

Critical Pedagogy in Practice: Forum Theatre as an Approach to Addressing Controversial Issues in Norwegian Religious Education

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Abstract: This article explores the adaptation and development of Augusto Boal's forum theatre within the framework of Norwegian religious education (RE) during the 2020s. It examines how this interactive theatrical form, originally conceived under the military dictatorship of 1970s Brazil, may be used to address controversial issues in a secondary school in the Norwegian democratic welfare state. Forum theatre draws on Paulo Freire's critical pedagogy and is used to scrutinise and challenge power asymmetries, advocate for societal change and promote empowering practices for both teachers and students. The analysis suggests that forum theatre, as a drama-based pedagogical approach, has significant potential to navigate and mitigate the challenges associated with discussions of controversial issues in the school context. Nonetheless, its application in democratic welfare states, where the distinctions between oppressor and oppressed are less clear, introduces complexities. This necessitates careful and conscious pedagogical reflection and action to avoid unintentionally disempowering already marginalised or oppressed students.

Keywords: controversial issues, forum theatre, religious education (RE), critical pedagogy

Zusammenfassung: Dieser Artikel untersucht die Anpassung und Entwicklung von Augusto Boals Forumtheater im Rahmen des norwegischen Religionsunterrichts in den 2020er Jahren. Es wird untersucht, wie diese interaktive Theaterform, die ursprünglich unter der Militärdiktatur der 1970er Jahre in Brasilien entwickelt wurde, genutzt werden kann, um kontroverse Themen in einer Sekundarschule im demokratischen Wohlfahrtsstaat Norwegen zu behandeln. Das Forumtheater stützt sich auf die kritische Pädagogik von Paulo Freire und wird eingesetzt, um Machtasymmetrien zu hinterfragen und herauszufordern, für gesellschaftliche Veränderungen einzutreten und ermächtigende Praktiken sowohl für Lehrer als auch für Schüler zu fördern. Die Analyse deutet darauf hin, dass das Forumtheater als theaterpädagogischer Ansatz ein erhebliches Potenzial hat, um die Herausforderungen, die mit der Diskussion kontroverser Themen im schulischen Kontext verbunden sind, zu bewältigen und abzumildern. Nichtsdestotrotz führt seine Anwendung in demokratischen Wohlfahrtsstaaten, in denen die Unterscheidung zwischen Unterdrückern und Unterdrückten weniger klar ist, zu Komplexitäten. Dies erfordert eine sorgfältige und bewusste pädagogische Reflexion und Handlung, um zu vermeiden, dass bereits marginalisierte oder unterdrückte Schüler unbeabsichtigt entmachtet werden.

Schlagwörter: kontroverse Themen, Forumtheater, Religionsunterricht, kritische Pädagogik

Introduction

This article examines the potential of Augusto Boal's forum theatre, deeply embedded in the theoretical and critical pedagogical tradition of Paulo Freire, as an approach to addressing controversial issues in religious education (RE). Forum theatre originally emerged from the sociopolitical landscape of 1970s Brazil as a response to stark poverty, widespread illiteracy and harsh military dictatorships.

During this time, societal and political disparities were extreme, education was accessible to only the privileged part of the population, and the roles of oppressor and oppressed were clearly delineated.



Several movements advocating for both reform and revolution emerged during this period. Forum theatre was used as a means for the oppressed to become aware of the suppressive conditions under which they lived, rehearse demonstrations, protest actions and strikes and, consequently, promote liberation and social change (Boal, 2008; Freire, 2018; Skagen, 2021). By this time, Norway specifically and Scandinavia in general, had already established a democratic welfare state underpinned by ideals of equality and recognition of differences that made education systems accessible to all (Thuen, 2017). Therefore, the drive to raise an awareness that leads to significant social upheavals and revolution may not have been as pertinent in a democratic welfare and education system. Does this mean that forum theatre should have been dismissed as a pedagogical approach in democratic welfare states as early as the 1970s? I would argue not; however, the transposition of theories and concepts originating from a specific historical, geographical and political milieu to fundamentally different contexts raises critical questions and considerations.

This study focuses specifically on the application of forum theatre and its critical pedagogical roots within the RE framework in Norway during the 2020s. This context is markedly distinct from the one in which it originated, as the Norwegian educational system exists within a democratic welfare state that upholds values such as equality and human dignity, and the demarcation lines between oppressor and oppressed are rather blurred and permeable. The research question that guides this article is as follows: *What opportunities and challenges arise when forum theatre and the pedagogy of the oppressed are used to address controversial issues in a democratic welfare state's education system and RE?*

Although I engage with the research question theoretically, the arguments and discussion are based upon the empirical action research I conducted on the subject of forum theatre and controversial issues in Norwegian RE (see Hammer, 2021; 2023; Hammer & Lenz, 2022).

Controversial Issues and the Potential for Democratic Education

'Controversial issues' are not easy to define, and a longstanding scholarly debate has discussed which criteria should determine them (see, e.g., Anders & Shudak, 2016; Cooling, 2012; Hand, 2007; Hess & McAvoy, 2015).¹ As early as the 1970s, Bailey (1971) was emphasising that a shared understanding of controversial issues is essential when examining their significance in schools and education systems. He proposed the following definition: 'Controversies are largely social phenomena: that is, they are those topics and issues about which numbers of people are observed to disagree' (Bailey, 1971, p.69). A little more than a decade later, Stradling (1984) argued that the controversial issues that most frequently pose challenges for teachers are 'those on which society at large (or the local community, or even the school itself) is clearly divided and for which different groups offer conflicting explanations and advocate conflicting solutions based on alternative values' (p.121). The Council of Europe incorporates an emotional dimension and describes controversial issues as 'issues which arouse strong feelings and divide opinion in community and society' (Kerr & Huddleston, 2015, p.8).

My work on controversial issues and forum theatre in RE builds on these earlier contributions through an understanding of controversial issues in educational settings as those in which students' 'disagreements and conflicts of opinion create discord and arouse strong emotions in the local school context' (Hammer, 2024, p.10). My definition resembles that put forth by the Council of Europe, but I believe it is significant to highlight the local school when working with issues that are controversial among teachers and students. The reason for this is twofold: 1) Controversial issues are context

¹ I have elaborated on this debate elsewhere and, for the purpose of this article, I believe it is sufficient to clarify my position. For an overview of the main positions in the criteria debate, see Hammer (2024, pp. 30–35) or Hammer (2021) in Norwegian and English, respectively.

dependent, meaning that what is controversial in one school or classroom may not necessarily be controversial in others (von der Lippe, 2019); 2) Freire's critical pedagogy, and hence forum theatre, focuses on addressing issues that are relevant, realistic and meaningful to the people involved in exploring them (Boal, 2002; Freire 2018).

Scandinavian and international research and policy documents emphasise including controversial issues in teaching as key for promoting education for democratic citizenship (e.g. Hess & McAvoy, 2015; Ljunggren, Unemar Öst & Englund., 2015; McLaughlin, 2004; Stray & Sætra, 2016). As Garrett and Alvey (2021) point out, 'there is nearly unanimous agreement that discussions of controversial issues are beneficial for democratic life' (p.2). The Council of Europe states that the need to develop pedagogical practices that empower teachers and students to address controversies in democratic ways is 'a matter of educational urgency' (Kerr & Huddleston, 2015, p.7). In Norway, the concept of 'controversial issues' is not mentioned explicitly in the curricula; however, I would argue that these issues nevertheless have a central place. The school's core curriculum, which permeates all school activities, mandates that education should equip students to become active democratic citizens capable of 'practicing critical thinking, managing differences of opinion, and respecting disagreement' (Utdanningsdirektoratet, 2017, p.15). However, earlier research has identified several challenges that emerge for teachers and students when controversial issues arise in the classroom, to which I now turn.

Earlier Research on Approaches to Controversial Issues in Schools

Many theoretical and empirical studies, including those by Hand and Levinson (2012) and Ho, McAvoy, Hess and Gibbs (2017), highlight *discussion* as a pedagogical method especially suitable for addressing controversial issues and promoting democratic education. Nevertheless, teachers often encounter challenges that hinder their work during such discussions. As far back as the 1980s, Stradling (1984) identified both internal and external limitations that continue to echo in contemporary research. These limitations range from teachers feeling that they lack sufficient subject knowledge about complex and controversial issues to their fear of losing control and authority. Other constraints include school culture, time pressure, assessment-driven agendas and concerns about parental reactions. High levels of tension in the class, uncertainty about the adequacy of the classroom environment and doubts about the ability to adequately safeguard students' vulnerability and identity also contribute to these challenges (e.g. Anker & von der Lippe, 2016; Cowan & Maitles, 2012; Hess & McAvoy, 2015; Myrebøe, 2022; Quartermaine, 2016).

Consequently, there appears to be a tension between the democratic justifications for dealing with controversial issues in teaching on the one hand and the individual and structural limitations inherent in teachers' work ecology on the other (Hammer, 2024). Several studies have discovered that avoidance is a common strategy among teachers (Anker & von der Lippe, 2016; Flensner, 2019; Hess, 2005). However, this strategy is problematic because the potential for promoting democratic values and principles, as well as facilitating students' democratic learning, is lost due to teachers' discomfort. When the controversial issues pertain to the religious, political or moral domain (McLaughlin, 2004) or, more specifically, contain derogatory statements rooted in racism, homophobia, anti-Semitism and anti-Muslim hostility, they are considered extra sensitive and challenging to handle (Røthing, 2019).

Moreover, even if teachers do take a deliberative approach to controversial issues and facilitate relevant discussions in class, students often choose to withdraw rather than participate. Hauan and Anker's (2021) study of student strategies in classroom discussions about religion and blasphemy at two Norwegian upper secondary schools illustrates this point. The authors found that a small number of

boys dominated the discussion, while other students became quiet and withdrawn. The authors explain this by highlighting the dynamics and power structures within the classroom, which contributed to some students' knowledge being more valued and recognised than others, and the absence of interpretive frameworks that accommodate everyone's experiences. In their study, secular discourse dominated the classroom and marginalised religious voices. In the discussion, although both dominant and marginalised groups tended to exhibit epistemic resistance, they did so in two different ways. The dominant groups worked to maintain the privilege of not being contradicted in the discussion, while marginalised groups chose withdrawal instead. According to Hauan and Anket (2021), for the marginalised students, the emotional investment and risk of participating in a discussion where they expected that their perspectives would be ignored, was too high. There were also students who chose withdrawal out of fear of offending their religious peers. Collectively, these student strategies resulted in many perspectives being excluded from the discussion, thus narrowing the diversity of opinions. Hauan and Anker (2021) findings also resonate with Jerome, Little and Young's (2021) assertion that the consensus orientation in deliberation hinders the plurality of perspective and critical examination, and with Garret and Alvey's (2021) findings that student withdrawal indicates emotional content and high risk.

Well-documented challenges and limiting factors highlight the need for more research-based knowledge on addressing controversial issues in ways that foster safety and empowerment for both teachers and students. This forms the basis for my exploration of forum theatre as a novel drama-based pedagogical approach.

Forum Theatre – Theoretical and practical principles

Forum theatre, the most renowned theatre form developed by Augusto Boal, originated in Brazil throughout the 1970s and falls under the broader umbrella of the 'Theatre of the Oppressed' (Boal, 2008). The theoretical underpinnings of forum theatre are directly influenced by Paulo Freire's (2018) critical perspectives on education and pedagogy, as elaborated in his influential work *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. Specifically, the incorporation of Freire's critical pedagogy into forum theatre has brought concepts such as power, oppression, empowerment, liberation and change to the fore.

Forum theatre is an interactive theatrical form guided by a character referred to as 'the joker'. Much like the joker in a deck of cards, which has no specific value or suit and can shift between them, the joker of forum theatre – ideally – does not align with any side but serves as a link between the stage and the audience (foreword by Jackson, Boal, 2002). The joker, a Socratic character, delineates the rules of the game and poses probing questions. Boal (2002) described the joker's role as ensuring that 'those who know a little more get the chance to explain it, and those who dare a little, dare a little more and show what they are capable of' (p.245). In Boal's (2002) vocabulary, the joker is not a 'facilitator' but a 'difficultator', a figure who challenges simplistic solutions and enhances the participants' understanding of the situation's complexity. This role includes fostering awareness of how micro-oppressions in daily life are connected to oppressive macrostructures in society. Concurrently, the joker ensures that this complexity does not impede intervention and action (foreword by Jackson, Boal, 1995).

The procedure of forum theatre follows some main principles. First, a theme that is relevant, realistic and meaningful to the participants and showcases a distinct conflict between the protagonist and the antagonist, is presented. Initially, the scene is played out with the conflict ending without resolution. The scene is then replayed with the audience invited to participate actively and, leveraging Freire's dialogical teaching, power and trust are delegated to the participants (Freire 2018). In Boal's (2002)

vocabulary, they change position from spectators to 'spect-actors', that is, the contradiction between passive spectators and active participants dissolves (Engelstad, 2001).

During the performance, participants can intervene by saying 'Stop!' whenever they believe an alternative approach could improve the protagonist's situation. The intervening individual is then invited on stage to assume the role of the protagonist and enact the proposed solution. Following such an intervention, the joker steps in to prompt reflection through strategic questioning, which helps participants process what they have witnessed and experienced. The scene is replayed multiple times to allow various participants to test their alternative suggestions. The aim of forum theatre is not to win or find a definitive solution but to serve as a collective learning process and rehearsal space. Participants can recognise events from their own lives in the performances, reflect on different forms of oppression and practice new and empowering strategies for the oppressed. In this sense, forum theatre can function as a 'rehearsal for reality' (Boal, 2002; 2006). In its original Latin American context, this rehearsal process was employed, among other things, to prepare for strikes and protests against harsh regimes and systemic oppression. But what happens when forum theatre takes a major temporal, political and geographical leap from Brazil under a military dictatorship in the 1970s to RE in the Norwegian democratic welfare state in the 2020s?

Norwegian RE

In Norway, RE is called Christianity, Religions, Worldviews and Ethics (KRLE). It is a compulsory and nonconfessional subject for all students from Grades 1–10 (approximately 6–16 years old), regardless of their religious or secular affiliations (Utdanningsdirektoratet, 2020).

The concept of 'controversial issues' is not mentioned explicitly in the RE curriculum, but I argue that they nevertheless hold a central place in the subject. The curriculum comprises five core elements, two of which are particularly relevant to my earlier work on forum theatre and controversial issues. The core element of 'Ability to Take Others' Perspectives' emphasises that RE should 'provide students with the opportunity to develop their own viewpoints and attitudes when encountering others through internal and external perspectives, and through dialogue and reflection on similarities and differences' (Utdanningsdirektoratet, 2020, p.3). Through the core element of 'Ethical Reflection', students should become able to 'identify ethical dilemmas and discuss moral issues using their own experiences and capacity for empathy' (p.3), thereby enabling them to 'handle significant and minor questions, conflicts, and challenges relevant to the school community, everyday life, and the global society' (p.3). A relevant competence for the end of Grade 10 states that students should learn to 'explore others' perspectives and manage disagreement and conflict of opinions' (p.8). Furthermore, through the interdisciplinary theme of 'Democracy and Citizenship', RE is intended to teach students to participate in ethical reflection, practice perspective-taking, address challenging questions, examine power and exclusion and challenge established norms (p.4). Key values addressed by the subject include respect for human dignity, equality and solidarity (p.2).

Alongside the democratic mandate, a second trend exists in Western democratic education systems that is constantly present and influenced by neoliberal ideologies. This trend emphasises individualism and competition, with the principles of capitalism and the market economy shaping educational objectives (Apple, 2011). This neoliberal, results-oriented trend was somewhat downplayed in the new Norwegian curricula introduced in fall 2020, which reduced the number of competence goals and increased teachers' professional autonomy (Skeie, 2020; Utdanningsdirektoratet, 2020). Korsvoll (2020) describes RE reform as an intercultural shift that reduces the focus on Christian cultural heritage in favour of

diversity and tolerance. Nonetheless, Skeie (2020) highlighted the need for a critical perspective on the new curricula, as the international policy trends shaping their development emphasise a competitive, individualistic view of education that potentially favours middle-class children.

In this policy context, I collaborated with RE teachers, students and school leadership to develop forum theatre as a new drama-based pedagogical approach to addressing controversial issues. In the next section, I describe some of the main characteristics of the research and development process.

Developing Forum Theatre to address controversial Issues in RE

My work with forum theatre and controversial issues is based on an action research process conducted at a secondary school in Oslo, Norway, during the spring semester of 2020. Today, there are many different forms of action research, but common to them are all iterative action cycles, democratic processes and participant involvement (McNiff, 2014).

The primary participants in the action research were three RE teachers and their respective classes (A, B and C). These three classes constituted the entire 10th grade at the school, which comprised 71 students. Additionally, the school leadership (principal, assistant principal and head of studies) served as secondary participants by facilitating the institutional framework for our work. This facilitation included, among other things, providing teachers with sufficient time by assigning substitute teachers and reallocating meeting times, securing suitable spaces and, most importantly, setting aside the neoliberal assessment-driven agenda in favour of our work with forum theatre and democratic education (see Hammer & Lenz, 2022).

We conducted three cycles, each consisting of five phases: 1) planning, 2) rehearsing forum theatre with five to six students from each class who volunteered to be actors, 3) performing forum theatre in all three classes, 4) observing the forum theatre performances and 5) reflecting. Prior to Cycle 1, I collaborated with the three RE teachers and the school leadership to formulate a written assignment for the students. The purpose of the assignment was to map out the types of disagreements related to religion and beliefs that the students encountered in the school context. This part of the work was theory driven, based on Freire's (1970/2018) concept of 'generative themes' and, accordingly, Boal's (2006) extension of this idea, which recommends that the themes enacted in forum theatre should be relevant and meaningful to the participants. Following standard procedures for content analysis (Gibbs, 2007), I coded and categorised the students' responses to the assignment. The three largest categories were: 1) use of derogatory and abusive terms, such as 'gay', '(fucking) Jew', 'negro'² and 'whore'; 2) religious beliefs vs. atheism and 3) derogatory speech about fellow students' religious beliefs and practices.

The students' experiences were closely aligned with the teachers' perceptions of the students' disagreements, and these categories formed the basis for the scenes in the three cycles.

In the planning phase, the teachers and I designed drafts for the scenes. For Cycle 1, we created a scene in which a religious female student was ridiculed and demeaned because of her religious beliefs. In Cycle 2, we designed a scene that stereotyped and was derogatory towards Muslims and Islam, and in Cycle 3, we created a scene with two antagonists, one of whom used the term 'gay' without an apparent derogatory intention, while the other stated that homosexuality was a sin.³ In Phase 2 of the action

² I am aware that the use of this word is offensive and deeply harmful to many individuals and communities. I use it here to give an accurate description of the data.

³ For an elaboration of Cycle 3, see Hammer, 2021

research cycle, I rehearsed the scenes with the volunteer student actors. An important principle in this phase was that the students were allowed to adapt, adjust and modify the scene to best reflect their lived experiences and speech patterns. In Phases 3 and 4, the scenes were performed in all three classes, as well as observed and video-recorded by me. During the forum theatre performances, the three participating RE teachers took on the role of joker, while the 10th-grade students were both actors in the original scene and spect-actors during the play. In Phase 5, the three RE teachers and I reflected on several issues, including to enact the joker role, ethical themes and the students' participation and engagement. In the following sections, I discuss some of these issues in more detail.

Empowerment and Transformed Classroom Dynamics

The emphasis on power, oppression and liberation in forum theatre differ from the usual structure of *discussions* on controversial issues. In the initial enactment of the forum theatre scenes, the power asymmetry in the controversial issue might appear to be a static zero-sum game, with characters fixed in their oppressor and oppressed positions (Amundsen, 2023; Boal, 2002). However, forum theatre deviates from more conventional forms of theatre because the *power to* direct the course of the play lies with the audience – the spect-actors (here, the students) – not with the original actors or the director (here, the RE teachers as jokers). The scenes and the asymmetric power relations in the presented generative controversial issues are intended to be dismantled and replaced (Boal, 1995). Through forum theatre's dynamic and process-oriented course, spect-actors have the *power to* initiate interventions and test various action alternatives, which are always aimed at empowering oppressed protagonists to stand up for themselves (Amundsen 2023; Boal, 2008).

Freire (2018) locates the strength and power for change in what he calls 'praxis', that is, the collective reflection and action that leads to an awareness of the oppressive structures and situations in which one is involved. The fundamental idea in praxis and, consequently, in forum theatre, is that the power and seed of transformative practice reside in the social community and collective processes. As Amundsen (2023) points out, the *power* one has *with* other people can be used to find new solutions, gain insight into many perspectives and challenge entrenched patterns, which from a holistic perspective supports the common good. The purpose of the interventions in forum theatre is to empower oppressed protagonists to believe in their own abilities and resources so that they can find the *power* and strength *within* themselves to become agents of change in their own lives (Amundsen, 2023; Boal, 2002; Hammer, 2024).

Combined with dramaturgical distance, the staging of relevant and experience-based controversial issues in forum theatre triggers students' genuine engagement in ways that lead to high interactive participation and a low risk of exposure and conflict (Hammer, 2021). Based on Callan (2016), this phenomenon is explained by students experiencing forum theatre as a safe space in which they can retain their dignity while at the same time being intellectually challenged. In forum theatre, the focus shifts from the individual exchange of views common to classroom discussions towards collective reflection and action orientation. The collaborative dynamic that arises among the students also enables RE jokers to guide the process by asking questions rather than spending effort on preventing student suggestions and managing tension in the classroom (Hammer & Lenz, 2022).

Thus, in line with the descriptions in the RE curriculum and in accordance with the purpose and principles of forum theatre, students working with controversial issues in forum theatre report that they have had the opportunity to practice handling disagreements and conflicts of opinion, discuss moral questions based on their own experiences, exercise perspective-taking through empathy and reflection,

think critically, reflect on democratic values, such as solidarity and equality, and address issues of power and exclusion (Hammer, 2021; 2023; Hammer & Lenz, 2022; Utdanningsdirektoratet, 2020). However, during the forum theatre performances on controversial issues in RE, we cannot rule out that some students withdraw from active participation because their religious or secular viewpoints differ from the dominant discourse in the classroom or the normative value base and intentions of forum theatre (see Hauan & Anker, 2021). Although I did not find this in my data, it is worth keeping in mind when developing forum theatre in the RE context in the future.

Despite forum theatre's clear connections with democratic education and the aims of the RE curriculum, could we nevertheless imagine a paradox in which forum theatre inadvertently reinforces the neoliberal educational premises that critical pedagogues so distinctly reject?

The Pitfall of Disempowering the Ones Who Are Already Oppressed

Within the logic of neoliberalism, the prevailing idea is that everyone has an equal opportunity to achieve individual success in the global knowledge economy. Consequently, failure to navigate the system is perceived as an individual's own fault. Those who succeed are lauded as winners, whereas those who do not or who fall by the wayside are labelled losers and held accountable for their own failures (Helsvig, 2022). In contrast, Freire (2018) and Boal (2008) position the community and the value of solidarity at the heart of action and change. They proposed that disparities and the social issues that individuals face must be understood dialectically, that is, as an interplay between the individual and society.

In the 1960s and 1970s, a distinct military and economic elite represented a kind of collective adversary for oppressed segments of Brazil's population. In the education systems of contemporary democratic welfare states, the identification of oppressors and oppressed is not as clear-cut: the context is more complex, and power imbalances are subtler. This difference raises the following question: What happens in forum theatre when the lines dividing oppressor and oppressed become blurred?

A Canadian study in which forum theatre was employed to explore tensions between unhoused and other residents of Montreal illustrates this point. The author of the article, Sonia Hamel, asked whether forum theatre and the Theatre of the Oppressed might inadvertently become the Theatre of the Oppressors; in other words, can forum theatre equip oppressors with more efficient tools of oppression (Hamel, 2013)? The article underscores the potential pitfalls if the oppressed protagonist (in this case, the unhoused individual) lacks allies in the audience – or anyone – willing to advocate for them. In this forum theatre performance, the narratives of the oppressed were turned against them. When shop owners and other residents intervened, they co-opted the narratives of the homeless, portraying *themselves* as oppressed and victimised by their antisocial and aggressive homeless neighbours. Furthermore, the homeless were depicted as responsible for their own conditions and poor living standards – a portrayal that justified the indifference of the other residents towards them.

This example illuminates several challenges that pertain to the use of forum theatre in a school context. First, as Hamel (2013) points out, appropriation of the perspectives of the oppressed is a potential outcome when forum theatre moves to a Western context, where anyone might perceive themselves as oppressed. Consequently, the forum theatre process can take unintended and undesirable turns, for example, if no one stands up for the oppressed protagonist. In my study, the oppressed are the student who is ridiculed for her religious beliefs (Cycle 1), the Muslim who is confronted with derogatory remarks about Muslims and Islam (Cycle 2) and the student who is called 'gay' and told that

homosexuality is a sin (Cycle 3). Second, if interventions reduce societal or school exclusion to a matter of individual agency and poor choices that are disconnected from larger social structures in society, forum theatre risks legitimising already existing asymmetric power constellations, privileges and positions, thereby promoting the disempowerment of students who are already marginalised or oppressed in real life.

Much research, including my own, indicates that forum theatre in a school context tends to remain focused on the micro – sometimes meso – level, with connections to the macro level largely absent. Both teachers and students need more scaffolding to be able to make connections between the three levels (Francis, 2013; Hammer, 2021; 2023; 2024; Hammer & Lenz, 2022). In this respect, it is helpful to recall Freire's (2018) concept of praxis, in which he emphasises that for consciousness-raising and social change to occur, action and reflection must be supplemented with theory. In schools and RE, using forum theatre as a pedagogical approach to addressing controversial issues might involve providing students with scaffolding in the form of concepts and theories that help them see the dialectical connections between their own life conditions and the systems that frame them. The use of terms such as 'gay' and 'Jew' as derogatory expressions is not arbitrary; rather, it is both a part and a result of structures deeply rooted in a history of prejudice against homosexuals and Jews. Assertions that Muslims are terrorists, and that Islam is a violent religion, must be contextualised within media dynamics and existing structural frameworks of understanding. Incorporating this awareness could form an integral part of a comprehensive teaching period in which forum theatre could serve as a central component.

Concluding Remarks

In this article, I have explored the opportunities and challenges related to using Augusto Boal's forum theatre and Paulo Freire's critical pedagogy when addressing controversial issues related to religion and worldviews in Norwegian RE classrooms. Despite the significant disparities between the societies and educational systems present in Freire and Boal's Brazil in the 1970s and Norwegian RE in the 2020s, I argue that there is still much to gain from using forum theatre in this new context. Adopting a critical pedagogical approach brings power, oppression and change to the forefront of the explorations, while diverging from traditional methods of discussing controversial issues. The dramaturgical distance created by forum theatre allows students to explore sensitive and challenging issues without escalating conflict within the classroom, thereby fostering empowerment processes for both students and teachers. However, in Norway and other welfare states, where the boundaries between oppressor and oppressed are blurred and dynamic, some potential pitfalls – especially the reproduction of existing power relations – exist.

In Freire's pedagogy and Boal's forum theatre, the aim is to make individuals aware of the dialectical relationship between oppressive microsituations and the structural power mechanisms that surround them. I have pointed out that this connection is challenging for teachers and students to grasp in a school context. Therefore, it would be beneficial for future research on forum theatre, RE and controversial issues to focus on how to incorporate these elements in ways that help students understand that their lives, worldviews and expressions are part of the larger structural conditions that surround them. If successful, this approach has the potential to not only encourage students to enact changes in their immediate environment but also to instil a belief in their ability to advocate for broader societal transformations, all while embracing the human dignity of all individuals.

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