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Exploring teacher agency to address controversial issues in religious education – a forum theatre and action research approach

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ABSTRACT

Dealing with controversy is highlighted in policy documents as a cornerstone of democracy and education. However, previous research points to several challenges for teachers when dealing with controversial issues (CI) in class. In this article, we apply an ecological conceptualisation of teacher agency and explore the ways in which forum theatre (FT) and action research (AR) can provide conditions for developing religious education (RE) teachers' agency to address CI. Our main findings indicate a shift in teachers' orientations from short-term goals of exercising power and control to avoid causing conflict in class towards a process orientation in which an 'avoidance strategy' transformed gradually into some combination of a 'deliberation and embodiment strategy' and a 'trust and power-sharing strategy'. We conclude with a reflection on whether this new approach to addressing CI has the potential to become substantiable and hence contribute to the educational goal of promoting democratic education.

Introduction

European and Norwegian educational policy documents state that addressing controversial issues (CI) in schools is a prerequisite to prepare young people for political and civic engagement (Crick, 1998; UNESCO, 2021; Utdanningsdirektoratet, 2017). Handling controversy is a cornerstone of democracy and, in the current societal context of increasingly fragile democracies, a matter of 'educational urgency' (Kerr & Huddleston, 2015, p. 7). Hence, a growing number of research studies and online publications give insights into factors that support and constrain teachers when addressing CI in class. In most curricular contexts, teachers report challenges such as lack of time and competence, lack of expert knowledge and appropriate pedagogical approaches, and difficulties protecting students' sensitivities and establishing a safe classroom climate (Anker & von der Lippe, 2016; Flensner & Von der Lippe, 2019; Kerr & Huddleston, 2015). The most widespread pedagogical recommendation in the research literature is discussion (Hand & Levinson, 2012; Hess & McAvoy, 2015; Ho et al., 2017; Sætra, 2021). However, even when discussion is adopted as a pedagogical method, teacher challenges seem to endure in many instances. For this reason, it seems beneficial to expand current thinking regarding methodological choices and pedagogical strategies and examine how researchers can contribute to the 'CI education' field by not only analysing what teachers

are already doing, but intervening in the practice field and, through interprofessional collaboration, contributing to the development of teacher agency to work with controversy.

The national and curricular context of this study is religious education (RE) in Norway, where it is a non-confessional and compulsory subject for all students from grades 1–10 in public schools. The RE curricula state that students should learn to 'explore the perspective of others and deal with disagreement and conflict of opinion' (Utdanningsdirektoratet, 2020). The overall objective of the current study is to explore whether changes in RE teachers' work ecologies, such as structural, material, and immaterial conditions, can enhance their agency to address CI related to religion and worldviews. The ecological approach is in line with Priestley et al. (2015b), who suggest that 'any attempt to enhance teacher agency should not just focus on the capacities of individuals (…) but should at the very same time pay attention to the factors and dimensions that shape the ecologies of teachers' work' (p. 3). The contextual and temporal changes introduced in teachers' work ecologies in this study were *action research* (AR) and *forum theatre* (FT). As the term 'action research' implies, it consists of both 'action' and 'research'. 'Action' refers to ways of improving practice, promoting social change, etc., while 'research' concerns ways of producing valid knowledge about social practices. AR always involves some form of intervention, and the mode of working is cyclical (Herr & Anderson, 2015). The AR in this study includes three RE teachers, 71 10th-grade students, the school's management, and researcher Aina. FT was introduced by Aina as a new *drama pedagogical approach* to address CI. FT is rooted in the critical pedagogical legacy of Paulo Freire and centres power asymmetries, empowerment, and change (Boal, 2002; Freire, 2018 [1970]).

The transformative agenda of FT and the critical AR is to interrupt habitual ways of thinking and acting and to develop and change pedagogical practice in ways that strengthen equality, human dignity, and solidarity (Boal, 2002; Carr & Kemmis, 2002). The following research question is explored in this article: *How can FT and AR provide conditions to develop RE teachers' agency to address CI?* The focus is on examining RE teachers' actions and reflections before, during, and after addressing CI in FT sessions; exploring the implications of carrying out collaborative and critical AR; and understanding in what ways these new conditions influence *why* and *when* turning points occur and new forms of teacher agency emerge.

Addressing CI in schools: earlier research on constraining factors and teaching strategies

A body of research literature and educational policy emphasise several challenges and constraints teachers face when working with CI in educational settings. In a paradigmatic article, Stradling (1984) illuminates four main categories of internal and external constraints. The first is *teacher constraints*, such as lack of knowledge of a complex issue, their subject understanding, and personality factors regarding what role they are comfortable taking. Being a 'neutral chairman' or adopting 'procedural neutrality', as advocated by Stenhouse (1983), is regarded by many as difficult to sustain as they feel uncomfortable with open-ended discussions in which they risk losing control and credibility. The second, *school constraints*, includes structure and organisation such as timetabling arrangements, classroom design, potential disapproval of the head and colleagues, and school climate regarding accepted teaching methods. The third, *external constraints* from critics outside the school system, such as parents, board of management, and school governors, also impact on teachers. Lastly, *issue-specific constraints* concern sensitive issues, such as sexism and racism; however, these constraints may vary according to schools' student composition. Furthermore, constraints are inherent in a CI; evidence is incomplete, biased, or contradictory, and learning outcomes may be unforeseen.

Stradling's (1984) almost 40-year-old contribution still resonates with recent research and educational policy. Cowan and Maitles (2012) highlight that, in many countries, secondary school teachers face structural school constraints, such as lack of tradition of discussing CI and physical classroom design, as well as external constraints due to assessment-driven agendas, parental disapproval, and the influence of the mass media and politicians. The Council of Europe points to five

main challenges for teachers when addressing CI: teaching style, protecting student sensitivities, classroom climate and control, lack of expert knowledge, and dealing with spontaneous questions and remarks (Kerr & Huddleston, 2015).

Due to the emotionally charged and sensitive nature of CI (Gereluk, 2013), addressing such issues related to religion and worldviews in schools can be a contentious terrain. McLaughlin (2004) states that 'controversial issues of particular sensitivity arise in relation to the moral, religious, social and political domains' (p. 152). Empirical studies paying particular attention to RE and CI have found that when students' religious or non-religious worldviews collide in class, it can create a great deal of tension and polarisation (Flensner, 2015; Franck & Thalén, 2018; Hammer & Schanke, 2018). Warren (2006) defines such incidents as 'hot moments' in which 'people's feelings—often conflictual—rise to a point that threatens teaching and learning' (p. 1). Several studies have shown that many teachers feel insufficiently trained and ill-equipped to handle the dilemmas and constraints likely to occur if addressing CI in RE and citizenship education (Nazar, 2020; Oulton et al., 2004). When terrorism is addressed in RE, teachers report fear of not being able to safeguard students from discomfort and emotional distress, dealing with students' prejudices, concern about the unintended intensification of social divisions (Quartermaine, 2016), lack of time and professional and didactical competence (Anker & von der Lippe, 2016), and worries that it will evoke strong feelings and could divide the class (Toft, 2020). In the research literature on CI, discussion is frequently recommended as a favoured teaching method (Hess & McAvoy, 2015; Ho et al., 2017). However, due to the challenges and constraining factors, teachers in fact adopt a variety of teaching strategies, ranging from avoidance, denial of the controversy, provocation, representing/considering various perspectives, soliciting empathy, and deliberation (Flensner, 2020; Hess & McAvoy, 2015).

Forum theatre

'Theatre of the oppressed' is an umbrella term that encompasses all of Augusto Boal's theatre forms, with FT being particularly well known (Boal, 2008 [1979], 2002). The origin of FT can be traced back to the military dictatorship in Brazil in the 1970s, since when it has been developed in new contexts all over the world. Theoretically, Boal's 'theatre of the oppressed' (2008 [1979], 2002) is closely aligned with Freire's 'pedagogy of the oppressed' (2008 [1979]), and the critical theoretical approach focuses on power, oppression, emancipation, and change. Hence, the aim of FT, or any other pedagogical method or educational policy for that matter, is never neutral. The promotion of values such as critical thinking, equality, solidarity, and human dignity has always been the primary objective directing in FT-work.

FT plays are designed to resonate with people's real-life experiences and to show situations with elements of oppression, power imbalance, and injustice. The oppressed protagonist and the power-holding antagonist enact a clear conflict, and the play ends in an unresolved way. The play is then performed again, but this time the audience is encouraged to replace and empower the oppressed protagonist to stand up against unjust and oppressive behaviours or mechanisms. Now, the spectators are no longer passive observers but, rather, transformed into active contributors who have the power to promote change though the enactment of a variety of solutions. In Boalian terms, they are now 'spect-actors'. Hence, FT is a process rather than a straightforward path, and experimentation, trial, and error in the development of more just solutions constitute its modus operandi (Boal, 2008 [1979], 2002; Engelstad, 2014).

The emancipatory educational ideal behind this procedure is informed by a belief in the power of critical enquiry leading to transformative action. Therefore, FT does not aim for a single 'true' or 'optimal' solution for a given problem to which the teacher has privileged access, but to empower students in the experience of finding non-oppressive solutions. In the Freirian sense, it aims to open up 'new avenues for [the students] to make better moral judgments that will enable them to assume some sense of responsibility to the other in light of those judgments' (Giroux, 2010, p. 217).

A central character in FT is the Joker, enacted here by the three RE teachers. The Joker's main task is to lead the conversation between actors and the audience. As indicated, the Joker is not supposed to have the right answers, and they personally decide nothing. Rather, the role of the Joker is informed

by a Socratic ideal who, in terms of asking questions, encourages the spect-actors' reflection and doubts (Boal, 2002). Achieving this ideal requires an altered teacher role, adjusted teacher–student relations, and, as Larrivee (2000) puts it, 'the creation of authentic learning communities by adjusting the power dynamics to turn power *over* into power *with* learners' (p. 293).

The critical theoretical framework of FT had implications for how exactly we staged the CI in the sense that we created scenes that showed how such issues often carry with them some inherently asymmetrical power relationships. To examine power distribution, reflective and transformative thinking, and change of practice to address CI in RE, we have chosen teacher agency as an analytical lens.

Teacher agency as an analytical lens

The concept of teacher agency is related to the teacher's capacity to respond professionally and independently to challenges emerging in classroom situations and other pedagogical practices (Imants & Van der Wal, 2020; Sang, 2020). In recent years, the focus on teacher agency has increased as a consequence of an accountability paradigm, making the *individual* teacher responsible for the implementation of measurement- and competition-oriented, standardised educational goals, but also as a critique of and counter-perspective on this paradigm. Opposing the notion of teachers as 'technicians' who implement pre-existing standards (Villegas & Lucas, 2002), a critical perspective emphasises that teachers have to be 'agentically positioned as professional decision makers and collegial experts in the contexts of their own learning communities' (Charteris & Smardon, 2015, p. 115). This positioning comprises the teachers' capacity to independently evaluate and change educational practices, *including* the interpretation of their underlying goals and objectives, implying that their ability to act as *agents of change* within particular contexts is highlighted (Pantić et al., 2022).

Based on these preconditions, Priestley et al. (2015a) have developed an *ecological* conceptualisation of teacher agency, emphasising that agency 'denotes the "quality" of the engagement of actors with temporal-relational contexts for action, not a "quality" of the actors themselves' (p. 3). Drawing on ideas and a conceptual framework from Emirbayer and Mische (1998), Priestley et al. (2015b) illustrated their theory with a three-prong model (Figure 1).
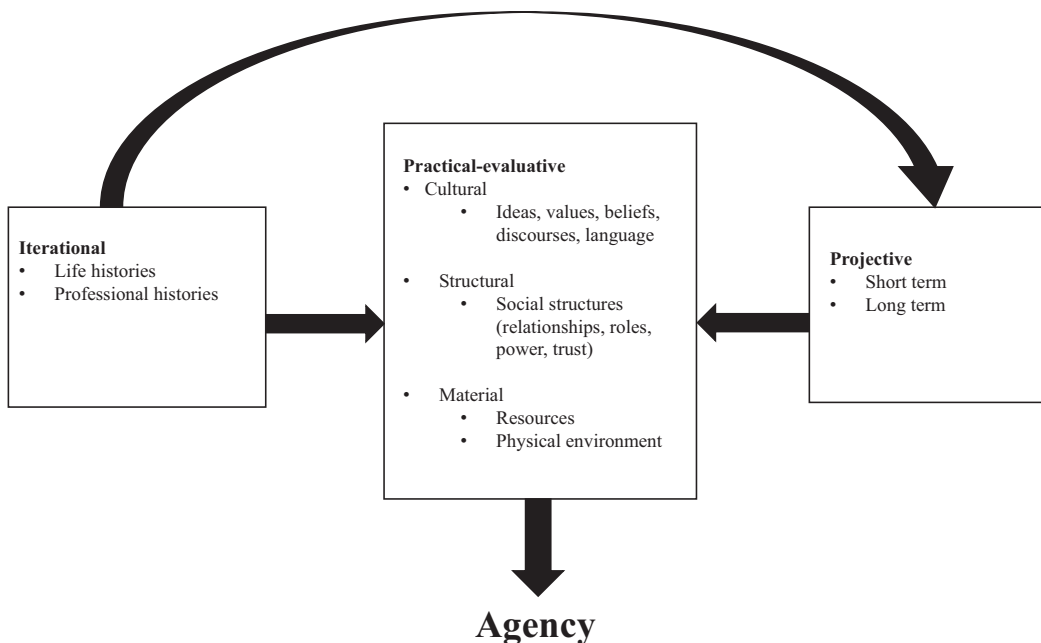

Figure 1. The ecological teacher agency model.]

This ecological model illustrates that the development of teacher agency to address CI will be informed by personal or professional previous experiences, oriented towards some combination of short-term or long-term future objectives or values, enacted in present concrete situations, and constrained or enabled by cultural, structural, or material resources. In our study, FT as a pedagogical approach and AR as a mode of professional development represent both available resources and contextual and temporal conditions. With its focus on what empowers teachers to perform professional judgement and action, the ecological understanding of teacher agency corresponds with core elements of critical pedagogy.

Method

Defining CI in this study

CI are not easily defined, and a longstanding theoretical debate has illuminated scholarly disagreements as to the criteria which should determine them (see, e.g., Anders & Shudak, 2016; Cooling, 2012, 2014; Hand, 2007, 2008, 2014; Nocera, 2013). In this study we adapt the definition proposed by the Council of Europe, namely that 'controversial issues are issues which arouse strong feelings and divide communities and society' (Kerr & Huddleston, 2015, p. 13). Consequently, in the FT sessions, we addressed issues that the participants found relevant and where divergent opinions, strong emotions, and tensions were at play.

Context and research design

The research reported in this article is part of a larger AR study, which was originally planned to run from December 2019 to April 2020 but, due to the COVID-19 lockdown, was prolonged until the end of June 2020. The study took place in a religiously and culturally diverse secondary school in the east of Oslo. Primary participants were three RE teachers who were given the fictitious names of Ana (25), Saadiq (32), and Herman (36) (actual ages in parentheses); their 71 10th-grade students (aged 15/16), who comprised the entire 10th grade (divided into classes A, B, and C); and researcher Aina. The school's principal, assistant principal, and head of studies were secondary, but still vital, participants.

We followed the methodological principles of Carr and Kemmis (2002), which implied undertaking cyclical AR founded in critical theory. We completed three cycles of planning, rehearsing, acting, observing, and reflecting. In each cycle, FT was enacted in all three classes. Prior to cycle one, students were given a written assignment in which they were asked to describe situations at school in which disagreements about religion and worldviews had been central. When the three RE teachers and Aina decided which topics to enact in FT, the student responses were always consulted, and the scenes were created to resonate with both the students' and the teachers' real experiences of everyday school life. In cycle one, we designed a FT scene about existential questions and students' differing opinions, based on their atheistic or religious positions. The second cycle focused on moral criticism of Islam, exploring the phenomenon of generalisation and oppressive attitudes towards Muslims. In the third and last cycle, the FT showed divergent opinions regarding the moral legitimacy of homosexuality and the use of 'gay' as a derogatory term. In all three cycles, the RE teachers enacted the Joker role in their own classes.

Data generation and analysis

Empirical data were generated throughout the AR process. They consisted of audio-recorded pre- and post-interviews with the RE teachers and management, audio and video recordings of FT in all three classes, audio recordings of all planning and reflection meetings, and five audio- and video-recorded focus group interviews with a total of 27 students. Additionally, the data included Aina's

observation notes and a written field book, the RE teachers' reflection notes written immediately after each FT session, and an anonymous mini-survey handed out to the students after each FT. Hence, the data were comprehensive, and selection was necessary. Due to the research question posed in this article and the interest in RE teachers' agency, we chose to focus on the teachers' own actions and reflections. However, it is important to note that the data in their entirety contribute to our full understanding of the AR process and the RE teachers' development of agency in this context.

The first step in the data analysis followed the procedures for content analysis. The audio files were transcribed, coded, and categorised in NVivo. The coding process combined concept-driven coding, giving prevalence to particular questions in the interview or meeting schedules, and data-driven coding, which searched for meaning, statements, or patterns that could shed light on and complement our understanding of the teachers' experiences with FT and their development of agency (Gibbs, 2007).

In the second step, we used the ecological teacher agency model as an analytical lens (Priestley et al., 2015b). This model examines the interplay between dimensions and components that are likely to enable or hinder the development of agency. It made us pay particular attention to how past patterns of addressing CI shaped present thinking and actions in FT, what role the management played, and how the teachers developed and changed their future orientations and present thinking and actions during the iterative and self-reflective process of carrying out AR (Figure 2).
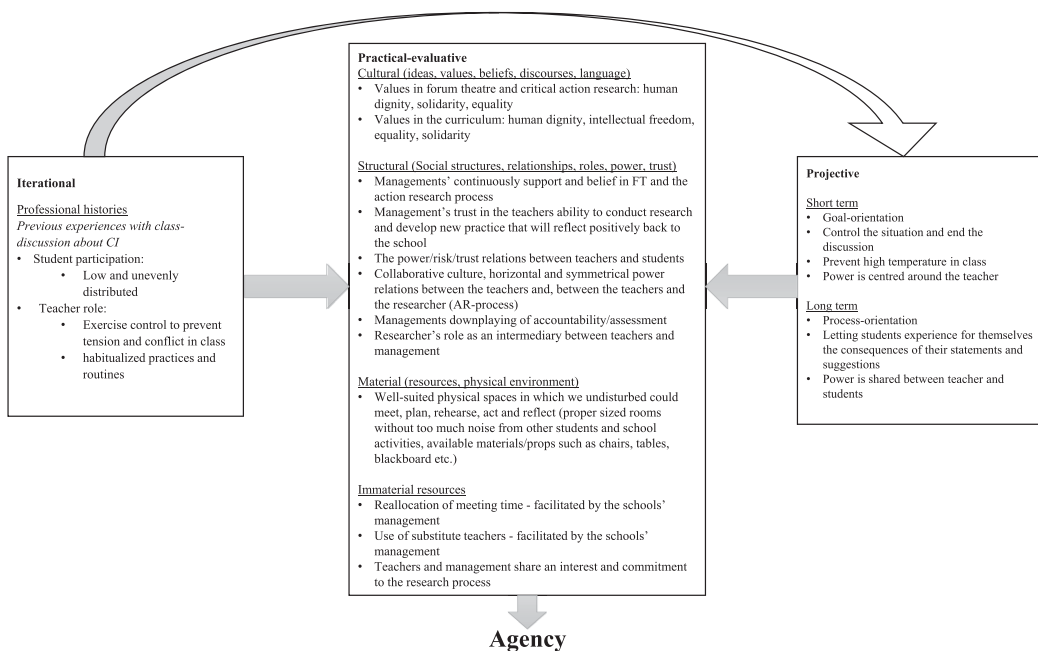

Figure 2. The second step in the analytical process.

The third step in the analysis was inspired by Engeström (2001), who states that contradictions and tensions have the potential to be turning points leading to development and change. Hence, to fully grasp exactly *what* development and transformations occurred in the AR process and *where*, we searched for expressions of dilemmas and tensions, turning points, and new directions of reflection and action (Figure 3).

Dilemmas and tensions	Cycle 1 ⟶	Cycle 2 ⟶	Cycle 3
Power/control ◄───► Risk-taking/trust	Jokers do not accept suggestions which they fear will create 'hot moments' Affected by prior experiences with CI in class-discussions, exercising a high degree of control New to FT, being in the beginning of a learning process, not confident	Jokers still try to guide students away from suggestions they think will create hot moments, or suggestions they don't believe will have sustainable effects for the protagonist Turning point: Reflection meeting	Joker welcomes all suggestions Jokers are more confident, taking greater risks, do not try to control suggestions or exercise power to prevent 'hot moments'
		Reflection meeting: The three RE teachers and researcher Aina are discussing the dilemma of controlling/censoring students' suggestions vs. letting the students do their own experiences, collaborative and reflective space, agreement that it is much to learn from students' suggestions even if the teachers find them inexpedient or non-sustainable	

Figure 3. The third Step in the analytical process.

Ethical considerations

Ethical considerations were of major concern throughout the entire research process. We discussed the risk of reproducing established notions of what is controversial and what is not and the dilemmas associated with potentially cementing these topics as controversial. We recognise that addressing CI in class is a risky endeavour, but so is the choice *not* to address them. Our stance is that live controversies have the potential to promote democratic learning if approached openly. However, due to the sensitive nature of the topics, we put significant effort into the FT design and choice of student actors. We followed the principle that no one should play a character that is too close to their own positions and attitudes. To counteract the emergence of new power imbalances or stereotypes, we decided that the Jokers should be constantly aware of this risk, meet such occurrences with Socratic questions, and encourage students' reflections. The project is registered with and approved by the Norwegian Centre for Research Data, with reference number 606538.

Results and analysis

The following categories reflect the combination of data-driven and concept-driven analyses (Gibbs, 2007). The first step of coding and categorisation clarified significant patterns and topics, which, during the second step, were analysed and applied in the ecological teacher agency model. These parts of the analysis made us pay particular attention to the relationship between past experiences (iterational dimension), future orientations (projective dimension), and the development of agency in the present (practical evaluative dimension) (Priestley et al., 2015b).

Teachers' professional histories with controversial issues

On several occasions throughout the entire AR period, the RE teachers discussed what normally characterised a class discussion about CI. Ana's statement is representative of how all three teachers described their prior experiences:

> In a classroom discussion (…), there are always the same [participating students], and it is always those who are a little louder than everyone else, right. And then there are so many [students] who just back out, and also … they place all their faith in you as a teacher, so you as a teacher have to deal with it here and now, and put an end to it, and you have like five minutes. (reflection meeting after cycle three)

Ana's statement seem to raise two main concerns: 1) low and unevenly distributed student participation; and 2) the students' reliance on the teacher to exercise power and control to end the discussion.

Teacher Saadiq elaborates on what he thinks is an important difference between class discussion and FT about CI:

> In a class discussion, it is like, "Oh no, they [fellow students] are arguing again". But in forum theatre, it is more like, "How can I [the individual student] contribute to solve the situation?" The focus is sort of somewhere else. (…) it was much easier [for students] to participate in forum theatre than it is in a classroom [discussion] because you [the students] do not speak against anyone, in a way, you [the students] only react to a scene. (reflection meeting after cycle three)

When analysing these statements using the analytical framework, we see that the teachers' past experiences with CI (iterational dimension) made them particularly aware of the risks of letting students' differing opinions escalate in class; hence, they noticed the ways in which FT differed from ordinary class discussion on that matter. The shift in focus from attempts to win an argument to the common goal of solving a challenge was seen as an asset that facilitated a higher degree of student participation and hindered clashes of opinion. These findings might be explained by Hammond (2015, with reference to McFarlane, 2005), who accentuates 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' (p. 47). The process of enacting challenges that already exist within the class gives students an opportunity to explore a relevant issue from a safe distance (Campbell, 2019). Obviously, this does not mean that the introduction of FT to address CI relieves or suspends teachers from the task of handling spontaneous discussions. What FT does is to take the controversial and spontaneous issue that is already present and enact it in a planned setting. As the method creates a more cooperative dynamic among the students, teachers can act as question-posing facilitators instead of striving to prevent escalation. At this point, our data indicate new forms of teacher agency emerging in the FT setting.

Teacher–student relations

The RE teachers' role in FT is to be a Joker. Throughout the entire AR period, the three teachers discussed and reflected upon the Joker role and the inherent tensions and dilemmas involved in enacting it. One topic often discussed in meetings was the point of intersection between *how much to lead* and *how much to let go*. The following excerpt from FT enactment in cycle two, class A, highlights how it can be difficult for the Joker to allow suggestions that they do not regard as constructive or sustainable:

> Joker Saadiq: Now we will try to help Ali (the 'Muslim' protagonist) so that Ali can stand up for himself.
> Spect-actor: He must be at war, then. Fight!
> Joker Saadiq: Ha ha … so, the question is, then, 'spect-actor', how should Ali fight so that this will be a good solution?
> Spect-actor: He has to say something to Tobias (the 'ethnic Norwegian' antagonist) … the thing is that Tobias thinks they [all Muslims] are also like that [Muslim terrorists]
> Joker Saadiq: Yes, ok, but does that make the situation better?
> Spect-actor: Yes, but right … first they will argue, but afterwards they will accept each other.
> Joker Saadiq: By saying bad things to each other? (laughter in class)
> Spect-actor: No, no, no, afterwards, when they meet each other, they do not talk to each other.
> Joker Saadiq: I think this will be a bit difficult because then they just get angrier at each other. But thank you, good input.

An identified *turning point* in the teachers' reluctance to allow student suggestions they found inexpedient occurred in the reflection meeting after cycle two, when the teachers and researcher were

discussing the dilemma of *guiding away from/censoring the students' suggestions* vs. *letting students experience for themselves the consequences of their instructions and enactments.* The following excerpt from the reflection meeting after cycle two is illustrative:

> Researcher Aina: I remember that there were some suggestions at the end that you guided them away from, but (…) maybe they could have just enacted their suggestion? And then we would have seen that "ok, this did not go so well", and then we could have analysed it afterwards?
> Saadiq: Yes, of course!
> Researcher Aina: So, I think there is development potential in the Joker role to dare to let students enact "bad" suggestions, to let them see how it goes? (…) "Why did some strategies lead to increased tension or oppression?" is the sort of question you can ask in that context.
> Saadiq and Ana: Yes.
> Saadiq follows up:
> Yes, so they can see how it goes. I kind of think that is the foremost goal … that things are not decided in advance. We just have to try, see how it goes, and then adjust it again, right?

Judgements of risk are central to the practical–evaluative dimension (Priestley et al., 2015a). The critical theoretical foundation of the FT method and the Socratic Joker ideal rests on the idea that power and trust are handed over to the spect-actor so they can try out solutions and discuss, reflect upon, and rehearse change. This requires an altered teacher role and an adjusted teacher–student relationship. As the iterative cycles proceeded, and after the above-mentioned *turning point* (Engeström, 2001), the teachers showed more confidence in interrupting habitual ways of thinking, minimising the need to control, and, consequently, showing a willingness to take greater risks. Being increasingly aware of the value of explorative processes among the students, they started to allow them to enact all kinds of solutions and to try and fail and try again. By doing this, they opened a learning space in which all student voices were heard. We interpret this as the emergence of agency whereby the teachers became *empowered to empower* students to participate and rehearse transformation.

The collaborative action research process

The significance of RE teachers' collaboration with each other and the continuous researcher presence was highlighted in meetings and interviews as among the criteria determining the project's feasibility and the enhancement and further development of agency to address CI. In the following excerpt, teacher Ana talks about the significance of being in a community of practice and elaborates on the importance of creating spaces to reflect with colleagues:

> If you had chosen the wrong students to be actors, it would have been completely crazy in there, right. And that has to do with the fact that you have to know your students; you have to know the class. And then it's good to have someone else on the same level [other teachers] with whom you can talk and create forum theatre scenes. (post-interview)

Teacher Herman elaborates on the significance of the AR process and the role of the participating researcher:

> I feel very much listened to in the process, whether it has been about creating the scenes or about student actors and things like that. I also feel that it has been an organic process … that sometimes you Aina (…) have of course thought of a lot of things that we have not thought of … but that sometimes we have also thought of some things that you had not thought of. (post-interview)

For all the teachers, working with CI through FT was a completely new experience. In this situation, it seems that the conditions AR facilitated: cyclical, iterative, and reflective modes of working, symmetrical relations with colleagues and researcher, mutual acknowledgment and trust, dialogical spaces, and horizontal learning environments, increased their motivation and self-confidence.

These conditions enhanced their agency to develop new practice in an unfamiliar pedagogical terrain.

Teacher–management relations

The management's enthusiasm for the project and their supportive role throughout the research period were highlighted by all three teachers as very important for the project's feasibility, as the following quotes demonstrate:

Teacher Herman:

> We received reassurance from the management that they did not only support it [the research project] morally, but that they also supported it practically, so that if there was a shortage of time … that we could, for example, reallocate meeting time. (post-interview)

Teacher Saadiq:

> This is the first time I have experienced them [the management] thinking that something is worth spending time on and we as teachers finding it interesting, too. (post-interview)

Teacher Ana:

> I think it's great that they have been positive from the very beginning, and that they have seen (…) that we have learned something from it, which we can bring with us [in the future] (…) And then it might also be easier when you [Aina] are not here … for us to have time to conduct forum theatre. (…) I guess they will be positive about it [facilitate time and other resources] as long as they see that we have gained insights, that we have been positive and collaborated well. (post-interview)

As we interpret these statements, the management's continuous support and confidence in FT and their trust in the teachers' ability to conduct collaborative AR and develop new practices that would reflect positively on the school, played a significant role in developing teacher agency. The process of learning and developing FT through AR in an empowering and supportive environment was a positive experience for the teachers. These conditions made development of agency possible in the practical–evaluative dimension, but also, as evident in Ana's statement, it enabled a long-term future orientation regarding further development of FT at their school.

Discussion

This study set out to explore in what ways FT and AR provide conditions to develop RE teachers' agency to address CI. Earlier research has identified personal, structural, cultural, and material conditions that constrain teachers' work with CI (e.g., Anker & von der Lippe, 2016; Cowan & Maitles, 2012; Stradling, 1984), and we have used the ecological teacher agency model to analyse RE teachers' constraints. Given our transformative agenda, we are not only interested in the development of agency and change of current practices and constraints, but also the *sustainability* of these transformations.

The ecological teacher agency model highlights that iterational aspects contribute to or hinder teacher agency by being a pool of skills and knowledge that informs future actions (Priestley et al., 2015b). The data analysis has shown that the RE teachers' previous experiences with class discussions about CI influenced how they enacted the Joker role in FT. The Boalian Ideal Joker is Socratic, but, as Campbell (2019) notes, the teacher in the role of Joker can struggle to achieve this ideal and instead become selective, controlling, or censoring. Early in our research process, these dynamics were seen when the RE teachers acted on habitualised approaches and routines and exercised power and control to prevent student contributions in FT from triggering high-temperature discussions or 'hot moments' (Warren, 2006, p. 1). Given previous experiences with tense discussions and low student participation, it is not surprising that the teachers adopted what is often referred to as an 'avoidance strategy' (Flensner, 2020; Hess, 2009; Hess & McAvoy, 2015). The problem with this strategy is that it leaves no room to explore, reflect, and learn from CI which are

potentially relevant to students' real lives. It also fails to embrace the opportunity to promote educational aims, such as in Norwegian RE, where students must learn to 'explore the perspectives of others and deal with disagreements and conflict of opinions' and '(…) develop their own views and attitudes in encounter with others, through inside and outside perspectives and through dialogue and reflection' (Utdanningsdirektoratet, 2020).

According to Priestley et al. (2015b), teacher agency is about 'interrupting habitual ways of thinking' (p. 31), and the transformative turning point occurred after two cycles of AR. The collaborative and reflective process, and the teachers' experience of being able to address controversial and sensitive issues in ways that did not lead to tension and conflict, contributed to this shift. Normally, the issues we addressed in FT – religion vs. atheism, Muslims and terrorism, and homosexuality – are regarded as particularly sensitive and contested (McLaughlin, 2004). Iversen (2014) suggests that FT, through its emphasis on promoting emotional reactions to oppression and the collaborative action taking place to change it, creates a safe space and freedom from individual self-presentation. This is in line with Hammer's (2021) finding that the students taking part in the study appreciated the method of FT and hence the Jokers' Socratic and non-directive way of addressing controversial and proximate issues, while at the same time creating a safe distance. The more confident the RE teachers became with FT and its potential to facilitate democratic interaction and safe environments, the more they showed a willingness to take greater risks and consequently developed agency to let go of, or at least minimise, their habitual practice of exercising power and control. The 'avoidance strategy' gradually transformed into some combination of 'deliberation and embodiment strategy' and 'trust and power-sharing strategy'. These developments can be explained in terms of 'transformations of context-for-action over time' (Priestley et al., 2015a, p. 6), where new forms of agency empowered teachers to position the students as the subjects of exploration, not the object of the teacher's (or the school's or the educational system's) agenda (Shor, 1993).

The findings resonate with the recent curricular reform in Norway which toned down the result-oriented tendencies related to a neoliberal logic of accountability and measurability (Biesta, 2006) in favour of a clearer orientation towards creation of reflective spaces and communities of practice (Utdanningsdirektoratet, 2017, 2020). We believe the findings add to previous research on teaching strategies (Flensner, 2020; Hess & McAvoy, 2015) and the safeguarding of students when addressing CI (e.g., Flensner & Von der Lippe, 2019; Iversen, 2019). Nevertheless, we are aware that the development of these new strategies has emerged in the context of this specific study, and we cannot predict the sustainability of these changes. Our ecological lens on teacher agency suggests that the transformation of teaching practice involved aspects of learning and *unlearning* on the part of the teachers, which, to a large degree, depended on the enabling conditions provided by the combination of FT and AR. Also, as emphasised by Priestley et al.'s (2015b) research, agency is seen as 'resulting from the interplay of individuals' capacities and environment conditions' (p. 3). Among these capacities and conditions, we find the management's will to suspend an assessment-driven agenda, the teachers' experiential knowledge of classroom practice and the researcher's acknowledgment of this knowledge, everybody's collaborative and trust-building skills, and the researcher's ability to coordinate the work and be an intermediary between the management and the teachers (see Figure 2). While the specific combination of FT and AR, the interplay of these new environmental conditions, and the teachers', management's, and researcher's capacities and qualities empowered the teachers to develop agency to address CI in the curricular context of RE, it is uncertain whether these changes will endure beyond the end of the study. However, it seems reasonable to assume that many of the school conditions, the teachers' individual capacities and the new learning will persist and, at least, be available resources in the teachers' future work ecologies.

We believe that our findings are significant for other curriculum areas as well. FT and AR, as temporary and contextual conditions and modes of working, are not specifically linked to RE but, rather, applied in a number of educational settings worldwide. FT is relevant in all curricula where CI and asymmetric power relations are at play and when the agenda is to empower the

oppressed to promote change, and AR facilitates interprofessional collaboration and development or improvement of pedagogical practice, regardless of curricular context.

Conclusion

In this article, we have examined the ways in which FT and AR could provide conditions to develop RE teachers' agency to address CI. As an analytical lens, we chose an ecological conceptualisation of teacher agency (Priestley et al., 2015b). In our study, we saw that FT and AR altered some of the existing environmental conditions at the school, which, in turn, contributed to the development of RE teachers' agency to address CI. This was evident in the shift in teachers' orientations from short-term goals of exercising power and control to avoid causing tension and conflict in class, towards a process orientation whereby the 'avoidance strategy' transformed gradually to some combination of a 'deliberation and embodiment strategy' and a 'trust and power-sharing strategy'. However, these changes in teaching strategies were not a result of FT and AR alone but, rather, an outcome of the interplay of transformed environmental conditions and some qualities and capacities on the part of the teachers, management, and researcher.

Hence, when certain conditions and individual qualities interact, FT and AR have potential to develop teacher agency to address CI in ways that promote democratic education. Due to this emphasis in educational policy, the well-known constraints, and to sustain long-term transformations, we recommend that policy makers and school authorities invest in empowering conditions for the development of teacher agency. This includes creating supportive institutional environments, facilitating reflective communities of practice, and encouraging interprofessional collaboration between researchers and teachers. We suggest that future studies could add to these findings by exploring the ecological conditions and teachers' capacities necessary to sustain long-term transformations of practice to address CI in empowering, anti-oppressive, and democratic ways.

Disclosure statement

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