipline entails at least sometimes _____ or _____.

Students were given one point for selecting a word that was fully appropriate and half a point for selecting a word which, although not fully appropriate, was from the right group of words, where we had divided the words into two groups: virtues and vices.

The tests included short stories and two kinds of questions about them. First, students had to say what a person had done, whether it was good or bad, and why it was either good or bad. Second, students were asked which virtues the main characters had exemplified and whether they should have done what they did. This required the students not only to understand the course of the story but also the moral context.

These tests were similar to those that had been used in the Knightly Virtues project at the Jubilee Centre. Although the students in the Knightly Virtues project were four years younger than our students, we decided to use similar questions. Analysis of the questions in the tests in the Knightly Virtue project had indicated that they were too long or difficult for the students; about 25% of the students did not complete the test, and the scores were rather low. Davison, Harrison, Hayes, and Higgins (2016) concluded from this that more reliable results would have been obtained with easier questions. We thought that what had turned out to be too difficult for 9–11 years old students might be appropriate for our 14–15 years old students. Even so, our test was somewhat more difficult, since the texts in our tests were around 1,300 words compared to around 1,000 words in the Knightly Virtues project. We received responses for both tests from 106 students in the participating schools and 61 students in the control group. Of these 167 students, there were 81 boys and 86 girls (see Table 2).

Once we had the results from both tests, they were handed over to the Research Institute at the School of Education which then coded them according to whether they were from the first round or the second round. When the researchers graded the tests, they did not know which code mark indicated which round. This was done so that expectations for the effect of the teaching would not affect our grading.

When beginning the grading, 20 randomly selected results were first graded collectively. Once the researchers were convinced that they had come to a common understanding of how to evaluate the answers, they divided the tests into four portions, one for each researcher, with roughly the same number of tests from the first round and the second round.

5. Results

The cumulative grade for all the questions on the test shows an improvement from the first to the second round, the average grade being 28.6 out of 60 in the first round and 31.86 in the second round. Only a small part of the improvement is explained by taking the same kind of test again

Table 3. Average grade for the understanding of meaning of words.

	First round	Second round	Difference in average grade
Experimental group	5.66	6.23	0.57
Control group	5.96	6.03	0.07

Table 4. Average score for the understanding of meaning of words for boys and girls in the experimental group on a scale from 0 to 10.

	First round	Second round	Difference in average score
Boys	5.48	5.97	0.49
Girls	5.84	6.61	0.77

since the eta value of the distribution (η_p^2) is 0.13. This indicates that the improvement is mainly explained by the students' work during the project period. When looking at individual questions on the test, the difference between the experimental group and the control group was most prominent in the questions that concerned the understanding of vocabulary on virtues and vices. The average grade for the two groups is shown in Table 3.

The difference in average grade from the first round to the second round was statistically significant, irrespective of group or gender. The eta value of the distribution indicates that the influence of taking the test is small ($\eta_p^2 = 0.027$). This indicates that the teaching during the project explains the improvement between the two rounds of the test.

In the experimental group, there was a considerable difference in both grades and improvements between boys and girls, with the girls both receiving higher grades in the first round and showing more improvement from the first to the second round (see Table 4).

Although the gender difference appears to be quite pronounced, and the girls do statistically better than the boys, the difference between the improvement of the two groups was not enough to be statistically significant. The better results for the girls may be explained by the girls being more active during classes. Teachers mentioned this in the interviews, and field notes indicate that the girls participated more in discussion about the story. Here are examples from field notes in two different classes taught by different teachers:

(1) [The teacher] says that the assignment is in the workbook on p. 10 and then reads the questions in the book. She first talks about Kjartan and asks whether he is conciliatory or not, disciplined or lacks discipline, and why. A few students answer with one word, mostly the same girls, but two other girls also suggest a few answers and one boy.

(2) [The teacher]: "I am going to read chapter 24 for you. What do you think will happen?" A lively discussion begins on what is likely to happen in the chapter. Participants are four girls who sit together, two and two at desks next to the window. One expresses the hypothesis that Bolli will be killed with reference to the dreams of Guðrún. Another mentions the sword Footbiter. [The teacher] adds information on the sword Footbiter and on Kjartan's sword which the king of Norway had given him.
[The teacher] begins to read the chapter where Kjartan is killed. The reading is broken up with insertions and explanations. The same four girls who had talked before interrupt with words and questions. Other students do not say anything.

In our field notes, we find no comparable examples of boys being more active than girls. Various comments by the teachers also support the hypothesis that girls are, in general, more active than boys. One of the teachers remarked, after the project had been completed, on the interest of the students and how they received the text.

> There are a few, especially boys, who no matter what we are doing, they just do not actively participate.

Two other teachers, when interviewed, said that the girls had been more devoted to the assignments. One of them said that the inactive students were mostly boys and that that was not confined to this project. Other teachers agreed with this.

At various points in the interviews, the teachers mentioned that working on vocabulary about virtues and vices did not take time away from reading the story but, rather, made the reading easier. The following quote is typical of this:

> I found it perhaps more comfortable in that I had a certain point of departure … you always need to find a certain path for a story like this and in order to … make the teaching a bit more exciting and more profound it is very good to have some point of departure like this, something other than just the storyline.

Some of the teachers mentioned that they would use a similar approach when teaching other Sagas, and one mentioned in particular that she wanted to try the same approach with the *Saga of Gísli* and the *Saga of Hrafnkell*.

The teachers all agreed that words for moral virtues and vices were too rare in the active vocabulary of the students. One teacher remarked:

> I think that none of them really knew well these concepts … generosity, benevolence, … modesty … these are all words which are not in their active vocabulary.

Another teacher agreed saying:

> First, they did, of course, not know what a virtue was, or a vice, they did not understand the word "virtue" nor the word "vice" … now they have begun using words they did not understand to begin with … such as for example "resilience".

According to the teachers, they succeeded in teaching the students new vocabulary by using words on virtues and vices in assignments about *Laxdaela Saga*. Interviews with a focus group of students confirm what we saw in the quantitative data and the interviews with the teachers: the reading of the story had augmented the vocabulary they had for discussing moral issues. Here is a short excerpt from a discussion with a group of students from ninth grade:

Researcher:	Do you remember some words you have learned?
Student:	Benevolence and self-discipline and respect and … virtues …
Researcher:	You have of course heard words like 'benevolence' before …
A few students at the same time:	Yes.
Researcher:	But like … 'self-discipline' … was that not part of your vocabulary before?
Student:	No.
Two students at the same time:	No.
Researcher:	What about a word like 'modesty'? Is that a word which … which you use daily … in ordinary talk?
Two students at the same time:	No.

6. Conclusion and some reflections

Analysis of the test results indicates that the six-week intervention, where the students read and discussed various moral aspects of *Laxdaela Saga*, improved their comprehension of moral vocabulary. In the parts of the test that measured knowledge about the meaning of words that describe moral virtues and vices, there was a statistically significant improvement from the first to the second test. The eta squared value of the distribution indicates that this improvement was partially due to the intervention. The interviews with the teachers and the focus groups support this result. We feel, therefore, that in cooperation with the teachers we have shown a way in which *Laxdaela Saga* can be used to teach moral vocabulary to teenagers. And we can add that approaching the story with a moral point of view did not delay the reading of the saga, nor did it burden the teachers with extra work. Quite to the contrary, this way of reading the saga helped the teachers dig into the story.

The tests were meant to measure three things: (1) understanding of moral vocabulary, (2) competence in applying moral concepts, and (3) competence in arguing for a certain moral point of view. Concerning the two latter items, the students made an improvement from the first to the second round of the test, but the difference between the experimental group and the control group was not statistically significant. This raises questions about the measuring of such a complex competence as the application of moral concepts and moral reasoning; written test may not be the best way to

measure such competences, and it may also be doubted whether a short intervention in just one school subject among many will affect such complex competences in a readily measurable way. Perhaps changes like these will only be evident "later in life" as the Icelandic National Curriculum Guide suggests (Ministry of Education, Science and Culture, 2015, p. 95).

The Knightly Virtues project was much larger, comprising almost 1,100 students in 19 schools. The most interesting difference between our results and those of the researchers at the Jubilee Centre is that in our project we see a clear gender difference which does not show in the data from the Jubilee Centre. Whether this is explained by different teaching methods, different age groups, different social circumstances and culture or something else we don't know. However, according to the PISA test on literacy, gender differences (in favour of girls) are more pronounced in Iceland (around 40 points) than in the UK (around 20 points). The difference between those who do best and those who fall behind is also greater in Iceland than in the UK (OECD, 2016, pp. 168–169).

Although philosophers disagree profoundly about moral theory, there seems to be general agreement that command of moral vocabulary is important for developing good morality. What else is needed so that students cultivate virtues one cannot say with certainty. Some scholars, such as Lawrence Kohlberg, have thought that understanding of concepts and understanding of moral reality were key factors in moral development. But he thought that more was needed and followed Durkheim (2012) in believing that a just school community was necessary for schools to cultivate students' morality (Power et al., 1989). Other scholars claim that good morality requires emotional maturity no less than cognitive understanding of words, concepts, and reasons (Arpaly, 2002; Arpaly & Schroeder, 2014; Kristjánsson, 2010).

We do not take a stance here on theories on moral education but point out that, no matter which theory one favours, understanding the vocabulary which is used to describe moral reality is found to be important. One way for schools and teachers to meet this need is to teach stories in such a way that words that are used to describe moral virtues and vices are used to talk about the characters and what they do. Finding a space for moral education in the teaching of regular school subjects (which take up most time in school curricula) in this way has the benefit of not requiring large changes in teaching material or in the organization of the subjects. It does, however, require that the literature – be it the Sagas in Iceland, Shakespeare in England, or Cervantes in Spain – be given enough time, and that the teachers are supported in thinking differently about their teaching and have access to support material where moral concepts are used. Our research indicates that this approach may produce results which matter for the moral development of the students.

Although our quantitative data only show improvement in students' understanding of moral vocabulary, we believe more can be gained through class discussion about the ethical aspects of literary texts. We find it likely that teaching through dialogues concerning moral issues may be conducive to better competence in discussing moral issues, improved emotional development, and contribute to a better school community.

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Appendix. Frames for interviews with teachers and focus groups

Interview with teacher

Introduction

The beginning of the interview: Introduce yourself, the research project, how the data will be used etc. Tell the interviewee that this should be like an ordinary conversation rather than a QA session.

(1) Personal profile
    How long have you worked as a teacher?
    Where did you work before, where do you work now?
    Which subjects do you teach?
    How old are you?
(2) Experience related to the subject "Icelandic"
    Which classes or age group do you teach?
    Where lies you interest in the subject?
    Your earlier experimental work?
    Your experience of teaching the Icelandic Sagas?
    Your experience of teaching *Laxdaela Saga* in particular?
(3) Participation in the research project
    (a) The teaching material
    (b) The teaching
    (c) Teaching methods
    (d) Participation and interest of students
    (e) Self-reflection of the teacher in this role
(4) Open discussion. The teacher communicates what she wants to say.

Close the interview by asking whether there is something else that the teacher wants to say, whether something important has been forgotten.

Advice: Listen attentively. Follow the discourse of the interviewee who is telling a story, not just answering questions. Avoid Why-questions, use rather "Could you describe for me … ?" Avoid Yes-or-No-questions. Tolerate silence.

Interview with focus group

Introduction

Explain what the purpose of the focus group is. Make all feel relaxed. Tell a little about the research and explain how the information will be used. Get a permission to record the interview and promise anonymity.

(1) Opening – break the ice
(2) Introductory questions
    Are adolescents reading books?
    What are you reading? Where (home/library/school)?
    What are your favourite books?
(3) Transition questions
    Can you explain to me what you are doing in the Laxdaela classes?
(4) Central questions
    Have you learned new words recently?
    Can you tell me what "virtue" means?
    What kinds of things make one virtuous?
    Can you mention some persons that you find virtuous?
(5) Closing questions
    What do you think about the teaching material?
    Can you discuss the story/what you find interesting in the classes?
    How does the teacher react when you express your own views?
    Do you all agree?
    How do you reach a conclusion?