

Article

Jihadists and Refugees at the Theatre: Global Conflicts in Classroom Practices in Sweden

Karin K. Flensner ^{1,*}, Göran Larsson ² and Roger Säljö ^{3,4}

¹ Department of Social and Behavioural Studies, University West, Gustava Melins gata 2, S-461 32 Trollhättan, Sweden

² Department of Literature, History of Ideas, and Religion, University of Gothenburg, Box 200, S-405 30 Gothenburg, Sweden; goran.larsson@lir.gu.se

³ Department of Education, Communication and Learning, University of Gothenburg, Box 100, S-405 30 Gothenburg, Sweden; roger.saljo@ped.gu.se

⁴ School of Business, Economics and IT, University West, Gustava Melins gata 2, S- 461 32 Trollhättan, Sweden

* Correspondence: karin.kittelmann-flensner@hv.se

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Abstract: In democratic societies schools have an obligation to address complex societal issues such as ethnic/religious tensions and social conflicts. The article reports an exploratory study of how theatre plays were used in upper-secondary schools to generate pedagogically relevant platforms for addressing the current Middle East conflicts and their impact on European societies in the context of religious education and civics. The schools are situated in areas with substantive migrant populations of mixed backgrounds, and this has implications for how these issues are understood as a lived experience. In the same classrooms, there were students who had refugee backgrounds, who represented different interpretations of Islam, and religion more generally, and whose families were victims of terrorism. There were also students with strong nationalist views. The study is ethnographic documenting theatre visits and classroom activities in relation to two plays about the Middle East situation. The results show that plays may open up new opportunities for addressing these issues, but that they may also be perceived as normative and generate opposition. An interesting observation is that a play may generate space for students to tell their refugee story in class, which personalized the experience of what it means to be a refugee.

Keywords: controversial issues; conflicts; migration; civics; religious education; drama; teaching; ethnography

1. Introduction

International crises, conflicts and political tensions currently find their way into Swedish classrooms, especially in subjects such as religious education (from now on RE) and civics. What happens in classrooms is framed by the curriculum and the subject, but what is articulated and how it is articulated is also grounded in the personal experiences and knowledge of students and teachers as well as in discourses that are prominent in society. In recent years, international migration has been a topic of intense public attention. The discussions have been tense and resulted in polarization in Sweden as elsewhere. In the autumn of 2015, the so-called “refugee crisis” culminated in Europe. Migration flows across the world continue, but European countries have closed their borders and, in various ways, they have made it difficult for refugees to reach Europe and apply for asylum. Sweden (together with Germany) was one of the European countries that, in proportion to their population, received most refugees during this period. This cause of events combined with the activities of terrorist organization ISIS (i.e., the Islamic State) recruiting supporters from all over the world (including

Swedish citizens), operating in the wars in Syria and conducting terrorist attacks on European soil, contributed to highly polarized debates about topics such as religion, security, threats, integration and migration policies. While most political leaders and a large proportion of the public expressed solidarity with people escaping war, hatred, xenophobic and anti-Muslim rhetoric also spread in the public debate and especially in social media.

The background of this exploratory study is that during the course of these rather dramatic events, we were contacted by a group of RE teachers in a school. They argued that they found it increasingly difficult to teach about Islam in general, and in particular about the conflicts in the Middle East. In a short period of time, this specific school, like many other Swedish schools, had a rapid influx of newly arrived students with a Middle East background. Some of these were victims of the terror of ISIS and had escaped the wars in Syria, in some cases with rather traumatic experiences. Other students in the same classroom had brothers or other relatives who had travelled to Syria to join ISIS, and they more or less openly expressed sympathies for this terror group. Furthermore, other pupils in the same classrooms articulated strong anti-Muslim, xenophobic attitudes and/or they expressed negative feelings towards religion as a social phenomenon. In this polarized climate, some teachers found it difficult to handle the situation, as the contents of lectures in both RE and civics stirred strong emotions. The encounter with these teachers became the starting point of the research project named Global conflicts with local consequences—learning and arguing about Middle Eastern conflicts in Swedish classrooms. The overall aim of the project is to study how the current conflicts in the Middle East, stemming from the eruption of the civil war in Syria in 2011, are portrayed, played out and discussed in Swedish classroom practices. Observations of RE and civics classrooms have been conducted at six upper secondary schools in seven classes. We have also conducted interviews with teachers and focus group interviews with students.

1.1. Aim

One element of the instructional strategies decided on by the teachers in two of the schools in the research project was to use theatre visits as a pedagogical resource when teaching about the topics that relate to the above mentioned conflicts. The focus of the present article is to report on some of the experiences of using theatre performances in this specific context. Thus, the aim of this article is to explore how plays may be used as a resource in teaching about sensitive and religiously and/or politically complex issues.

1.2. Controversial Issues in Teaching

Issues that emerge at the boundary between facts and opinions and that in obvious ways concern knowledge and values are often perceived as controversial. In many cases, they have a tendency to divide communities, societies and sometimes even families [1–3]. Widely different, even opposing, explanations of complex issues are launched, and a strong commitment to a particular perspective often makes it difficult to reconcile opinions and to formulate a shared understanding of what is at stake. Ethnic conflicts (cf., e.g., Reference [4]), military aggression and occupations of territory [5] and religious tensions exemplify such events that trigger strong emotional reactions that may stay in the collective memory over long periods of time.

In democratic societies, several institutions, such as open media, political institutions and the educational system, are expected to contribute to handling controversial issues and to promote public understanding. The democratic ideal is built on the assumptions of the value of public deliberations involving parties with different positions. The educational system is a mechanism for promoting knowledge relevant for participation in such public discussions characterizing a democratic society. Schools are expected to provide arenas where different world views and perspectives on significant social issues can be addressed through open discussion. However, even a cursory glance at the history of educational discourse shows that it is not obvious that schools have addressed controversies, conflicts and contradictions in society in accordance with these ideals. On the contrary, schools,

in many ways, have been dominated by monocultural and nationalist ideals and practices that favor coherent national narratives [6,7], and, in the Swedish context, there has also been, and maybe still is, a strong orientation towards reaching consensus [8,9]. According to Englund [9], the extent to which controversies have been seen as a natural part of instructional practices in the attempts of fostering a democratic mindset has varied. However, at the curricular level, such an obligation is, and has been, clearly articulated. The Swedish Education Act specifies that the school has a clear democratic mission and that it should, "... teach and establish respect for human rights and the fundamental democratic values on which the Swedish society rests" [10] (Chap. 1 § 5 our translation). The Swedish National Agency for Education [11] explicitly argues that an important part of the democratic mission of schools is to promote "an open conversation climate where different views can meet, be tested and addressed." (p. 4, our translation). Consequently, it is the responsibility of schools to make such discussions possible and to address controversial and contested issues and dilemmas in order to prepare students for their role as active citizens in a democratic society.

In several educational settings, especially in school subjects such as RE and civics as taught in the Swedish context, controversial issues according to the syllabuses, constitute significant elements of the subjects. The Swedish subject of RE is a mandatory, non-confessional school subject, and all students are taught together about world religions, major non-religious worldviews and ethics, regardless of religious or non-religious affiliation of the individual student. In comparison with RE in many other countries (see for example Reference [12]), RE in Sweden has a clear sociological and religious studies orientation, but the subject also includes normative elements that stress critical thinking and anti-authoritarian perspectives. An important goal of the subject is that it should contribute to preparing students for living in a pluralistic and tolerant society [13]. The teaching in civics should, according to the syllabus "give students the opportunity to develop knowledge of issues relating to power, democracy, gender equality and human rights [...] [and the] teaching should contribute to creating conditions for active participation in the life of society" [14]. In line with these steering documents, it is, thus, the task of the school to mediate facts and knowledge as well as to support democratic attitudes and values which stress the significance of open public debate. From this point of view, discussing controversial issues is a normal and expected activity in all subjects, and it is the obligation of teachers to teach the students how to address and discuss these matters in constructive, critical and responsible ways (i.e., the discussion should, not be offensive or based on prejudices, racist or authoritarian opinions).

In spite of the democratic mission of schooling, research shows that many teachers avoid addressing issues they think may be controversial or cause strong emotions in the classroom. Many teachers also report being unsure about how to address potentially controversial issues in their teaching [15–18]. This ambiguity of the situation may be grounded in teachers' lack of knowledge and/or uncertainty about how to address such questions in a constructive and educationally productive way. There is also an obvious fear of losing control in the classroom or ending up in a situation where some students may feel violated or upset when facing issues they may perceive as controversial (but which may not be perceived as such by other students [19]). In the particular contexts where this project has been carried out, the conflicts were very intense as we conducted our research and so was the media coverage. It is also clear that students often had strong, and opposing, sympathies. In addition, in such contexts, the school should play an important role and contribute to making contested and conflicting perspectives of events understandable for children and young people living in a complex world [20–22].

So how do teachers address controversial issues of this kind in the classroom? According to research, the most common way is to organize different types of discussions [17]. Another way is to stage different types of role play or simulations that relate to dilemmas or contradictions. These ways of approaching controversial issues imply that the instruction explicitly builds on, and aims to go beyond, cognitive skills to involve the students' emotional and existential backgrounds as well as their imagination when attempting to enhance learning [23–25]. Additionally, learning through

different types of narrations in texts, films or Internet sources is common in teaching when approaching controversial issues [26]. The method deployed by the teachers in our case is using theatre visits as a pedagogical tool for addressing controversial questions.

1.3. Theatre Visits as an Instructional Resource

Humans use narratives in various forms to understand the world, their fellow human beings and themselves [27]. The use of text to approach sensitive topics and controversial social issues through literature, films, or theatre is, therefore, a well-established method within the field of so-called entertainment-education [28,29]. This research field is based on Bandura's social cognitive theory, which focuses on the effects of learning through role models and the importance of vicarious learning for self-efficacy [30] and unites this with theories of drama highlighting various aspects of identification and emotional involvement [31]. Narration through texts, literature, films or theatre represents alternative modes of approaching controversial social issues. In research, it has been shown that working with sensitive topics through theatre may open up the dialogue for richer and more nuanced discussions, which promote understanding and empathy [32–34]. Kincaid [31] argues that the benefits of using various types of drama in teaching are related to the capacities of such activities to promote engagement and to trigger emotions and cognitive reorientation. For example, identifying with the characters in a play enables the spectator to see the world from an alternative perspective and, thus, contributes to a more complex understanding of social issues and moral conundrums. Whilst a public debate, a text or a teacher's lesson might clarify different positions and debunk factual errors, the logic of a conventional debate is still often polarizing. The aim is often to win the argumentation and to encourage people to take sides, and this could lead to a situation where the participants stop listening. The aim of Swedish teachers according to curricula is to contextualize questions and to present various interpretations without neglecting empirical facts. When presenting many alternatives, the students are given an opportunity to rethink their own positions. Similar opportunities for opening up perspectives characterize the involvement in artistic fields, including the theatre. According to the research by Kagan [32] and Rivers [34], people with diametrically different views on topics such as homosexuality, slavery and racism were, for example, more likely to reach out to each other in new and different ways through the use of theatre plays. Rivers argues, "[t]heatre engages the totality of our senses, thus enabling a greater receptivity to the material at hand" [34]. The narratives in the plays helped the audience to relate to different perspectives, to counter stereotypes and reframe taken-for-granted positions and, thus, they contribute to meaning-making [35–37]. With this theoretical background and with earlier research in mind, we now turn to the data in our empirical study from Sweden.

2. Materials and Methods

Our study represents an ethnographic approach [38]. In addition to accompanying the students when visiting the theatre to watch two plays (see Table 1 below), the empirical material is based on (a) classroom observations, conducted in 2017, during five lessons at two upper secondary schools (66 students aged 17–19) in two classes, (b) individual interviews with two teachers, and (c) three focus group interviews with 10 students in three groups. Field notes were taken immediately after the theatre visits. The classroom observations included the lessons immediately before and after the theatre visits. The classroom observations and interviews were recorded on audio file and transcribed verbatim. In relation to the second play, *The Others*, the students were instructed by the teacher to write down their reflections and these essays are also included in the analysis.

The two schools are publicly funded, upper secondary schools and both classes in this article attended the Technology program. School 1, with 812 students, is situated in a larger city, and School 2, with 1221 students, is in a rural area. In terms of the educational level of the parents, the classes are according to official statistics quite similar and 68% respectively 71% of the students have parents with education at the university level. At School 1, 28% of the students have a migrant background or have two parents born outside Sweden [39]. At School 2 only 8% have this background, but this school

received a larger group of newly arrived migrants of which a significant part was unaccompanied children, during 2015.

Table 1. Overview of the empirical material.

School	Play	Subject	Observed Lessons	Focus Groups Interviews/ No of Students	Inter-Views Teachers	Written Essays
School 1	<i>The Jihadist</i>	RE	3	1 (3)	1	-
School 2	<i>The Others</i>	Civics	2	2 (3 + 4)	1	43

The empirical research has been reviewed by the Regional Ethical Review Board in Gothenburg, which decided that Swedish legislation on ethical review does not apply in this case. Therefore the board gave an advisory statement. The advice given by the board has been followed, as well as the general principles of research ethics formulated by the Swedish Research Council. In the presentation of the results, the names of teachers and students are changed, teachers are given names with the initial letter T and students the initial letter S.

2.1. The Plays

Before we turn to our empirical findings, it is necessary to give a brief presentation of the two plays that are included in our study. From a general point of view, the two plays were very different in terms of aesthetic expressions, story and message.

2.1.1. *The Jihadist* by Johan Gry, Joel Nordström and Wahid Setihesh

The play, *The Jihadist* [*Jihadisten*], attracted a great deal of attention in the media in the spring of 2017 [40,41]. It tells the story of a young man living in a segregated and socioeconomically vulnerable area. In the play, the audience follows the radicalization of one person. In the announcement by the theatre, the play is presented as telling the following story: “About a young man’s journey from Gothenburg to the war in Syria. What makes young people leave the safe welfare state and choose to participate in a cruel war in another part of the world? During the journey, we encounter Ilias, his family, girlfriend, friends, the administrator at the job center and the Imam” ([42], our translation). According to the playwrights, the aim was neither to defend, trivialize nor normalize the fact that Swedes joined a brutal terrorist organization as the Islamic State. On the contrary, the aim was to show that it is not easy to give a straightforward answer to why young people decide to leave the safety in Sweden and go to war in a foreign country that they have no or very limited connection to. This information of the ambition of the play, however, did not satisfy critics, who found the play disgusting and offensive in what they saw as an attempt to trivialize the brutality inflicted by the Islamic State [40,41]. Consequently, the play instigated discussions in the media. The content was viewed as a contested topic and the verdict on the play was split.

The play *The Jihadist*, performed at the City Theatre of Gothenburg, was viewed by one class at School 1, and the students saw this play as part of the RE class in our sample.

2.1.2. *The Others* by Christofer Bocker

The Others [*De Andra*] was set in a small independent theatre, the Angered Theatre, located in one of Gothenburg’s suburbs. *The Others* is a new play by Bocker, who in recent years has become known as a dramatist who wants to explore “the stranger, the Other, and to investigate the extent to which we understand that the stranger is to the same extent within ourselves.” ([43], our translation).

The Others, according to the official presentation, intends to investigate migration and identity in a “post-apocalyptic Sweden” characterized by mistrust and segregation [44]. The play is partially based on conversations with Somali refugees. At the center of the story are a mother and a daughter who are on the run. Why they have to escape is the daughter’s constant question to the mother, but the mother,

to protect her daughter, does not want to answer. During the escape, they lack the essentials—water, food, medicine, not to mention safety, trust in people and a home. Where they are heading is even more unclear. In the play, it becomes obvious that migration is not a simple journey from one place to another, nor does it end when arriving at the new place. In *The Others*, migration is described as a condition, a state of mind, and it is about constantly moving and always escaping from something, never going to anything. Additionally, how does this affect the development of people when they have to live as refugees? What does migration do to people? How does it affect love and relationships? The play also addresses questions of having two homelands or no homeland at all. No certain answers are given, rather the play raises a large number of questions.

The play *The Others*, performed at the Angered Theatre, was visited by one of the classes in our sample at School 2 as part of civics instruction.

3. Results

In the following sections, we turn to the empirical results from the interviews and participant observations. Our study is exploratory and we have structured our findings according to the teachers' motives and students reflections on the plays.

3.1. The Teachers' Motives for Theatre Visits

The teachers who chose to take their students to the theatre as part of the instruction had somewhat varying motives for doing this. For example, the teacher at School 1 expressed worries for a specific student, who had voiced sympathies for Islamist oriented ideas and organizations. This concern was not only based on the teacher's own observations. Other students with a Muslim cultural background had also reacted to his interpretations of the Koran and had asked the teacher for help in this situation. In the interview, the teacher develops her observations and her motivation for including the theatre visit in the teaching.

Excerpt 1.

Therese: And then there was this other student, a guy from Afghanistan, who said: "you know about this, can't you ... ?" He wanted help against him, to [find arguments] ...

Interviewer: He was like upset?

Therese: Yes, and the guy who didn't show up at the theatre, he is really ... he just rattled off, he knows names "this person said this and that person said that and this is how it says [in the Koran], that didn't happen and this happened it's so and so, read this, look at this paragraph and look at this part ... " And then it's really hard for an uneducated Muslim like him [who argued against the Islamist class mate] [...] He felt desperate, to get this help. "No I don't agree with you that jihad is war, jihad is that you should work on yourself. And war yes, it exists and there is a discussion about the righteous war of self-defense, martyrs, that is to die, but it is life that is important ... "

Interviewer: So, you went into that discussion and started to interpret?

Therese: Yes, I did. [...]

Interviewer: Did he buy your interpretation of Islam, because you also presented a specific interpretation?

Therese: No, I don't think so, not at all. I am not a Muslim and sort of I can't know anything [in his opinion], and even if I studied at the university, I lack knowledge, I have the Western version. (*From an interview with the teacher, School 1*)

The excerpt illustrates dilemmas related to controversial issues in general. To what extent should the teacher take sides and express personal views on contested matters? And what can be perceived as promoting central values of curricula while at the same time showing respect for the students' freedom

of expression? The teacher Therese also articulates that she wants to give the student an alternative interpretation of Islam, but at the same time, she admits to the predicament of lacking the authority and the knowledge about how to do this. Having access only to the Western version of Islam puts her in a weak position to exercise epistemic authority. In precisely this situation, Therese found out that the Gothenburg City Theatre was playing *The Jihadist*, and her idea was that the theatre would contribute to more nuanced conversations introducing different perspectives on jihadism to all students.

It turned out that the student she was specifically concerned about chose not to attend the play, which was a disappointment to her. In the interview, she said that she assumed that he understood that the play might challenge his perceptions and therefore he avoided the situation. This pattern, i.e., that students who approach extreme environments start to withdraw from school and, in many cases, even leave school, was familiar to several of the teachers in the project. One possible explanation of why students in such situations drop out is that it is too demanding to be in an environment where a person's value system is constantly being challenged or put into question. Such situations may arise when teachers and fellow students are engaged in discussing controversial and contested issues that have a strong personal significance to the student in question. In all its complexity, the quotation above illustrates that it can be very difficult to reach and target specific students with strong persuasions. It also illustrates that an action or intervention could lead to further distancing and even growing divides. This result can be compared to Mattson's [45] study who found that some actions of schools to prevent extremism rather stigmatized students with right-wing sympathizers and contributed to more extreme positions.

The other teacher in our sample, Tomas, reported systematically using literature, film and music as central resources for teaching. According to this informant, this approach was employed in both RE and civics in order to contribute to the students' personal development and to their future as democratic citizens. Thomas described theatre as a cultural expression that provides opportunities to problematize the world and to discuss existential and political issues with the pupils. Whilst School 1 was situated in a big city, School 2 was situated in a rural area, and many of the students had never visited a theatre before. For the teacher at School 2, theatre visits were also a tool for empowering the pupils with cultural capital and to offer *Bildung* to those who had fewer opportunities in society because of economic or other social and cultural barriers. The specific idea behind choosing *The Others* was to make students encounter new perspectives on migration and identity and to problematize the Swedish national self-image. He first hesitated to bring the students to the play, partially because they were unaccustomed to the aesthetic expressions offered by theatre, and partially because he wanted the theme of migration to be problematized in ways that the students could relate to. After having seen the play in advance, he decided to bring them to the theatre.

Excerpt 2.

Tomas: I thought, "Will they understand?" And then I, well, no, what do we mean by understanding? No, they will not understand. But I don't understand the refugee crisis either. So, what are they to understand? Well, they must get some kind of idea that there are human beings migrating, and that's what I want to reach and that's why these mixed double results [both positive and negative responses from the students] will be. No, we do not always understand everything, but they have learned a lot. It's sometimes a difference that ... I mean, who can explain identity? Who can understand identity? One can try to capture it from a number of examples, and that's what I think they've done in the reflections, even if they do not cheer about the content of the play. [...] It's a difficult genre. And that's also the point. It's ... The whole idea of a theatre play is that it's going to be difficult, and that's also what's going to be the idea here. To do this and to not make it difficult, I think is very ... contains more risks. [...] But, of course, this play is strange, because it [being a refugee] is a strange situation. (*Interview with the teacher, School 2*)

In the context of this discussion, Tomas described himself as on a mission promoting the fundamental values of the Education Act [10]. Through the material he introduced in teaching, he wanted to challenge perceptions and give new perspectives. His interpretation of learning in this context implies putting the students in a position where the complex and dilemmatic nature of the situation becomes apparent, even if it cannot be resolved. Thus, his ambition is for the students to have an experience in Dewey's [46] sense through which they could take away a sense of a dilemma, an unresolved issue. This school is situated in an area where there historically have been strong right-wing sympathies, and during the participant observations, we noticed that several of the students articulated xenophobic and migration critical opinions, mainly outside class. The teacher, to our knowledge, seldom addressed these opinions straight on but instead tried to undermine them by outlining other perspectives and introducing alternative discursive constructions.

3.2. Student Reflections on the Plays

3.2.1. The Jihadist

Understanding or Whitewashing

In the lesson that followed watching the play the Jihadist, the discussion concerned how the students perceived the content of the play.

Excerpt 3.

Therese: But what did you think about ISIS before and after the play?

Sofia: Well ... no, I don't like them [laughter]. I didn't before, I don't after, so ... No, but I do not know. It didn't really change my view of it. [general support in the class]

Sebastian: I thought ... or the way I have understood it before, it was quite the same in the play. It felt like it really was like that. The only thing I didn't agree with was that they described the guy, the main character, who joined ISIS in the end, that he was quite lost and didn't know what he was doing. I don't think it is like that. I think everyone who joins ISIS or any other terrorist group, or something like that, is fully aware of what they do. And they shouldn't be treated like innocent like they didn't know what they were doing and ... They should be punished for what they have done. (*Classroom observation, School 1*)

The excerpt summarizes the gist of the classroom discussion quite well. In this class, the majority of the students took a distant approach to the theme of the play and the topic was not very emotional for them. In this specific setting, there were also students with a Muslim cultural background, but the classroom conversation could best be described as secularistic. Some of the students even expressed strong anti-religious sentiments and, on several occasions, some of them expressed that "religion or at least Islam should be abolished" (from fieldnotes, School 1). The above quote is also an example of the common irritation among the students with the play. They perceived that *The Jihadist* attempted to convey a message that they should subscribe to, and many stated that they felt that the play assumed that the audience was expected to feel compassion or even feel sorry for jihadists:

Excerpt 4.

Sebastian: I felt that you should feel compassion for jihadists, how they are, thus becoming Jihadists. But I thought it was a stupid purpose to have for play, it confused me a bit.

Therese: Mm. You were critical of being somehow understanding ... Yes, Ismail?

Samir: I felt exactly the same.

Teacher: What? Can you develop a little?

Samir: So, the message of the play was that you should in some way feel sorry for those who are involved ... or like try to understand why they do so. (*Classroom observation, School 1*)

Even though the stated aim of *The Jihadist* was to provide a complex picture of a controversial topic and to discuss why some young people turn to violence, the students perceived the message as if it was to defend those who became foreign fighters in the Middle East. They objected to what they saw as attempts to excuse people who willingly engaged in despicable acts.

In the follow-up discussion about *The Jihadist*, there was, for example, much argumentation about just how to understand the message of the play:

Excerpt 5.

Samir: The play itself was good, the acting and such, I thought they were doing the best, most of the time. But as we have talked a little about before, the very purpose of the play was a bit unclear, or the message they wanted to mediate, what they wanted us to do. If we only were to feel sympathy for those who become . . . yes, jihadists, extremists, or if we . . . or if it only was about understanding, that's a positive purpose. Or whatever it was, like.

Siraj: It's a rather daring topic for a play. It's very easy to get it wrong. Because there are so many different opinions about this. But I think they tackled it quite well. It was . . . sure, I felt that their purpose was almost to like sympathize with IS or Daesh members, feel in some way, "yes, but there is a reason that they do this" and that . . . not that it's okay, but in some way it's society's fault that it has become like this. (*Interview with students, School 1*).

Both students in this excerpt argue that the play could be (mis-)understood as providing excuses for those who decided to become jihadists. For example, Samir argues that the purpose of the play was a bit unclear and that it balanced between, on the one hand, "expressing sympathy for those who become [. . .] jihadists, extremists" and, on the other hand, providing understanding, which he saw as a "positive purpose". This reaction, and the ambiguity it reflects is interesting since the student sees one claim of the play as highly problematic, and the other one as legitimate and commendable. For example, Siraj, who in the interview positioned himself as with Muslim background, argues that the play is "daring" and that "it is very easy to get it [the issue] wrong" since there "are so many different opinions about this". At the same time, he claims that "I think they tackled it quite well", thus arguing that the complexities of the situation were well represented. In his opinion the play aimed at showing that there is a reason that they do this, but that this message came close to expressing sympathies for the Islamic State and/or putting the blame on the Swedish society (i.e., racism, anti-Muslim sentiments, etcetera). The reception of the play, as represented by these two students, indicates that the play managed to address an issue in a relevant manner, but that there were risks that it might be interpreted as offering excuses for those who had chosen to become foreign fighters. When the teacher told the students that they would visit the theatre, she mentioned that the play had caused a heated debate in the media, but based on the students' comments none of them seemed to have been aware of this debate.

Whose Interpretation?

The Jihadist touches on several interpretations of Islam, e.g., Salafist interpretations that the main character Ilias seems to embrace, but in the play, other Muslims try to have theological discussions with Ilias. In the classroom, the play also triggered discussions about different interpretations of Islam. Some argued that ISIS represents a tiny minority within Islam, but with an extreme interpretation. In the interview, one of the students related to this as follows:

Excerpt 6.

Siraj: They also showed this in the play. There was another Muslim, an imam, who said "this is wrong, that's not how it [Islam] goes . . . It's not Islam . . ." The Quran is not a bunch of rules that you should follow blindly. It's a guideline that you have to interpret yourself, what you think is best. You don't have to . . . My dad, he is a Muslim and he has always said this, I do not believe in anything myself, but he has always told me this: "You don't have to be a Muslim or Christian or anything to understand if something you're doing is bad. If you

ever hesitate, 'can I do this or not', just think 'if I'm doing this, is it bad or not?' Forget about religion, 'is it bad or not?' 'Do you feel that this is no good, then it's wrong'. It doesn't matter if that's part of religion. (From the interview with students, School 1)

As mentioned before, the classroom conversations at School 1 were quite critical of religion in general, and in this class, students with religious positions did not expose their beliefs in the discussions. However, in the interviews, personal reflections related to the play were brought up, e.g., as in the case of Siraj, through references to conversations with his father about personal responsibility related to religion. The argument the student makes is that you cannot use the religious text as "a bunch of rules" dictating what to do, there is always a need for consideration about the moral grounding of the decisions people take. Although the classrooms observations revealed that the play contributed to a critical discussion and the possibility to express new positions, the discussions also exposed and reinforced the secularistic norm. Religion was frequently referred to as irrational and deviant, and as the source of violent extremism (cf. Reference [47]).

3.2.2. The Others

Personal Experiences and Messages of the Play

While it was fairly easy to grasp the teachers' motives for going to the theatre, it was much more difficult to determine how the students responded to the plays. Nonetheless, in the case of *The Others*, some of the students in a direct way related to the content of the drama to their own life experiences. Judging from our interviews, this specific play triggered thoughts and conversations that probably would not have taken place otherwise. For example, immediately after the play, outside the theatre, while waiting for the bus, we talked to some of the students in the class who had themselves come as refugees alone in their early teens. One of the students, Simon, who had escaped to Sweden from Eritrea quite recently, was especially touched by the play:

Excerpt 7.

It was exactly like that, it was exactly like that, he said repeatedly. You know, when I went through Sahara to Libya, it was so cold in the night, we didn't know where we went, we just went. I went in a pickup, we were like 20 persons at the back and during the day we had no water and it was so hot. It was exactly like that. (From fieldnotes)

We understood through his body language and voice that it had been emotional to watch the play; it triggered difficult memories. When we did a formal interview one week later, Simon argued that the play could possibly help other students (i.e., those who had not experienced the hardships of leaving one's home country and pursuing a dangerous escape to Sweden) to understand some of what they (i.e., migrants and asylum seekers) were talking about.

Excerpt 8.

Interviewer: What did you think about the theatre?

Simon: It was really good. It shows how refugees have come from their country to get ... freedom. The play was true. It was the same, I had that journey when I came to Sweden, the things they showed us at the theatre. **Interviewer:** You recognized a lot?

Simon: Mm ...

Said: I too think it was good and it told about part of my journey, but not everything really. But yes, it worked. It was good.

Simon: But it shows the other [classmates] how we came here. Those who don't know ... How we came to take this way, the hardest way. It showed this to all people that were there. (From an interview with students, School 2)

To these two students, who both shared the experience of being asylum seekers, the message was related to their own journey of migration. Also, students without migrant backgrounds expressed similar thoughts about the message of the play:

Excerpt 9.

Sanna: I think the message of the play was to get more understanding for refugees and that refugees don't choose to leave themselves and that we should not judge them when they escape to a country. *(From a written student essay, School 2)*

The play seems to have been received in line with the teacher's intention, i.e., it provided the students with the possibility to gain new perspectives and gave them opportunities to place themselves in an imaginary situation where they had to run for their lives.

Excerpt 10.

Stina: It must be a weird feeling to have no idea where you are going, though you are on your way. You know where you want to go but haven't a clue if it is the right direction. *(From a written student essay, School 2)*

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However, other students had a more reserved and critical understanding of the play, and they thought that it was quite obvious that the play had an ambition to address other questions than just the physical escape from oppression and hardship.

Excerpt 11

Sven: What they want to say through the story is that it is difficult to live as an immigrant in contemporary society. They get hate they do not deserve and say they have to escape from someone, or they will die. What I experience in this theatre is that they have made an exaggerated situation for some who should be deported from the country. *(From a written student essay, School 2)*

Here, we see how the same play is received and understood in different ways. Students with personal experiences perceive the play as an opportunity for identification so that others can "walk in their shoes". Some of the students, who lacked this experience, were more distant and took an intellectual position, and some even opposed the message of the play about promoting understanding of reasons and experiences of migration. As the study does not include any form of pre-test it is hard to determine whether the play affected the student's original views on migration and refugees or not. The educational framing in terms of the play being part of the civics course, and the task to write an assignment that is part of the assessment, affect how the students relate to the play. At School 2 it was common to express migration-critical opinions. For example, the opinion that "we cannot take in everyone" was often articulated in this class, and despite that there were strong xenophobic views in the group, these views were, to our knowledge, not addressed openly or in a structured way in the classroom discussions by the teacher. When students from this class were asked what they thought about the play, the most common answer was: "ok but weird" (from fieldnotes, School 2). Additionally, some students expressed that they felt constrained by the play's way of communicating their message.

Excerpt 12.

Stefan: The message in the play, as I understood it, was that we would help and take care of refugees, we would show empathy for them because they have been through so much to come here. The message was, to my mind, unclear and unnecessary. The message is about empathy for immigrants and they like to try to force this into the viewer. *(From written student essay, School 2)*

This student takes the opposite position in relation to the teacher's intention to let the students see the play. The play was seen as a representation of a propagandistic discourse intending to force an opinion onto the audience rather than a method for learning about others' experiences and life choices.

The Personal Narrative

After seeing the play, the teacher asked the students with a migrant background if anyone wanted to tell about their experiences during their journey to Sweden. One of the boys volunteered. His story was received differently by the students, much less distanced, and it contributed to a completely different approach and discussion about migration in this specific class.

Excerpt 13.

Saga: It became real in some way. It makes you understand it more. Because you have heard the story, you see it so many times on television and so on, that they experience this. But just that he is standing here, he's been through this. Like, it really happens. It's getting more . . . coming close.

Selma: And he really tells how he felt and how it was for him . . . (*Interview with students, School 2*)

Several students thus had difficulties relating to the narrative of the play, possibly because they were uncomfortable with the way the story was told. The story of the play, on the other hand, opened for the discussions that were of the kind the teacher had planned for in response to the play. To put it differently, the play provided a window of opportunity to address difficult and contested topics in the classrooms.

4. Discussion

The overarching aim of our article has been to explore how theatre plays were used as resources in teaching about sensitive and religiously and/or politically complex issues in an environment where the students had different backgrounds for relating to the topics. We explored the teachers' motives and reasoning when choosing to bring their students to the theatre as part of RE and civics classes, and what reactions these plays and their contents generated among the students and, as a next step, what types of interpretations this element of an instructional process brought about. While it was fairly easy to grasp the teachers' motives for going to the theatre, the students responded in divergent and complex ways to the plays.

Anyone that has been involved in teaching knows that teaching can never be reduced to a simple input-output affair—the same content and structure in one lesson will never come out exactly the same in another class, and it is also obvious, and far from surprising, that the same content is understood in different ways based on the personal experiences of students and their local context. This was also the case in the classes that visited the theatre and watched *The Jihadist* and *The Others* in this study.

The teachers' motives for including a play in the teaching had to do with ambitions such as introducing more perspectives on an issue in order to generate a deeper and more sophisticated understanding of the complexity of the situation. Through the theatre, different positions and opinions could be made visible. At School 1, the teacher was worried that a specific pupil was becoming interested in jihadism, and she had hoped that the play could reach this student in a way her teaching and discussions had not. At School 2, the choice of using theatre was related to the content of the specific play but also to the more general goal of introducing the theatre as a mode of cultural and existential expression. He thus had a general ambition of contributing to a process of *Bildung* by letting his students see this play. None of the students expressed opinions about the plays as plays. It seems that the focus of attention for the students was the content and message of the plays, and the reception by the students clearly differed. Some expressed that the plays contributed to understanding (a) how it is to be a migrant or (b) factors that contribute to people joining jihadist movements. Others perceived those perspectives as attempts to influence them in specific directions, and they were

somewhat annoyed over this. Concerning *The Jihadist*, the message of the play of understanding the process of radicalization was construed in the classroom discussion as providing a series of excuses for people who had taken illegitimate decisions. The personal narrative offered by a classmate about his experiences of migration was seen as more authentic and informative than the narratives of the plays.

One question asked is what theatre performances, as a specific genre of storytelling, meant for understanding the message of the plays. Many of these students had never been to a theatre before, and this could be a potential obstacle to understanding the messages, according to the teacher. In this group of inexperienced visitors to the theatre, several of the students dismissed the plays as weird. This in no way contradicts the assumption that a visit to a theatre can provide other means for learning about a contested topic for a large group of the students. Unlike teaching, where positions and facts often are outlined in a more distant, reified and objective way, Gesser-Edelburg [20] argues that the language of the theatre has an inherent capacity to communicate complexities in ways that will generate new perspectives and new thinking processes among students. From this perspective, considering something as weird could also provide a new opportunity to experience and learn something.

For example, it was clear that the reactions of the students, especially in the written essay after the visits to the theatre, were communicated in a strong educational framing. Since they had been given the task of describing their perceptions of the message of the play, they assumed that their answers would be part of a process of assessment and grading. For example, in School 2, there was an ongoing discussion among students about “politically correct opinions”, and when these pupils were informed about our research interests, they asked if “only politically correct opinions would be included in the project.” It turned out that those who asked this question held strong xenophobic, migration and Islam-critical views. However, these types of opinions were rarely discussed in the classroom, and the students also expressed themselves with caution in the written essays that followed the plays. We believe that this gap—i.e., what they write in written essays and what they express among friends and peers—illustrates that migration, integration and religious extremism are perceived as controversial issues in Sweden at the moment, as they are the subject of intense media debates and often based on strong opinions rather than on knowledge, facts and experiences. Commitments to such opinions serve as a hurdle for open inquiry and discussion [2,3] in the classrooms. Both students and teachers said that the topics addressed in the plays are daring and sensitive for both teachers and students.

If we compare the plays included in our study, *The Jihadist* appears to be the play that caused few conflicts, and a strong consensus soon emerged in the classroom-discussions that followed after the theatre visit. Thus, the students argued that the kind of religious, violent-approving, extremism exposed in the play is unambiguously negative and a bad deviation from “normal Islam”. At the same time, there were students who in the classroom articulated a strong secularistic position and made critical comments, such as, “all religion, or at least Islam, should be abolished” which is a widely acceptable position towards religion in contemporary secular Sweden [47]. Whilst *The Jihadist* brought strong negative emotions in the public debate, the students mainly reacted negatively to what they perceived as the psychologicalization of the radicalization process. Some even argued that understanding of the mechanisms contributing to the main character, Illias, in the play joining ISIS relativized the question about guilt and personal responsibility. Here, teachers who work with teens have a potential challenge, as many students of this age tend to see the world in terms of dichotomies, black or white, rejecting problematizations and nuances as delusions. Another possible explanation is that religious extremism is perceived as more ideology-motivated than other types of violent extremism.

Compared to *The Jihadist*, *The Others* raised a different social problem, which was arguably closer to the students’ lives and several of the students expressed stronger personal opinions about the topic of The Other. This play takes up the theme of migration and identity and the majority of the written essays after the theatre visits give voice to empathy with people forced to migrate, but some expressed a type of resistance against the notion that the play was intended to persuade them to emphasize. “Unclear” and “unnecessary” were some reviews in relation to this. In this class, several of the students

took a migration critical attitude and expressed that “we cannot take all”, i.e., that Sweden cannot harbor all migrants. From this point of view, the play became a trigger for defense mechanisms and, thus, reinforced the views the teachers in our sample intended to challenge. Here, teachers balance the school’s democratic fostering undertaking and democratic principles.

However, in some cases, “good” intentions or to be on “a mission”, as one of the teachers put it, could actually do more harm than good, as illustrated by Mattson’s [45] studies of young neo-Nazis in Swedish schools. His material contains examples where schools wanted to address racism and strengthen democratic opinions among students and did so by organizing so-called theme days on the Holocaust. For some groups, these theme-days were perceived as prescriptive and did not contribute to providing a critical dialogue, on the contrary. The school should not have a relativistic attitude towards racism or xenophobia, but if the initiatives taken in educational settings have a confrontational character, it might not solve the original problem, and in some cases, it could even push students into vulnerable positions that they have difficulties escaping from [48,49].

Although it is difficult to determine if this problem is present in our sample, it is important to remember that at least one student who, according to the teacher, expressed sympathy for an interpretation of Islam that the teacher perceived as islamistic and he skipped going to the play, *The Jihadist*. Still, it is possible to argue that empirical research shows that watching plays can contribute to another type of understanding (cf. References [32–34]). However, it is important to remember that the school’s task of fostering also frames the experiences in a specific way when the goal is to educate citizens who respect democracy. Here, it is one of the school’s major challenges - how much of intolerant opinions can be accepted in a school context? The school should mediate knowledge but also values, and these values include democratic freedoms, such as freedom of religion, freedom of opinion and freedom of expression, and it must be possible to arrive at different positions and perceptions. At the same time, it is also the teacher’s duty to maintain a civilized classroom climate where all students are treated with respect.

From a comparative point of view, the theatre visits where the class attended *The Others* initiated other discussions compared to those that were initiated by *The Jihadist*. For example, as mentioned above, one of the students became strongly emotionally affected by the play *The Others*, as it reminded him of his own journey through the Sahara and across the Mediterranean. The teacher noticed this and asked if he wanted to share his story with his classmates. Because of this context (i.e., the recent theatre visit) and that he was given the opportunity to tell how he ended up in Sweden, his story was received in a completely different way. After the account, his classmates describe the migration crisis as becoming real for them and that they understood it differently when hearing his personal story. Interestingly, his story was similar to the story in the play, but for several of the students, who lacked a migration background and previously expressed negative views about migration and immigrants, it was their classmate’s story that touched them, not the play. The personal narrative meant that the empathy of the classmates was activated in a way that neither the teaching nor the play had been able to do. This seems to support Levinson’s [37] suggestion that personal narratives can serve as a bridge between the facts of school subject (i.e., the content) and the emotional engagement, and in this way help the student achieve a more nuanced understanding. Identification and seeing the world through the eyes of another person can provide new perspectives and generate a more differentiated cognitive access to complex issues (cf. Reference [25]). Although this is a positive example, it is precarious, and possibly even unethical, to ask students to share their personal experiences and perceptions, especially regarding sensitive issues. Teachers may have control over what is said in the classroom but not outside of it, and the teacher can never know with certainty how different students perceive a discussion if they are made to be the representative of one or the other position [19]. In this particular case, however, the student’s personal story generated positive consequences for both him and his classmates, and the conversation focused on the reasons why people migrate and why they are willing to risk their lives, rather than on closed positions, such as “we cannot take all”, which was a dominant form of discourse before the class attended the play and the student shared his personal story.

As shown in earlier studies, the use of the theatre in teaching is neither unique nor new. The ancient Greeks used theatre as a resource for catharsis and *Bildung* [27]. This illustrates that so-called entertainment-education in the form of watching plays can have an effect on awareness and it can change positions and behaviors [20,28]. Thus, it can be an effective tool for addressing controversial questions and for creating the kinds of conversational contexts where educationally relevant discussions may emerge.

5. Conclusions

In summary, this study has provided examples of how two schools in Sweden use theatre visits as a means for discussing why young people living in Sweden have become foreign fighters in the Middle East, on the one hand, and, on the other hand, why and how migration is both a social phenomenon and an individual experience. Through attending plays that address complex and politically polarizing issues, the teachers in our sample tried to create opportunities for the students to address current social challenges. Instead of providing ready-made answers—i.e., attempting to present what is right and wrong—the plays provided a more complex description of socially contested topics, such as wars, migration, violence identity, values, democracy and human rights. Although this was the intention expressed by the teachers, some of the students still perceived that the plays were normative and one-sided and that they left little or no room for personal opinions. Some even felt that, in spite of the new setting, there was an expected correct versus incorrect answer when it came to interpreting these plays. This may be read as a sign that the educational framing of the activity implied that there still was a “didactic contract” operating as a premise for the students when interpreting the play. However, some students argued that the plays and the following discussions provided opportunities to address questions that had not been explicitly in focus in the classroom. From this point of view, the plays provided an opportunity to discuss larger questions, such as values, social formations, identity, democracy and human rights against the background of artistic and personal experiences. The theatre visits in our study thus provided an opportunity for both teachers and students to talk about controversial issues and current social and political affairs based on narratives of individuals affected by these issues. Our study indicates that some of the students related the individual story to the larger political context, some did not. However, it is necessary that the teacher is aware of why and how he or she is using entertainment-education as a pedagogical tool, but it is also important that the teacher makes sure that there is enough time before and after the theatre visit for preparations, discussions and analysis. The topic of the plays should also be placed in context, and the students should be informed about why they have been taken to the theatre to see a specific play and how its topic relates to the curriculum; if not, the visit can both be counterproductive and appear weird for the students.

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