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# Addressing controversial issues in religious education by enacting and rehearsing democracy through Forum Theatre: student perspectives

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## ABSTRACT

Both policy and research emphasise the significant role that addressing controversial issues plays in democracy and citizenship education. However, less work has examined what forms of democratic learning are promoted when controversial issues are addressed in specific ways. This article is rooted in action research and, through an analysis of student perspectives, explores the potential for democratic learning when Forum Theatre (FT) is used to address controversial issues in religious education (RE). FT facilitates critical democratic education; hence, it centres on power asymmetries, empowerment and transformation. The findings indicate that this critical pedagogical approach empowers students to become political and moral agents in the search for nonoppressive solutions and that FT promotes education both *through* and *for* democracy. However, an explicit goal in FT and critical pedagogy is to critically examine the interconnectedness between micro-oppressions and macro-structures. This was not achieved in the FT exercises in this study: this article discusses the possible reasons for this result, along with recommendations for further reinventions of FT in the context of RE, controversial issues and democratic learning.



## KEYWORDS

Controversial issues; Forum Theatre (FT); democratic education (DE); religious education (RE)

## Introduction

How can addressing controversial issues in schools promote students' democratic learning? This question is equally relevant today as when the Crick Report (1998) argued for citizenship and democracy education, stating 'Teaching about citizenship necessarily involves discussing controversial issues' (8). Crick (1998) argued that education should address controversial issues to prepare children to deal with controversies 'knowledgeably, sensibly, tolerantly and morally' (56). Nearly twenty years later, the Council of Europe argued that the capacity to engage in interaction with people who have different values and opinions from oneself is central for democratic learning (Kerr and Huddleston 2015). Here, controversial issues are defined as 'issues which arouse strong feelings and divide opinion in community and society' (8) and they recommend 'active and participatory learning and engagement with "real-life" issues' (7). This definition guided the research reported in this empirical article.

The present study focuses on teaching controversial issues in RE as part of the entire school's responsibility for democratic education (DE) in Norway. The need to address controversial issues in democracy and citizenship education has been highlighted by many researchers, particularly within

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the field of social studies (Hess 2009; Hess and McAvoy 2015; Ljunggren, Unemar Öst, and Englund 2015). These studies mainly draw on theories of deliberative DE and favour discussion-based approaches and teaching methods (Hand and Levinson 2012; Ho et al. 2017). Also, studies conducted with particular attention to RE have accentuated how controversial issues can enhance democratic deliberation (Flensner, Larsson, and Säljö 2019), respect for human rights (Jerome, Liddle, and Young 2021) and religious literacy and respect for people who have different opinions (O'grady and Jackson 2020). However, it seems beneficial to gain more knowledge about other teaching methods and what forms of democratic learning are promoted when controversial issues are addressed in specific ways. The current study is based on action research conducted in a secondary school, considering Forum Theatre (FT) as a new drama pedagogical and critical democratic approach for addressing controversial issues in RE. FT centres on power relations and aims to empower students to become active participants and agents of change (Boal 2002). Hence, using data generated from student experiences, this article examines: 1) What forms of democratic learning do students express when reflecting on their participation in FT about controversial issues? 2) What must FT design and critical democratic educators consider in terms of power, oppression and empowerment in the context of RE in Norwegian schools in the 2020s?

### The FT method and critical DE

The 'theatre of the oppressed' (TO) is the umbrella concept embracing the various theatrical forms of the Brazilian drama pedagogue, writer and director, Augusto Boal (1931–2009), of which FT is the best known (Boal [1979] 2008, Boal 2002). Since the 1970s, when Boal began systematising his theatre techniques, the prevailing line of thought has remained central to his proposition that 'the unwavering support of the theatre in the struggles of the oppressed' (2006, 4).

FT enacts events with elements of oppression and power imbalances, and the original play/scene ends unresolved. In Boal's (2006) own words, '[t]he show is the beginning of a necessary social transformation and not a moment of equilibrium and repose. *The end is the beginning!*' (6, italics in original). FT is interactive, and the audience ('spect-actors' in Boalian terms; here, the students) is encouraged to instruct or take the protagonist's part and suggest or enact solutions while continuously seeking 'the transformation of society in the direction of the liberation of the oppressed' (6). A character called 'the joker' (i.e. the RE teacher) moderates and explains the rules of the theatre and, through explorative questions, encourages the spect-actors' reflections and actions. Ideally, the joker decides nothing: their 'job is simply to try to ensure that those who know a little more get the chance to explain it, and that those who dare a little, dare a little more and show what they are capable of' (Boal 2002, 245).

When we use FT to address controversial issues in RE, the intention is to stimulate the students' critical awareness of oppression in their everyday lives and in the wider social context while promoting change towards values such as solidarity and equality (Hammer 2021; Boal 2002). By enacting and discussing a multitude of alternatives, people learn the consequences of their actions and the possible strategies of both the oppressors and oppressed (Boal 2002, 244). Through FT interventions and actions, spect-actors rehearse for real-life action (Boal 2002, 2006).

Following Freire ([Freire [1970] 2018] Vittoria 2019), critical democratic educators distinguish between humanising and dehumanising education. Humanising education fosters students' self-empowerment and creates opportunities for emancipation through an increased consciousness of inequality and transformations of asymmetric power relations. Dehumanising education, though, is antidemocratic, socialising students into hegemonic ideologies and existing inequality. However, critics have suggested that TO and FT bear the risk of becoming the 'theatre of the oppressor' through a colonial social inclusion tendency, claiming that these interventions are reduced to individualistic agency detached from larger social issues (Hamel 2013). Harlap (2014) notes that participants and facilitators inadvertently risk reproducing power dynamics and oppression and that FT design must be cautious about 'equipping the powerful with more oppressive tools' (219).

## DE and the Norwegian curricula

In the current study, the FT and its critical democratic approach to controversial issues was introduced and developed within the DE framework of the Norwegian curricula. According to Sant (2019), most policy documents on DE draw on liberal, deliberative and participatory models, but there are some examples of critical DE in enacted policy. This observation largely corresponds to the Norwegian curricula.

The overarching core curriculum for primary and secondary education states that teaching and training 'shall promote belief in democratic values and in democracy as a form of government' (Utdanningsdirektoratet 2017, 9); students must experience 'that they have genuine influence and that they can have impact on matters that concern them' (10). Teaching must stimulate students 'to become active citizens and give them competence to participate in developing democracy in Norway' (16) and train 'their ability to think critically, learn to deal with conflicts of opinion and respect disagreement' (16).

The main DE tendencies in the core curriculum are liberal and deliberative. Liberal DE centres knowledge of democratic institutions, democratic values and individuals' rights and duties (Sant 2019; Stray 2012). This learning *about* democracy is regarded as essential for everyone (Council of Europe 2018). Deliberative DE accentuates learning *through* and *for* democracy by examining real problems from everyday school life using discussion and problem-solving activities (Dewey [1916] 2011; Kauppi and Drerup 2021; Sant 2019). Numerous proponents of deliberative DE highlight the need to address controversial issues (Hess and McAvoy 2015; Jerome and Elwick 2020; Ljunggren, Unemar Öst, and Englund 2015). Whereas the Norwegian curricula do not explicitly mention the concept of 'controversial issues', they are highly present in formulations such as 'dealing with' and 'respect', 'disagreements' and 'conflict of opinion' (Utdanningsdirektoratet 2017; 2020). Hess (2009) argues that 'there is an intrinsic and crucial connection between the discussion of controversial political issues, especially among young people with disparate views, and the health of a democracy' (12). In addition to liberal and deliberative DE, the core curriculum includes elements of participatory DE. Here, emphasis favours action and praxis over communication and consensus, and pedagogical recommendations advocate that students should be heard and considered *through* participation in educational activities (Biesta 2006).

Some criticism has been raised over deliberative DE, which is of relevance to this study. Multicultural democratic educators claim that, in culturally diverse societies and schools, deliberative DE risks repressing, marginalising or discriminating students who experience conflict between their cultural beliefs and majority positions; some students might feel forced to give up their beliefs or become silent (Fraser-Burgess 2012, 3, 17). According to Mouffe (1999), in contrast, an agonistic democratic approach recognises the forms of exclusion they embody 'instead of trying to disguise them under the veil of rationality or morality' (757). Deliberative DE has also been criticised for valuing consensus over dissent and plurality (Lo 2017) and for creating a false dichotomy between rational thought and emotion (Garrett 2020; Ruitenberg 2009; Zembylas 2015).

The Norwegian RE curriculum also framed the development of FT to address controversial issues. RE is a mandatory and nonconfessional subject for all students from grades 1–10, where 'democracy and citizenship' is related to the following:

The students participating in ethical reflection and the practice of considering multiple perspectives. KRLE [Christianity, Religion, Worldviews, Ethics] helps to strengthen students' ability to handle challenging questions and be open to the views of others in a diverse society. By participating in ethical reflection, students can problematise power and exclusion and ask questions about current norms (Utdanningsdirektoratet 2020).

From this description, multiperspectivity, active participation, ethical reflection, power, exclusion and norm critique are emphasised; as such, learning *through* and *for* democracy are intended objectives (Council of Europe 2018). In addition to elements of liberal, deliberative and participatory DE, the RE curriculum draws on tenets from critical DE in encouraging students in problematising power, exclusion and the prevailing norms (Boal [1979] 2008; Freire [1970] 2018). Also, some

elements of multicultural DE are present in the RE curriculum's focus on problematising power, plurality, diversity and learning from the views of others.

This brief review shows that the current study's DE rationale has legitimacy in the Norwegian curricula. However, RE – more than the core curriculum – includes critical perspectives; hence, the present study contributes to expanding the knowledge base on how to incorporate critical DE in the RE curriculum.

## Methods

### Research design

The empirical material was generated from action research conducted at a secondary school in Oslo, Norway, from December 2019 to June 2020. Throughout the research period, I collaborated with three RE teachers, seventy-one 10th-grade students (divided into classes A, B and C; all three were religiously and culturally diverse) and the school's management (principal, assistant principal and head of studies). Action research is cyclical and self-reflective: it aims to improve or develop practices and is 'inquiry that is done *by* or *with* insiders [...] but never *to* or *on* them' (Carr and Kemmis 2002; Herr and Anderson 2015, 3). Hence, the research design always aimed to facilitate equal, participatory and collaborative working conditions; however, during different phases, we adopted different roles.

Three cycles of FT were conducted in each of the three 10th-grade classes. One cycle consisted of 1) planning FT, 2) rehearsing the FT play with student-actors, 3) enacting FT in classes A, B and C, 4) observing FT in all three classes and 5) reflecting upon the session. Prior to cycle 1, I facilitated two training sessions in which the teachers learned about the critical theoretical foundation, methodological principals and practical 'know how's' of FT. In this period, the students were given a written assignment to describe episodes from their everyday school context where disagreements and tension related to religion and belief had been central. Hence, to derive controversies to address in FT, we followed the definition and principles set by the Council of Europe (Kerr and Huddleston 2015), focusing on disagreement and tensions from students' 'real lives'. I coded and categorised the student responses, following content analysis procedures and using NVivo software (Gibbs 2007). Three categories were predominant: 1) *use of derogatory terms*, such as 'gay', 'Jew' and 'Negro'<sup>1</sup>; 2) *religious beliefs versus atheism*; and 3) *derogatory talk about fellow students' religion and beliefs*.

During the planning meetings, the teachers, who had first-hand experience in the school context, had primacy in creating the FT scenarios. In cycle 1, the scene showed a conflict between a religious student and atheistic student, in which the religious student was being oppressed. Cycle 2 generalised Muslims and contained derogatory talk about Islam. Cycle 3 contained a FT play on homosexuality, with the use of 'gay' as a derogatory term, and the assertion that the Holy Scriptures in Abrahamic religions condemn homosexuality as a sin (for a thorough discussion of cycle 3, see Hammer 2021). When the scenes were finished, each teacher asked for five to six students to volunteer to be actors. Thereafter, I worked with the student-actors to rehearse lines, bodily expression and spatial movements. Then, the FT play was enacted in classes A, B and C in sessions lasting one to one and a half hours, with the RE teachers taking the role of 'joker'.

### Data and analysis

Empirical data were generated throughout the period. Although the data are comprehensive, students' experiences, as expressed during five focus groups, were the focus. Each group included five or six students and were homogenous in age (15–16 years old), school, grade and participation. Groups 1, 2 and 3 from classes A, B and C, respectively, were heterogeneous regarding gender and the roles they had played during FT scenarios, ranging from acting in the original play several times

to taking on more observational roles. Groups 4 and 5 were mixed gender but homogenous regarding the roles they had chosen in the FT scenarios: Group 4 'Quiet' and Group 5 'Active'.

In this phase, I conducted an analysis of the group interviews. However, action research is a reflective and cyclical approach, and the students' responses were continuously discussed with the teachers. Using content analysis (Gibbs 2007), the focus groups were transcribed, coded and categorised in NVivo to determine the topics of interest for individual students. The responses were then analysed to identify similarities and differences of opinion among the group members, as well as how the group interaction contributed to the negotiation, modification and development of thoughts related to DE. Thus, both the content and interactions were relevant to the analysis.

### *Ethical considerations and reflections on limitations*

To gain insights into a collective view of FT rather than individual life stories or personal matters, focus group interviews were chosen. However, the group dynamics had the inherent potential to both encourage reflection and new thoughts or obscure some concerns or opinions, hence aligning with the criticism raised over critical DE. Namely, if some students experienced that some values or opinions were regarded as universal truths in the FT setting, they could potentially become silent (Fraser-Burgess 2012). This places minority opinions at the most risk; even if I tried to ensure that everyone was included and given space to voice opinions and clarify statements, I cannot rule out that some students sometimes withdrew from the conversation.

When conducting the focus groups, I followed a more structured methodology (Morgan and Hoffman 2018). There were some predetermined topics to cover and a complementary interview guide with questions intended to help participants elaborate on various topics. As a moderator, despite trying to inhabit the role of the Socratic joker, who, without deciding anything, encourages reflection through explorative questions, I probably influenced, to some degree, the direction of the conversations and possibly some elements of the knowledge construction.

Fictional names were used to safeguard the anonymity of the student participants. The research project is registered and approved by the Norwegian Centre for Research Data (ref. no. 606538).

### *The FT process – central features*

The procedural character of both FT and action research facilitated continuous development and adjustments throughout the research period (for an elaborated analysis of how the RE teachers developed agency in the joker role, see [Hammer and Lenz 2022]). Nevertheless, it is possible to elaborate on some central and recurring features in our FT process.

The students who volunteered to be actors were always encouraged to adjust the scene to ensure it reflected their own way of speaking and acting. When the FT scenes were played out in class, the students sat in a circle so that everyone could see each other; this made it easy for the joker to move around quickly and check in on all students when they had paused to think or discuss in pairs. The jokers encouraged the students to say, 'Stop!' whenever they thought the oppressed protagonist could have done something differently to change the course of events in a more just and non-oppressive direction. To keep the participation threshold low, the students were told that they could say stop whenever they felt something was wrong; they did not necessarily have to have a solution. If the student who said stop was unsure how to proceed, the joker facilitated small-group collaboration or asked questions. For every 'Stop!' and every intervention and improvisation on stage, the class applauded enthusiastically. As one of the RE teachers said, 'I really believe the use of applause and this seating arrangement make them feel confident and seen'.

In their efforts to try to change the oppressive event, the students' strategies ranged from verbally attacking and weakening the antagonist, 'questioning strategies' to figure out the reasons for the antagonist's behaviour to 'analogy strategies', drawing parallels between, for instance, derogatory talk about homosexuals and racism. After every cycle, the students were given a small questionnaire

to which they responded anonymously and individually. Most students believed that asking questions, having calm body language, showing empathy and genuine interest in the antagonist's perspectives were the most effective strategies.

## Results and analysis

A cross-group comparison showed that all five groups drew attention to the ways in which FT about controversial issues had *been rehearsal for change in real life* by staging *relevant and realistic issues*, triggering *emotional engagement* and providing insight into *multiple perspectives*, which raised their *awareness of oppression* and empowered them to become *active participants* in *transformative processes*. In this section, I will highlight two excerpts that show how the students negotiated and built upon each other's statements in an intersubjectively coconstructive meaning-making process leading to a kind of group opinion and some clusters of democratic learning.

### *Becoming agents of change: Relevant and realistic issues*

The following excerpt from Group 5 illustrates some major tendencies in how the students expressed and negotiated their experiences in terms of democratic learning:

Hadia: You might get a little tougher, or someone might trust a little more ... what should I say ... that you dare more ... next time ... if it happens in reality, right.

Facilitator Aina: Because then you just have ...?

Hadia: Yes! Or because ... then you may not be as unsure as to whether what you are doing is right or wrong. Because you see *what* other people around you would do and *when* they intend to break in, and what they think about the matter.

Facilitator Aina: Ok. How do the rest of you view this matter?

Fiona: (...) you sort of put yourself in the situation of the person who has the conflict [the protagonist], right, because that is the one who is being oppressed. So you may see it more from that person's angle.

Adrian: And ... I think it's very difficult if it does not concern you, then it's very difficult to try and see yourself in a situation you have not experienced yourself, or even *can* experience, most likely. So maybe it affects some more than it affects others, because they can end up in that situation themselves, so ...

Facilitator Aina: If it does not affect you personally, can it be relevant anyway? Or is it somehow not ...?

Adrian: It's relevant, but it's not *as* relevant, it's not. If I'm being completely honest ...

Facilitator Aina: Yes.



Adrian: Yeah, so it is not [equally relevant]. If I, for example . . . that with the terrorist thing [topic of cycle 2] . . . it is not as relevant for someone who *cannot* experience it as for someone who *can* experience it.

Facilitator Aina: Yes.

Hadia: But . . .

Adrian: For those who *can* experience it [in real life], they can . . .

Hadia: Yes, but . . . ok, it affects them personally . . . but it is relevant for those who sit and watch as well, because they know when to intervene or not.

We can see the emergence of several forms of democratic learning. FT and the relevant and realistic scenes seem to have encouraged critical DE by empowering students to intervene and voice and act opinions to challenge injustice and oppression, not only in a staged classroom setting, but also in 'real life'. This critical democratic element becomes particularly evident in Hadia's insistence that oppression is a collective responsibility requiring solidarity intervention and change. I suggest that the students' experiences are related to central features of our FT processes, such as the effort to make the scenes realistic and relevant, how they centred oppressions on controversial issues and how the jokers always worked to create an inclusive atmosphere. The students' expressions of democratic learning also touched upon central features in other DE models. Action and interventions are central to participatory DE, and in liberal and deliberative DE, critical thinking, evaluating perspectives and responding to disagreements are fundamental. Although our FT seems to have incorporated all these elements, it also transgresses the individualistic focus in liberal DE, pushing the deliberative democratic model by not aiming for consensus and transcending the participatory democratic model by directing action and reflection towards transformations of oppression and explicitly target values of solidarity and equality.

### ***Becoming agents of change: Emotions and engagement***

The following excerpt from Group 3 portrays how the students negotiated the value of emotions as a component in the process of becoming agents of change:

Abid: You can feel a little like [. . .] That something unfair happens when you sit and watch and that you do not have the power to change anything; that is, you *have* the power to change it by saying stop and doing something differently, and it [the urge to intervene] might happen because you feel a little bad.

Facilitator Aina: Yes, so what you're saying is, if I'm hearing you correctly now, is that you see something and you feel that 'Oh, this is a bit unfair', and then, you want to change something?

Aida: It [the oppression in the FT scenario] arouses a lot of emotions, and for some, it may be that they do *not want* to say anything *because* it affects them, uhm, and for others it may be that it arouses emotions, and they *want* to stand up and say stop for others. . . .

Facilitator Aina: Yes, ok. Do you get engaged or is it as if you could just as easily pick up your mobile phone and sit and do something else?



Aida: No.

Abid: No, you get involved.

Aida: Yes, you get engaged. Even if not everyone says anything, I know that everyone who sits there feels something and they are involved, right.

Emotions can function as triggers or pacifiers. The emotions students experienced could have led to silence and passivity because of emotional proximity or to voice and action from a more distanced position. However, the students acknowledged that emotions trigger engagement even if you do not directly intervene. This aligns with agonistic democratic educators arguing that, contrary to the deliberative focus on reason, students' emotions must be regarded as legitimate responses reflecting their life stories and affecting their decision-making, actions and understandings of membership and identity (Zembylas 2015). In our FT and critical DE underpinning it, the primacy of reason in deliberative DE is complemented by an acknowledgement of the value of emotions, such as empathy, as triggers in oral and bodily action. However, although FT incorporates the affective and emotional elements of agonistic DE, it does not consider dissent and agonism as the primary objective of the activity, nor as the ultimate driving force of democracy.

## Discussion

Taking a critical pedagogical approach to controversial issues in RE calls for reflections on what elements of critical pedagogy it promotes, inviting a discussion of FT's contribution to DE in RE, as well as a critical examination of the potential pitfalls of using FT in this context.

The critical pedagogue endorses theories that are dialectical – that is, theories acknowledging that social problems form part of the interactive context between the individual and society. Dialectical thinking involves searching for contradictions through back-and-forth reflection between, for example, process and product or being and becoming (McLaren 2009). Accordingly, critical theory and dialectical thinking encourage a critical examination of the hegemony and ideology of the dominant culture, as was the case in Boal's original theatre, which was rooted in the experience of overt and violent economic and political oppression (Strawbridge 2000). Hence, during hegemonic Brazilian military rule in the 1970s, the aims and ideals of TO and FT were to 'rehearse for revolution' against oppressive ruling and suppressive structures (Boal [1979] 2008). In the educational context of FT in Norwegian RE in the 2020s, power imbalances are subtler, and in most cases, they do not call for an all-encompassing transformation of society. The students in our study did *not* link oppression in the scenes to ideology or hegemonic macro-structures in society. Therefore, we address the criticism put forward by Hamel (2013): in an individualistic and meritocratic first-world context transposed from the original third-world aesthetic language of oppression and resistance, FT encourages individual agency detached from larger social issues.

In our study, the findings indicate that the students were triggered to become individual agents of change. They practised transformations of micro-level oppression in FT scenes by trying out a variety of solutions – for example, challenging the use of derogatory terms (Cycle 3) —but they also imagined being better equipped to transform similar meso-level oppression in their immediate social context outside of school. Other researchers have noticed the absence of links to macro-structures, here explained in terms of the researcher's and teachers' lack of scaffolding in the adequate tools and language to help students include postcolonial perspectives when discussing social inequality, exclusion and privilege (Gourd and Gourd 2011; Francis 2013). Another factor is that the joker tends to fall into everyday language and does not address the dialectical relationship between discourse and social structure (Dwyer 2004). Analogue explanations can be applied to our FT scenarios about controversial issues. Although the structural and systemic links were occasionally discussed in planning and reflection meetings, they were not incorporated into the FT design or the

jokers' questioning strategies. This was mainly because the RE teachers were new to FT, and during the three action research cycles, we concentrated on developing and modifying FT to the contextual conditions under which we worked.

Can we say that FT fails as a critical pedagogy and critical DE if it does not explicitly address structural oppression, as originally intended by Boal and Freire? Following Vittoria (2019), mechanical thinking and blind repetition of Freire and Boal's methods and techniques contradict the very essence of what they fought for – dialectical, critical and creative thinking – as well as their own call for reinventions of their work. In our study, and because of action research's critical self-reflective spiral of retrospective understanding and prospective action, we invented and reinvented the FT scenarios for every cycle (Carr and Kemmis 2002, 185). Thus, like Boal (2002), we prioritise the process rather than the result. The procedural character of both FT and action research means that, if the time frames were expanded, the process could have continued and evolved. The findings – a greater degree of support and scaffolding is needed to help both jokers and students link micro-, meso- and macro-oppressions – contribute to the continued development of FT as a way to address controversial issues and promote DE in RE.

The dialectical underpinning in critical pedagogy invites reflection on the widely theorised concept of 'empowerment' in the FT setting. Following Boal ([1979] 2008, 97), the concept of the spect-actor subjectifies the passive spectator into an active transformer of oppression. The empowerment expressed by students was a sense of agency related to their spect-actor position: they acknowledged holding the power to act and becoming moral and political agents in search of just solutions to controversial issues related to religion. According to Hess and McAvoy, '*We are being political when we are democratically making decisions about questions that ask, "How should we live together?"*' (2015, 4, italics in original). By extension, in critical pedagogy and FT, we not only aim to deliberate on political questions, but also to challenge and transform oppressive situations. Hence, the links between critical pedagogy, controversial issues, empowerment, DE and RE become apparent: when assuming the role of spect-actor, the students enacted and rehearsed active citizenship through participation in moral and political processes that problematise power and oppression to fulfil the democratic values of solidarity and equality. Hence, FT achieves policy goals by promoting learning both *through* and *for* democracy (Council of Europe 2018; Kerr and Huddleston 2015; Utdanningsdirektoratet 2017; 2020). This view aligns with Giroux (2009) and Freire's ([1970] 2018; Sant 2019) 'humanising education' that empowerment is about creating conditions for students' self-empowerment as political and moral subjects.

Nevertheless, the critical educator must always be aware of the potential reproduction of disempowerment, power asymmetries and colonial inclusion tendencies (Hamel 2013; Harlap 2014). The findings of the current study indicate that relevance and relative emotional proximity may silence some students. If FT causes feelings of being silenced or pacified, it contradicts our aims and might be interpreted as an unintended colonial inclusion approach (Hamel 2013). Even though not noted in the empirical findings, the dialectics of being and becoming in critical pedagogy call for a constant reinvention of ourselves as practitioners and researchers. Designing FT curricula to address controversial issues in RE is even more reflexive and conscious about including postcolonial perspectives from multicultural and critical DE.

## Conclusion

Educational policy and research have repeatedly emphasised how controversial issues play a pivotal role in DE. The present article analysed students' perspectives to understand what forms of democratic learning are promoted when controversial issues related to religion are addressed through FT. Because of its roots in critical pedagogy, FT stages critical DE by focusing on the inherent power dynamics in controversial issues and by aiming to raise students' awareness of power and oppressive dynamics in their everyday lives. The findings indicate that this critical pedagogical approach can empower students to become political and moral agents in searching for nonoppressive solutions; however, it also

incorporated elements from deliberative, liberal, agonistic and participatory DE. Additionally, through active participation, deliberation, critical thinking and interventions in transformative processes, the students found themselves rehearsing for future real-life events while simultaneously practicing democracy. As such, the FT scenarios promoted education both *for* and *through* democracy.

In any case, new contexts call for adjustments. Although the dialectic in critical pedagogy paves the way for an examination of the interconnectedness between micro-, meso-, and macro-oppressions, the findings show that, if students are to achieve this through FT, jokers and researchers need to provide a greater degree of scaffolding. A prospective reinvention of FT in the context of RE, controversial issues and democratic learning must incorporate, to a greater degree, postcolonial perspectives from multicultural and critical DE.

## Endnotes

1. I 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.

## Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

## Notes on contributor

*Aina Hammer* is an assistant professor and PhD candidate at OsloMet, Department of Primary and Secondary Teacher Education, division for RE-teaching. Her research interests include controversial issues, democratic education, religious diversity, teacher well-being and criticism of religion in religious education.

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