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Using forum theatre to address homosexuality as a controversial issue in religious education

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ABSTRACT

How to address controversial issues in schools is a recurring question for researchers and teachers alike. A widespread perception in the literature is that *dialogue* and *discussion* are the most appropriate pedagogical strategies. However, little attention has been given to other pedagogical approaches, such as arts and drama pedagogy. The overall objective of this article is therefore to explore the potential of forum theatre. Through action research with secondary school RE-teachers, students' utterances about homosexuality were transformed into a forum theatre session. The risks and benefits of using forum theatre in this context are discussed in relation to its basis in critical pedagogy, and areas for further research are identified.



KEYWORDS

Religious education (RE); controversial issues; forum theatre; homosexuality

Introduction

Controversial issues can be defined as 'issues which arouse strong feelings and divide communities and societies' (Kerr and Huddleston 2015, 13), and a recurring question for researchers and teachers is how to address them in class. Earlier research has shown that many RE-teachers find it demanding to address controversial issues (Anker and von der Lippe 2016; Quartermaine 2016) and that teachers and students often feel unsafe or uncertain when such issues are raised in classrooms (Jackson 2014; Flensner and Von der Lippe 2019). Nevertheless, there has been relatively little scholarly debate on controversial issues in the RE field compared to social studies and political classrooms (von der Lippe 2019).

The objective of this empirical article is therefore to contribute new perspectives on how to address controversial issues in RE. There is a widespread perception among educational researchers that *discussion* and *dialogue* are the best pedagogical approach (Hand and Levinson 2012). Consequently, the literature is concerned with what kind of discussion is best suited to the task (Gregory 2014; Quartermaine 2016), what factors hinder or promote discussion (Hand and Levinson 2012), how to appropriately frame a discussion (Hand 2013), and what enables a 'good' discussion (Sætra 2021). While these studies provide valuable insights, little attention has been devoted to other pedagogical approaches to controversial issues, e.g. arts or drama pedagogy. Hence, this study explores an alternative approach to addressing controversial issues in RE, namely through forum theatre. The Socratic dialogue and various forms of discussions are also key features of forum theatre, which, in addition, encourages embodied learning and differs from most forms of discussion by adopting an oppressed protagonist's perspective.

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The aim of this article is to examine RE-teachers and students' experience of addressing homosexuality as a controversial issue through forum theatre in RE. An action research project conducted in a secondary school in Oslo, Norway, provides the empirical basis for the article. It is not self-evident that homosexuality falls under RE-teaching, and nor is it obvious that homosexuality actually qualifies as a controversial issue. I therefore start with a brief description of RE in Norway, followed by a discussion of whether homosexuality should be addressed as a controversial issue or not. I then describe the theoretical framework for and method of forum theatre, before presenting and analysing empirical findings and discussing them in light of the risks and benefits of forum theatre and directive and non-directive teaching.

Religious education in Norway

In Norway, 96% of students attend public schools (Utdanningsdirektoratet 2019). The curriculum is national, and all students from age 6–16 receive the same basic education. RE is an integrative and compulsory subject for all students from grade 1–10, regardless of their religious or non-religious background. Since autumn 2020, and as part of an overall renewal of all subjects in Norwegian schools, the RE curriculum has been revised. According to Korsvoll (2020), the changes to the curriculum are not fundamental but reflect a turn in which national identity and Christian heritage are downplayed somewhat in favour of an intercultural approach.

Key values highlighted in the curriculum are equality, human dignity, mutual respect and tolerance. After 10th grade, students should be able to 'explore the perspective of others and deal with disagreement and conflict of opinions', and 'identify and discuss ethical issues related to various forms of communication' (Utdanningsdirektoratet 2020). These competence goals give RE-teachers great freedom to choose which topics to teach and indicate that controversial issues have a legitimate place in RE. Teachers are free to choose the pedagogical method and didactical strategy they find most appropriate.

Should homosexuality be addressed as a controversial issue in RE?

According to Hand (2007, 2008), if an issue is considered controversial, it should be taught openly and non-directively. This implies that the teacher should refrain from endorsing any particular view and allow students to explore various perspectives. On the other hand, if an issue or question is regarded as non-controversial, it should be taught as settled or resolved, and directly. In such case, the teacher must endorse one view as the right one to get students to accept the correct answer.

In his seminal article '*Should we teach homosexuality as a controversial issue?*', Hand (2007) concludes that homosexuality is *not* a controversial issue and should therefore be taught directly and settled as morally legitimate. He builds his argument on rejecting *the behavioural criterion* first proposed by Bailey (1971), which states that 'Controversies are largely social phenomena: that is, they are those topics and issues about which numbers of people are observed to disagree'. Hand (2007, 71, with reference to Dearden 1984), dismisses this criterion because 'the fact of disagreement is not enough to make an issue controversial'. The problem with the behavioural criterion is its inclusiveness and openness to almost anything that people may disagree on. Hand (2007) also rejects *the political criterion*, which defines moral questions as controversial 'when answers to them are not entailed by the public values of the liberal democratic state' (71). Given that public values and public morals are context-dependent and dynamic, the idea that the teacher should endorse the same moral positions as the state favours at any given time is neither defensible nor desirable (Hand 2008). Instead, Hand (2007) defends *the epistemic criterion*: '(...) a matter is controversial when contrary views can be held on it without those views being contrary to reason' (71). Hand (2007) explicitly addresses religious arguments that, with reference to scriptural authority, propound the wrongness of homosexual acts. Based on the epistemic criterion, he discusses why such religious

views are not rationally tenable unless 'one accepts the major premise that all biblical injunctions are morally sound' (77). He rhetorically answers his own premise by citing excerpts from the Old Testament and concludes that 'this premise is rationally indefensible' (77). In a later article, Hand (2008) defends the epistemic criterion by linking it to what he claims to be the central aim of education: to promote rationality. Cooling (2012) criticises Hand's (2007, 2008) views for being too narrow and proposes instead *the diversity criterion*, which emphasises the virtues of fairness and fostering community cohesion. The diversity criterion does not undermine rationality as an educational objective but aims to expand the elasticity of the epistemic criterion by acknowledging that reason always operates within certain paradigms and intellectual traditions. Cooling (2012, 2014) specifically addresses Hand's (2007, 2008, 2014) claim that religious injunctions are contrary to reason and criticises him for basing his argument on literal readings and ignoring the fact that there are more sophisticated ways to interpret sacred texts.

This normative debate shows that the question of whether or not homosexuality should be addressed as a controversial issue can rest on educational aims and criteria. Hand concludes, on the basis of rationality and the epistemic criterion, that the moral legitimacy of homosexuality is not a controversial issue and that teachers must address it as settled. Cooling's approach acknowledges religious people's rationality and highlights that religious interpretations are often far more complex than Hand acknowledges. On grounds of fairness, he argues for a diversity criterion aimed at promoting peaceful coexistence in society. This theoretical debate offers valuable perspectives for further scientific consideration. Cooling's approach seems to be the most inclusive and in line with the reasoning of this action research project. However, neither Hand nor Cooling base their arguments directly on empirical classroom research. Classroom interaction is complex and unpredictable, and students might very well bring non-sophisticated readings of the Holy Scriptures to class and, particularly to RE. In line with other researchers, I believe that the epistemic criterion does not take adequate account of the complexities of classroom interaction (Nocera 2013; Gereluk 2013; von der Lippe 2019; Flensner 2020), and that it potentially excludes vigorous debates in society from classroom practice (Hess and McAvoy 2015). Using the diversity criterion, on the other hand, risks excluding controversial issues from teaching practice simply to ensure cohesion (Hand 2014), whereas, in Norway, where the rights of homosexuals are morally supported and juridically guaranteed by the State, the political criterion could exclude religious arguments for the wrongness of homosexuality from classroom inquiry.

I find the behavioural, political, epistemic and diversity criteria to be important thinking tools, although not always sufficient to identify which issues should be addressed as open and non-directive or settled and directive in pedagogical contexts. Sætra (2019) criticises the criterion debate for resting on the false assumption that an *a priori*, universal and context-transcendent criterion actually exists that makes it possible to deduce from theory what should be done in practice. Instead, he proposes that 'the situation, rather than a definite criterion, should be the foremost guide to action' (338). Hess and McAvoy (2015) argue that students should be able to discuss issues they are likely to encounter in the public sphere. In line with this reasoning, I suggest that, in this particular school context, RE-teachers and students' experiences of homosexuality as a relevant and contested topic in class and society legitimise choosing to address it as an open, controversial issue through forum theatre.

Forum theatre: theoretical framework and method

'Theatre of the oppressed', pioneered by Augusto Boal in the 1960s (Boal [1979] 2008), is a collection of theatrical methods of which forum theatre is particularly well known. The theoretical foundation aligns closely with Freire's ([1970] 2018) critical 'pedagogy of the oppressed' in that it illuminates and analyses concepts such as power and oppression, empowerment and change. The basic philosophy of forum theatre is simple: 'being in sympathy with the oppressed in any situation and the belief in humanity's ability to change' (Jackson xxvi, in Boal 2002).

Forum theatre plays are designed to resonate with people's real-life experiences, and the goal is to 'discuss concrete situations (through the medium of theatre)' (Boal 2002, 242). In our forum theatre, we chose the topic 'homosexuality' because both students and RE-teachers perceived it as a recurring and controversial issue and thereby authentic in their school context and real lives.

Forum theatre is dynamic and interactive. It enacts situations containing elements of oppression, discrimination or injustice. It proposes a constellation of power imbalance between the antagonist and the protagonist, and, to provoke the audience's urge to intervene, the original scene ends unresolved. A central character in forum theatre is the joker, who explains the rules of the game but personally decides nothing (Boal 2002). The joker, here enacted by the RE-teachers, informed the student audience that they would observe the scene once as spectators. It would then be shown again, and they would be transformed into active participants. They could say 'stop', instruct or take the protagonist's part and enact alternative solutions whenever they thought something could have been done differently to improve the play's ending. In Boalian terminology, the spectators were now spect-actors (Boal 2002), and the power to influence and transform the situation was handed over to the students.

Boal (2002) described forum theatre as pedagogical in the sense that everybody learns together. Through the spect-actors' interventions, a multitude of solutions are visualised and analysed. The ethos is empowerment through enactment. In our case, the students were encouraged by the RE-jokers to become involved through peer discussion, whole-group reflections and to instruct or enact the protagonist. According to Boal (2002), the joker must not manipulate or influence the spect-actors or exercise any kind of power. In reality, however, as Campbell (2019) notes, the joker holds the power to facilitate democratic deliberation, but also to be selective, to control and, most problematic, to censor. Ellsworth (1989) criticises critical pedagogies because they risk reinforcing the very power imbalances they aim to equalise. There is a contradiction inherent in critical pedagogy between its emancipatory objective and the hierarchical relationship between teacher and students and the directive nature of dominant educational discourse. I will return to this criticism.

Research method

This article reports from the third and last cycle of a larger action research project conducted at a secondary school in Oslo from December 2019 to June 2020. Three RE-teachers, Ana (25), Saadiq (32) and Herman (36), their 10th grade students (seventy-one, divided into three classes), the school management and I collaborated closely to develop a forum theatre model adapted to the school context and to RE-teaching on controversial issues. We employed the action research model of Carr and Kemmis (2002), an iterative, self-reflective spiral comprising four phases: plan-act-observe-reflect.

The three classes made up the entire 10th grade at this school. The teachers described the classes as different in terms of activity level and conflict lines. Saadiq's class A was described as active and lively, Ana's class B as quiet and cautious, whereas Herman's class C was characterised by underlying tensions between some of the students.

Early in January 2020, before we started to plan the first cycle, all the students were given a written assignment in which they were asked to describe episodes from school where criticism of religion and belief-related tensions and disagreements had played a central part. Using content analysis procedures, I coded and categorised the responses (Gibbs 2007). The three largest categories were: 1) use of derogatory terms, 2) religious beliefs vs. atheism, and 3) derogatory talk about fellow students' religion and beliefs. In category 1, 'gay', 'Jew' and 'Negro'¹ were frequently reported. All these terms could have been addressed in a forum theatre session, but

¹I acknowledge that the use of this term in academic writing is contested and that it might be offensive to some. I have nevertheless chosen to use it in order to give an accurate description of the data.

due to the research project's time frame, we had to choose just one of them. The three RE-teachers confirmed the students' responses and unanimously agreed that homosexuality was the most controversial and urgent issue in all three classes. They highlighted two types of utterances that often led to heated exchanges: 1) students arguing the wrongness of homosexuality with reference to Holy Scriptures, and 2) the use of 'gay' as a derogatory term. Due to the principle that forum theatre should address real-life experiences and our stance that the authenticity of classroom interaction should guide pedagogical choices regarding controversial issues, we decided to address homosexuality in cycle 3.

Ethical concerns meant that four planning meetings were required to design the scene and try to foresee unintended outcomes (six hours). We discussed the limitation of using forum theatre to address homosexuality and the risk of discriminating students who shared the view (whether religious or non-religious) that homosexuality is negative. We agreed that the jokers should be constantly aware of new power imbalances emerging and that they held the power to counteract and question new potential oppressions. Another limitation of the method used was the risk of stereotyping religions per se, or religious people, by representing them as unambiguously negative to homosexuality. I will return to these limitations in the discussion section.

Once the scene was completed, the teachers asked for five students in their respective classes to volunteer as actors. Then, as an intermediate stage between the plan and act stages, I rehearsed the scene with the student-actors. First, I gathered the 15 students from the three classes who had volunteered. This session lasted one hour. I introduced the scene and let the students respond and adjust. Then, the three students from each class who would play the same role jointly developed an interpretation of their character and created background stories that would be revealed in response to the audience's interventions. For ethical reasons, the teachers had decided in advance which students should play which roles. This was to avoid anyone having to play a character who was too close to his or her own position, attitudes, opinions and identity. The underlying tensions in class C impacted on which students were chosen to be actors in the same play, and teacher Herman put a lot of effort into the selection. After this introductory session, I worked separately for one hour with the actors from each class in order to rehearse lines, body language, spatial movements and improvisations. Then, the forum theatre was enacted in the three classes, in sessions lasting 1.5 hours each.

The primary data in this article consist of audio-recorded, semi-structured, in-depth individual post-interviews of the three RE-teachers (45–90 minutes each), an audio-recorded group-reflection meeting with the three RE-teachers and myself (1.5 hours) and five video- and audio-recorded focus group interviews with a total of 27 students (40–60 minutes). All data were transcribed, coded and categorised in NVivo (Gibbs 2007). To safeguard the anonymity of participants, they were all given fictive names. The project is registered with and approved by the Norwegian Centre for Research Data, with reference number 606,538.

'The homosexuality scene' – central features

According to Hammond (2015), developing multi-dimensional characters is essential in forum theatre, and particularly when working with young people. Creating background stories and exploring the thoughts, feelings and motivation of the characters helps actors to understand their roles. Based on our experience from three cycles, I would like to add that this is particularly important for the students playing the antagonists, because they are the ones who must respond to the spect-actors' interventions and improvise without moving out of character. 'Improvisation' is the most reported challenge by far in the student data material.

In the original 'homosexuality scene', the teachers and I created two male antagonists, one of whom argued that homosexuality is wrong with reference to Holy Scriptures: 'Homosexuality is not natural. Humans were created to make children. It is Adam and Eve – not Adam and Steve', and 'Gays end up in hell'. The students named him 'Joseph', deliberately chosen as a commonly used name in

Judaism, Christianity and Islam, hence not linked to one particular religion. The other antagonist was named Pablo. He used the term 'gay' but did not seem to mean much by it. One of his lines was: 'Move a little further away. What the hell, are you gay?' The protagonist, named Mats, did not say anything in the original scene but when the joker, after the scene was shown the first time, asked the students to interpret it, they could easily identify Mats as the protagonist and read his body language and spatial movements as discomfort.

During the forum theatre sessions, students discussed in pairs and among whole group, and instructed the protagonist and enacted his part. They tried many different strategies, ranging from attempts to verbally attack and weaken the antagonists to 'questioning strategies' aimed at exploring and understanding the antagonists' utterances and viewpoints. They also used 'analogy strategies', drawing parallels between derogatory talk about homosexuality and racism. Especially the 'questioning strategy' and the 'analogy strategy' changed the dynamics between the protagonist and antagonist, and often led to a slight shift in the original statement. As 'Joseph' concluded after a racism analogy intervention: 'So ... I will not teach my children that homosexuality is right, but I will teach them to respect everyone'.

Results and analysis

In this section, I will highlight three categories I believe provide insights into how students and RE-teachers experienced forum theatre as a pedagogical approach for addressing homosexuality as a controversial issue in RE and, further, how the Boalian non-directive joker-ideal was experienced in a secondary school classroom context. Despite some initial differences between the three classes' dynamics and behaviour, I have not found any significant variances between them in how the students experienced forum theatre. It was primarily through the teachers' reflections and utterances that negotiations and reservations became apparent. By naming the categories 'Proximity and distance', 'Oppression and representation' and 'Directiveness and non-directiveness', I have tried to capture the main perspectives that visualise some of the internal dynamics and contradictions that arose when using forum theatre in this context.

Proximity and distance

The three RE-teachers and the vast majority of students thought that homosexuality was a relevant topic to address and they found the scene realistic.

Ava from Group 2:

There are many who call each other abusive words, like gay and ... yes, it's quite important in today's society.

Ilias from Group 1:

Personally, I think I have encountered the same situations, and therefore I feel that ... yes ... I can relate to the play more.

Teacher Herman highlighted what he found to be a central feature of forum theatre:

It [FT] has been a great way to address this issue ... I think it makes it a little more spontaneous and realistic. Here, you get a real response to something they [students] see, so it is more genuine.

The relevance element was related to proximity on the individual, school and community level. In addition, the balance between proximity and distance was highlighted as a reason why students did not feel that they were being attacked even though the topic was controversial, sensitive and proximate:

Teacher Ana:

(...) it's a little safer in forum theatre because it's a stage, there are actors, there are roles (...) you react to what you see, while in the classroom [regular teaching], your personal opinion would have come out much more clearly, and this would have led to a clash between students (...).

The shift of focus from personal opinions to the shared goal of solving a challenge is highlighted as a reason why the students' opinions did not clash. These findings are in accordance with Hammond (2015, 47, ref. McFarlane 2005) who suggests that 'drama creates distance, and this allows for objectivity where the child can get closer to the experience both within the play and in real life'.

Oppression and representation

Because forum theatre scenes are created with the objective of showing elements of conflict and oppression, the students reflected on this in focus groups. Lars from Group 4 stated:

I feel everyone has stood up for those who have been oppressed, in all scenes, so I feel it has been a very educational experience for many students, showing that, even though you belong to a religion, you can accept homosexuality and, if you are from one religion, you can accept another.

The element of oppression is also relevant in relation to the way characters are represented in the scene. Hadia from Group 5 stated:

The characters had a background story ... So, it's not like the characters didn't have a personality (...) there was wholeness in the characters and, this was to show different layers and understand that this has something to do with how the person is (...).

In Lars's opinion, everyone had tried to hinder oppression and he accentuated that forum theatre had promoted tolerance and visualised internal diversity in religions. Hadia thought the characters' background stories had made them dynamic and multi-dimensional, and that their real personality was revealed as a result of the audience's interventions.

The teachers also reflected on representation and oppression. Teacher Herman was somewhat concerned:

But if we think about how it is perceived if you identify very much with Joseph ... We have, in a way, or ... the students have, in part, with the background stories, come up with a correct answer ... like what works and what doesn't work. So I wonder if anyone might feel like ... ehm ... that it is a different view than his or hers that is presented as correct (...) that everyone should be equally tolerant.

Herman touched on to the normative premise for forum theatre: being in favour of the oppressed. He was concerned that some students might have felt that their opinions were represented as wrong or intolerant, and that there might have been some potential oppression implicit in the way we conducted the forum play.

Directiveness and non-directiveness

The teachers reflected a lot on their role as jokers and compared it to their regular RE-teacher role and to the Boalian ideal joker.

Teacher Ana:

(...) In the joker role ... you back off a little, right? You control it but, at the same time, you let the students control it to a much larger degree.

Teacher Saadiq:

Well, I ask a lot of questions during a school day, I have always done that, and forum theatre shows me that that is the way to go (...). In general, I do not think you really reach students by telling them 'This is the way it is'. They have to reflect on it themselves, before they can conclude on something.

Teacher Herman:

I think that forum theatre is basically meant to be very democratic and not very inculcating, but I think you still have a great deal of power to lead, even if you express yourself through questions. So, it is not exactly a trap to fall into, but at least you have to be aware of that power (...).

These quotes indicate that the teachers find forum theatre and the joker role less directive than regular RE-teaching. As jokers, they ask a lot of questions to encourage students to think for themselves and reach their own conclusions. Control is to some degree passed to the students. However, as Herman points out, even if you just ask questions, you still have the power to lead and be directive, and teachers need to be aware of this power.

The students also compared the joker role to the regular RE-teacher role. Hadia from Group 5 stated:

It was good that they asked follow-up questions, or questions that made us think (...). As jokers, it is not them who teach. They stand a little bit more on the sidelines (...).

In general, students responded very positively to the way RE-teachers enacted the joker role. They noted that the teachers were more on the sidelines and that teaching was transferred to, or perhaps shared between, teachers and students. They also found that the joker questions encouraged reflection and promoted insight.

Discussion

Every classroom has its own dynamics and what is considered controversial in one classroom might appear to be settled or insignificant in another (von der Lippe 2019). In the context of this research project, both RE-teachers and students highlighted that divergent opinions about the moral legitimacy of homosexuality and the use of gay as a derogatory term created strong emotions and tensions in class. Hence, the definition stating that controversial issues are 'issues which arouse strong feelings and divide communities and societies' suited our case (Kerr and Huddleston 2015, 13). It rests on the behavioural criterion and can be criticised for being too inclusive. However, if we had based our work on the epistemic criterion (Hand 2007), it would have significantly limited and distorted forum theatre's openness to all statements, particularly students' references to Holy Scriptures. To meet the RE competence goal 'explore the perspectives of others and deal with disagreement and conflict of opinion' (Utdanningsdirektoratet 2020), our assumption was, in line with Hess and McAvoy (2015), that controversial issues, vigorous debates and disagreements relevant to students' lives and society at large were best served by taking an open approach. As the data analysis indicated, the combination of proximity and distance could be a reason why students and teachers found forum theatre to be a good pedagogical approach for dealing with disagreements about controversial issues relevant to real life. Much of the literature on controversial issues is preoccupied with how to address them, while ensuring that the classroom remains a safe space for all students (Flensner and Von der Lippe 2019). This element of distance might help to accommodate the distinction Callan (2016) draws between students being virtue safe while at the same time being intellectually challenged.

However, choosing to address issues related to homosexuality was obviously a risky endeavour. As Jackson (2014) points out, 'all classroom interactions involve some degree of risk, especially when controversial issues are discussed and different claims to truth are made' (57). Acknowledging that some students make statements like Joseph did just as much to position themselves in class as to propound their worldview, we risked stereotyping them. Moreover, it is uncertain whether students who actually believe that 'homosexuals end up in hell' were adequately safeguarded. One deliberate step taken to counter these risks and avoid static representation was the work student-actors did to develop the characters by inventing names and background stories to visualise the character's complexities. The second comment regarding 'gay' as a derogatory term is different and has other

connotations and meanings. Research and surveys show that 'gay' is among the most used abusive terms in Norwegian schools (Hasund 2020). When adolescents use the term 'gay', it is not normally about sexual practice or orientation, but is related to expressions of masculinity or femininity that deviate from gender norms. The term 'gay' can also be used among friends to express friendship and cohesion, and hence be experienced as harmless (Røthing 2020).

Whatever the intentions behind devaluing homosexuality or using the term 'gay' might be, the consequences can be unintentional. Therefore, we aimed to 'identify and discuss ethical issues related to various forms of communication' and promote key values such as tolerance and human dignity (Utdanningsdirektoratet 2020). Our goal was to encourage students' critical reflection on oppressive behaviour and the power of language. As Freire ([1970] 2018) pointed out, reality is created through language, and the way we use words really matters. The data did not show any immediate change in the meaning of the term 'gay' when addressed in forum theatre. However, the empirical findings from the students' utterances indicated that forum theatre had encouraged reflection, provided multiple perspectives and empowered students to stand up to oppression.

Nevertheless, due to the normative premise of forum theatre and how we enacted the play, we risked creating new controversial issues relating to religion and must acknowledge that students who identified with the Joseph character, or students who just think homosexuality is negative, might have experienced some degree of marginalisation or discrimination. This is what Ellsworth (1989) criticises, namely the risk of critical pedagogy reinforcing or creating new oppressive power relations. This concern was not reflected among the students, but it nevertheless deserves serious consideration. In forum theatre, it is not possible to completely rule out the risk of unintended outcomes. However, by encouraging teachers' critical awareness of these potential risks we might have modified or minimised unwanted side-effects. Moreover, one of the principal features of forum theatre is to rerun the scene several times, always with the aim of detecting and avoiding the development of new forms of marginalisation. Hence, a forum theatre play can never end satisfactorily if oppressive patterns remain or emerge. However, due to time limitations in the school context, the teachers had to end the play at a predetermined time. Therefore, in retrospect, more extensive use of follow-up sessions and meta-dialogues about the forum theatre in each class could have been a way of opening a reflective space in which to discuss dilemmas related to power dynamics.

The dichotomy between directive and non-directive teaching has been criticised for being too rigid, leading scholars to suggest intermediate positions. Warnick and Smith (2014) argue for 'soft directive teaching', where students develop confidence in their 'ability to employ rationality and critical thinking strategies' (230). The teacher can endorse a position but leaves his or her viewpoint open to criticism and does not try to convince students to adopt it. In a similar vein, Gregory (2014) promotes a 'procedurally directive approach' in which the teacher's intention is to guide students through a rigorous inquiry dialogue rather than steering them to a predetermined position. Forum theatre also adopts an intermediate position between a directive and non-directive approach. Situated within the framework of critical pedagogy, it is directive in terms of its anti-oppressive objective and cultivation of critical consciousness (Freire [1970] 2018; Boal 2002). Moreover, being normatively framed by the Norwegian educational system and RE-curriculum, the forum theatre we conducted was directed towards predetermined values and goals. Its directiveness was evident in the way we designed the scene and it was potentially present in the jokers' power to pursue certain questioning strategies. The Boalian joker ideal is non-directive, and the secondary school RE-jokers' experience was that they were less directive than in their regular RE-teacher role, but not totally non-directive. The non-directive element was nevertheless evident in the way RE-jokers refrained from endorsing their own viewpoints and asked questions that left it to the students to arrive at the most desirable solution. This investigative and student-centred approach obviously involved some degree of risk, but also placed a huge amount of trust in students' desire and ability to counter oppression through action and reflection.

Conclusion

In this article, I have drawn on the criterion debate to argue that RE-teachers' and students' real-life experiences should be the foremost guide to pedagogical choices and actions, and that the context dependency of controversial issues made homosexuality relevant to address openly at this particular school. Through action research and close collaboration with RE-teachers and students, the aim was to generate knowledge about the risks and benefits of using forum theatre to address homosexuality in RE, and to discuss forum theatre in relation to the dichotomy between directive and non-directive teaching. The findings indicate that teachers and students experienced the combination of proximity and distance as a success factor that enabled them to discuss a controversial issue without feeling uncomfortable and provoking clashes of opinions. In addition, character development was highlighted as important to avoid characters being represented in a static and one-dimensional manner. Nevertheless, even though everyone could voice and enact their thoughts and solutions, students who identified with the Joseph character, or for some reason were negative to homosexuality, might have felt overpowered or silenced by the directive, anti-oppressive element of forum theatre. Thus, despite the fact that the RE-teachers and an overwhelming majority of students were enthusiastic about the combination of forum theatre and controversial issues, I have suggested that more extensive use of meta-dialogues about the forum theatre sessions could have provided opportunities to debrief and discuss the emergence of dilemmas and new power dynamics. In any case, more research is desirable on how students who hold or express views contrary to educational aims and values can be adequately safeguarded.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

Notes on contributor

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