

Research articles

Mediatished human rights education: the (challenging) role of the Norwegian Broadcasting Corporation

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Abstract

The purpose of this article is to analyse and discuss *Selma and the Quest for the Perfect Faith*, a TV series made by The Norwegian Broadcasting Corporation and promoted for use in schools, and the accompanying teaching material about freedom of religion made by Save the Children. We discuss the series and material critically from a human rights and a human rights education perspective, and evaluate their suitability for use in religious education. The article is informed by mediatistion theory and argues that freedom of religion is primarily operationalised in accordance with journalistic criteria for presenting religion, and that it does not sufficiently balance the rights of children and the liberty of parents. This is inconsistent with sound human rights education and highlights the need for critical awareness when operationalising educational material produced and distributed by media actors for use in the classroom.

Keywords

Human rights, human rights education, mediatistion, freedom of religion, religious education, media actor

Introduction

In January 2021, *NRK Super* (The Norwegian Broadcasting Corporation's channel for children) hosted what they called 'theme days' on the subject of religion. A series of TV programmes and a music video were released that focused on children's freedom of religion. The Norwegian Broadcasting Corporation (NRK) is the public service broadcaster in Norway. On the NRK website, the programmes about religion are explicitly promoted for use in schools and include several learning resources developed in cooperation with the Save the Children organisation.

The focus of this article is on the series called *Selma and the Quest for the Perfect Faith*. This consists of five episodes, each of about 20 minutes, that follow 25-year-old programme leader Selma as she visits and engages with children who adhere to different religions and life stances, with the explicit purpose of finding the perfect faith for her. Detailed educational resources for lower secondary school accompany the episodes (and specific lesson plans accompany each episode). These resources are presented as a 'didactic design addressing freedom of religion' under the headline 'Religion. Free to believe what you want' (Save the Children, 2021a). The stated objectives of this material are to help pupils 'increase understanding and respect for other's religions, life stances or ways of life', 'get to know the challenges and positive aspects of faith and doubt', and 'to have a deep knowledge of their own right to think and believe what they want' (Save the Children, 2021a).

In this article, we set out to analyse this didactic design and its suitability for religious education (RE) and human rights education (HRE). The term didactic design denotes a detailed plan for one or more lessons, normally including assignments and resources aimed at reaching at specific learning goals. We use didactic design as an inclusive term referring to the totality of the episodes (made by NRK) and the teaching material (made by Save the Children). In the article, we will frequently distinguish between these two, and specify this accordingly.

As a state-owned public service broadcasting company (cf. Lundby, Hjarvard, Lövheim & Abdel-Fadil, 2018), NRK is an important media actor in Norway and has considerable influence on educational practice. 77.2 % of Norwegian teachers report that they use general content from NRK as part of their teaching, and 75.4 % say they use educational material promoted by NRK (Dahle, Hodøl, Kro & Økland, 2020, p. 45). Educational material produced and promoted by NRK is therefore likely to be used in Norwegian schools. We want to discuss the cooperation between such a major public service media producer and non-profit organisations in making educational material, as well as possible considerations of RE teachers when making use of such material. This discussion is informed by institutional mediatization theory, emphasising a) how media institutions will format and shape their messages according to their own norms and standards and b) how other institutions may come to be influenced by, and in some

instances adopt, the formats of the media (cf. Hjarvard 2008; 2014). In the didactic design based on *Selma and the Quest for the Perfect Faith*, we argue that freedom of religion is primarily operationalised in accordance with journalistic criteria for presenting religion. We also contend that this ‘journalistic’ operationalisation of freedom of religion displays a strong focus on an individualised right to choose, which is a governing idea of the series and design. This is problematic from a human rights perspective, both because it fails to take parental rights into consideration, but also because it discredits the role of the family as an important condition and context for children’s own enjoyment of their freedom of religion. We argue that this operationalisation therefore also is inconsistent with a professionally sound human rights education. On a more general level, this highlights the need for teachers to be critically aware when choosing, planning, and operationalising educational material produced and distributed by media actors for use in the classroom.

In the following, we shall first present and discuss children’s freedom of religion within a human rights framework. Second, based on these perspectives, we critically analyse *Selma and the Quest for the Perfect Faith*, and spell out the individualistic and autonomy-oriented focus of the didactic design. Third, we discuss this operationalisation from a mediatisation perspective, drawing upon interviews with representatives from both NRK Super and Save the Children. Finally, we discuss the need for critical awareness among RE teachers and schools when making use of such educational material.

Freedom of religion and interrelated rights

Freedom of religion is an important human right, and an integral part of human rights education. It is therefore not surprising that when children’s freedom of religion is put on the educational agenda and educational material and resources for use in religious education aimed at children from 9-12 years old is produced, it is the Convention of the Rights of the Child (CRC) which is in focus. Unlike the other human rights conventions, the CRC specifically takes the child’s perspective on human rights. Concerning freedom of religion, Article 14 of the convention clearly states that ‘states parties shall respect the right of the child to freedom of thought, conscience and religion’ (United Nations, 1989). The CRC also obliges the state, upon ratification and according to Article 42, to ‘make the principles and provisions of the Convention widely known, by appropriate means, to adults and children alike’. Additional political pressure on strengthening the CRC in education also comes from The Committee on the Rights of the Child. In the concluding observations to the combined fifth and sixth periodic reports of Norway in 2018, the Committee points out that, despite improvements since the last report, knowledge about the Convention of the Rights of the Child is still inadequate and not systematically implemented in the training and education of teachers and other relevant professional groups working with and for children. The Committee specifically suggests that

teaching about CRC should be a part of curriculum plans at all levels (United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child, 2018, paragraph 10).

Children's freedom of religion is a general educational concern and a relevant topic in several subjects, including RE. When engaging with children's freedom of religion, however, one should also be aware that parents have rights in this area. Most importantly, parents have the liberty to ensure the moral and religious and moral education of their children. From a human rights perspective, this means that children's freedom of religion and parents' liberties are interrelated. This relationship can sometimes be complicated, as there may be cases where parents' rights and children's rights are in tension or pull in different directions.

Traditionally, the liberty of parents concerning the religious and moral education of their children has had a strong position in international human rights law. To raise a child in accordance with your own convictions is, as William Galston (2011, p. 287) and Eamonn Callan (1997, p. 143) point out, generally considered to be a central meaning-giving task in parents' lives, and thus inherent to a meaningful life. This liberty is considered important for intimacy and for the relationship between parents and children, as well as being an integral part of the socialisation process. These general arguments are also reflected in the preparation and development of the conventions. Accordingly, several important conventions protect parental rights, *sui generis*, in the sense that they are unique and independent rights. Most notably, we have the International Convention on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) (United Nations, 1966a), Article 18.4, which states that 'the states parties to the present Covenant undertake to have respect for the liberty of parents and, when applicable, legal guardians to ensure the religious and moral education of their children in conformity with their own convictions' (United Nations, 1966a). The International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR) (United Nations, 1966b), Article 13.3 has an almost identical wording as has Article 2 of Protocol No. 1 of the European Convention on Human Rights (ECHR) (Council of Europe, 1950), concerning the right to education. Individually and in conjunction with each other, these articles grant parents a strong mandate when it comes to influencing their children's religious and moral education. Although only *accessory* to the child's rights, Article 14 in the CRC nevertheless represents, as former UN Special Rapporteur on freedom of religion or belief Heiner Bielefeldt (2015, p. 9) points out, an element of continuity with Article 18.4 of the ICCPR when it states that 'States Parties shall respect the rights and duties of the parents and, when applicable, legal guardians, to provide direction to the child in the exercise of his or her right in a manner consistent with the evolving capacities of the child'.

An important question is how the liberty of parents affects children's freedom of religion. In one sense, it would seem to restrict it severely, but this assumption is premature. The impression that parental rights automatically trump children's rights changes when we look

at children's freedom of religion in conjunction with CRC Article 12 on the child's right to be heard, which states that their views should be 'given due weight in accordance with the age and maturity'. The last part of Article 14.2, which emphasises that parental direction should be given 'in a manner consistent with the evolving capacity of the child' corroborates this. A glance at General Comment nr. 12 (74), which is the Children's Committee's interpretation of Article 12, may also be instructive. This General Comment connects the right to be heard with the best interest of the child (CRC, Article 3), by emphasising that the principle of the best interest of the child is not applied correctly if children are not given a chance to express their views. That it is in the best interest of the child to be heard, and their opinion be given due consideration also in matters of religion, is confirmed by the *travaux préparatoires* (official preparatory work) of the convention. What are we to make of this?

From an overall perspective, it seems as if the specific nature of the child's right to freedom of religion is not something that is objectively given. It is, in fact, relative both to age and maturity - and thus under constant development. And it is also related to parents' rights. For instance, it is not clear when children or adolescents are mature enough for their views to be given due weight in questions about religion. Although the Committee on the Rights of the Child does not say anything specific about age, indications might be given through different practices in different countries for when a person is allowed to sign up or sign out of a religious or life stance community (Switzerland, 16 years; Germany, 14 years; Norway 15 years). This does not mean, however, that the views of younger children, as for instance those between nine and twelve (the designated age group for the didactic design examined here), should not be given due weight when it comes to membership in religious organisations or other issues relating to their freedom of religion - *if* they are mature enough. There is, in other words, an inevitably subjective element to this equation, which gives ample room for interpretation.

Unfortunately, there is no singular interpretation that enjoys universal support. Instead, there is disagreement among legal scholars which reflects different positions on this relationship, and these stances seem to go in different directions. One position leans towards prioritising the rights of the child, giving considerable weight to children's opinions from an early age (Brems, 2006; Köhler-Olsen, 2012); another emphasises the liberty of parents, and is more reticent when it comes to granting younger children influence (Ahdar & Leigh, 2005). These interpretive positions reflect different priorities, and not infrequently, different cultural and religious values regarding the best way to raise children, as well as the relationship between parents and children. The contentious nature of children's freedom of religion is also seen in the many reservations to Article 14 (Cali & Montoya, 2017). Despite such disagreements, and a tendency towards an increased emphasis in favour of children's rights, particularly by the Committee on the Rights of the Child (Øystese, 2016), all sound human rights-based interpretations nevertheless recognise the interrelatedness of children's freedom of religion

and parental liberty to ensure the moral and religious education of their children. This interrelatedness implies that both children's freedom of religion and parent's liberty, in order to be taken seriously, must be interpreted in light of each other. This means that a balance or reconciliation where neither rights-holder can automatically trump the other must be the guiding principle (Bielefeldt, Ghanea & Wiener, 2016, p. 216).

Selma and the Quest for the Perfect Faith

In this section, we shall critically analyse *Selma and the Quest for the Perfect Faith* and the supporting teaching material. We argue that this didactic design only balances the aforementioned rights to a small degree. Instead, it has a clear emphasis on children's freedom of religion at the expense of the liberty of parents, who are constructed as the primary obstacle to their offspring's religious freedom.

The plot running through the episodes of *Selma and the Quest for the Perfect Faith* is that Selma, a non-believer, sets out to find the faith that perfectly suits her; she is afraid she is missing out by not believing. In the series, children are for the most part presented as unencumbered selves, ideally finding their own paths independently of others. Throughout the series, we find that independent choice unaffected by others is presented as a panacea for the good life, thus expressing an ideal of strong, comprehensive autonomy. The following examples from the lyrics of the theme music video most clearly expresses this autonomy-oriented agenda, one that is in opposition to both parents and others. Selma sings:

You can choose your own path. A different path than your grandmother. For a short second, sailing on a wind. Faith is free, and the truth is wide. You, who are about to set off on a journey, do not need to believe the same as others. (...) If someone should put pressure on you, don't let them stress you. For life is your own journey. Others are weaving their cloth. (...) You are going your own way. Your life, your dance. Your faith, your way. Do what is right for you. Your way, your path. Forget the others. Your own journey. Life is your own game. You can believe what you want. (NRK, 2021a)

The final episode of the show, which concludes the narrative, confirms the autonomy-oriented perspective on religion and faith, as Selma concludes that she is not able choose *one* religion, but needs more time. She says that 'the perfect faith does not exist' and 'what is perfect for one is not perfect for another'. That this insight does not allude to or include cultural or community bonds is clear from the follow-up: 'The most important thing is that it suits you'. The final conversation in the last episode corroborates this by stressing the importance of 'not listening to others', and that the 'nicest thing is to take a little bit of everything and be inspired'. In the didactic design, this operationalisation of freedom of religion is justified by Article 14.2 of the CRC. As argued previously, it is not surprising that the CRC takes centre

stage when introducing freedom of religion to pupils in primary school, as this convention specifically takes the child's perspective on human rights. In the didactic design, Article 14.2 figures both explicitly in the teaching material and in the episodes. It is referred to in the accompanying theme music video, where Selma sings: 'There is a law, a convention, about freedom in a faith-dimension'. In the teaching material, however, we do not find the original version of Article 14.2, but a simplified or adapted one. The original text reads: 'States Parties shall respect the rights and duties of the parents and, when applicable, legal guardians, to provide direction to the child in the exercise of his or her right in a manner consistent with the evolving capacities of the child'. On the other hand, the simplified version in the teaching material—which originates from the homepage of the Ombudsperson for Children in Norway (Barneombudet) and is authored by the Ombudsperson and Norwegian UNICEF—states that 'All children have the right to think and believe what they want. Parents have a right to give them advice'. Most frequently, however (three out of five mentions), it is only the first part of the article—concerning the child's freedom or religion—that the material refers to, and the parental right to give advice is left out (Save the Children, 2021b).

One can appreciate the need for simplifying matters, particularly for children in this age group, but it is striking that neither the TV programmes nor the teaching material mention the official text. The important requirement of 'respecting the rights of parents' in the original text gives rise to the aforementioned legal and philosophical dilemmas and discussion about how to understand and interpret the nature of 'direction' as well as the coordination and balancing of children's and parent's rights. This dilemma is underplayed in the sense that the phrase 'right to give advice' creates an image of a 'neutral adviser', an image confirmed throughout the teaching material. The complex relationship between the rights of children and the liberty of parents, discussed previously, is not given much attention. This impression is strengthened by the fact that there is no mention of the rights of parents to ensure the religious and moral education of their children in conformity with their own convictions, as supported in the ICCPR, Article 18.4, ICESCR, Article 13. 3 or Article 2 of Protocol No. 1 of the ECHR.

Rather than confirming the rights of parents, we find that the didactic design constructs parents, family, and religious groups as the main potential obstacles to children's freedom of religion. This is most clearly displayed in episode 3. In this episode, which bears the title 'Freedom of religion', the focus is on not believing and on breaking free from the faith of your family. In this episode, Selma firstly meets a boy who is not religious. She then talks to a woman who had to break with her family after growing up as a Jehovah's Witness and a woman brought up as a Muslim, who has since stopped believing. The episode ends with an interview with a representative of the Ombudsperson. She briefly mentions the rights of the parents by saying that 'when the child is under the age of 15, parents can decide to some extent' when it comes to signing in and out of religious communities. The scene then

immediately cuts to the representative saying: 'If you disagree with your parents, you try to find a solution you all can agree on. If you experience something which is not OK, it is important that you speak to an adult you can trust'. The interview (and the episode) ends with the display of an information poster informing the viewer that it is possible to call the 'Alarm Phone'—a phone service for children and youths who experience violence, abuse and neglect—and displays its number.

This focus is confirmed and reinforced by the teaching material, both in the lesson plans meant for pupils and in the background material provided for teachers. Although the teaching material briefly acknowledges the rights and responsibilities of parents to provide guidance (Save the Children, 2021b, p.9), this is not developed further. Instead, attention is drawn towards religious parents as counterparts and obstacles or possible threats to children's freedom of religion, and that if the parents' role becomes coercive, the government is required to intervene. The background material refers at length to organisations, help-phones, help-services, and specific web pages children can consult which combat coercion in religious communities, social control, female mutilation, etc (Save the Children, 2021b, p.11).

Overall, the teaching material follows the series closely, mirroring and to some degree reinforcing the analysed operationalisation of freedom of religion. The didactic design thus uniformly expresses a clear narrative that represents the individual's free choice to pick and choose from religious elements as positive. At the same time it portrays families, religious communities and creeds that impose restrictions on individual choice and on peoples' lives as problematic. On one occasion, though, there is an interesting tension between 'educational intention' and the core plot of the show as a 'quest for the perfect faith'. In the explanation of the teaching material, the advisory comments suggest the following:

It is OK to point out that people do not usually choose their beliefs as a type of quest, but that we become part of the religion or life stance we are born into. For many, the right thing to do will be to stay; for others it will feel more right to change our beliefs (Save the Children, 2021b, p. 3)

The fact that Save the Children finds it pertinent to advise teachers to convey to pupils that belief is not normally the result of a quest is somewhat paradoxical, given the choice of title, song, narrative and individualistic emplotment throughout the show. There is evidence to suggest, as we shall see, that this tension can be ascribed to the journalistic logic and the relations between NRK and Save the Children.

The journalistic take on freedom of religion - and the ambivalent role of the Norwegian Broadcasting Corporation

In this section, which is based on mediatization theory and draws on interviews with

representatives from NRK Super and Save the Children, we argue that the individualistic conceptualisation and operationalisation of freedom of religion and the subsequent downplaying of parental rights and community aspect of faith is a (natural) consequence of institutional standards. These standards pertain to a journalistic formatting of religion, rather than being focussed on educational considerations. To substantiate this argument, a brief account of the role and mandate of NRK is useful.

As a tax-funded public service broadcast company, NRK is mandated to offer a broad range of content. Part of this mandate is to ‘contribute to education and learning, hereunder offer content suited for schools’ (NRK 2019, §44). This goal is primarily handled through the *NRK Skole* service (NRK School) which organises and promotes various media material from NRKs catalogue and archives. For the purposes of this article, it is important to point out that NRK Skole mainly functions as a portal, relaying material from NRK as a whole. This means that although media content is promoted as relevant for educational purposes through the webpages of NRK Skole and specifically aimed at subject-specific learning outcomes in the Norwegian curriculum, such media material is mostly developed and produced by other divisions of NRK. This means that educational considerations are not, to any significant degree, part of the production process. That this also applies to the production of *Selma* is confirmed by NRK Super, who are the ‘owners’ and producers of the series, and who initiated the partnership with Save the Children in developing the didactic design. The journalistic take on freedom of religion is clear:

Even though we have theme days about religion, we are journalists making them. And we need to make, well, it does sound off to say entertainment, but we need to make people want to watch this. At the same time, we are not pedagogues or experts. We are good at telling stories. That does not mean that we are sloppy, but this is first and foremost what we do (interview with the project leader of NRK Super’s theme days about religion).

NRK Super has been very forthcoming, giving us unique insights into the process of developing and producing the different media products included in the theme days. About two weeks after the material was aired for the first time, Project Leader Frank Sivertsen and journalist Dang Trinh agreed to give us an interview. Part of this interview will here be used to illustrate an important point about using media material in education; that the selection and presentation of content are formatted according to standards appropriate for the specific medium and genre involved. In this particular case, content about religion and freedom of religion is to a large degree formatted according to news journalistic standards, and this has a strong influence on the educational material promoted for schools.

There has been a significant amount of research on religion in Scandinavian news media in the

last decade (Furseth, 2018; Lundby, 2018, 2021). Although religion is not uniformly represented across media, some patterns of representation are prominent. Overall, religion comes across as something contested and controversial (Lundby, 2018). Due to the nature of journalistic media, conflict and controversies are generally given more coverage, and thus religion is mostly visible when it is seen in relation to various societal problem areas (Hjelm, 2011; Lundby and Gresaker, 2015). A focus on uncovering such problematic areas is seen to be part of the societal mandate of journalists. Døving and Kraft call news journalists in Norway *watchdogs of secularity*, in the sense that there is a hegemonic understanding of the public sphere as a secular space, and that religious ‘trespassing’ must be addressed (2013, p. 10-11). Although different religions are given different coverage, religion is commonly represented according to what we can call a *master narrative of individualism* (Toft, 2019, p. 93-94).

NRK Super’s theme days have had the explicit aim of addressing difficult issues and religion is seen as one of them (NRK, 2021b). Other issues addressed earlier have been mental health, violence towards children, and alcohol and drug abuse. The theme days are thus understood as part of the broader societal mandate of NRK to, among other things, put a focus on problematic areas. When developing theme days, they work from a given project mandate. Regarding the theme days about religion, this mandate already included a strong focus on the problematic aspects of growing up in religious environments.

The theme days are one of our most important tools to address the things it is difficult and important to talk to kids about (...) At the same time we want to highlight problem areas related to growing up in religious environments (...). Children need to learn that they have freedom of religion and do not need to believe the same as their parents. Ref. The Convention on the Rights of the Child Articles 14 and 30. (Project mandate, internal document)

Project Leader Sivertsen confirmed that this has been an important focus throughout the project. In addition to ‘creating respect for religion’, he told us that the driving force behind the project was to show that ‘you can choose for yourself, you don’t need to believe even if your parents do’.

Selma and the Quest for the Perfect Faith presents children of different faiths and the viewer encounters a rich variety of religions. Selma, the hostess of the series, is warm and genuinely interested in learning about beliefs and practices. The show is professionally produced by people who know their target group well. However, that this primarily is a journalistic product becomes clear during the interview. The journalist in charge of the series told us that balance had been important for them. ‘If we are to include very positive things about religion’, he said, ‘then we need to show the dark side as well’. This focus guided the process of making the series, and this is particularly visible in the episode named ‘Freedom of religion’, where an

adult woman tells us about her bad experiences growing up in the Jehovah's Witnesses faith community. When asked why this particular group had been chosen, Sivertsen told us that it could have been any religious group, but 'there's something about examples of children being denied celebrating the national day or birthdays. This hits the target group. This is something children can recognise'. Sivertsen summed up the strong journalistic approach very precisely when he talked about how they chose whom to include in the show.

If you watch the Selma show, you see those that are very fond of religion. However, we would like to see ten- or twelve-year-olds in the middle of it, whether it is Christianity, Islam or whatever, saying 'I am forced to go to church and I don't want to' and telling us about that. However, we did not find that, although I am sure children in Norway experience this. Not necessarily only churches, but different faith communities. This was what we really wanted. That would have been a scoop for us.

Instead, they needed to use adults in order to show the difficult aspects of growing up in religious communities. In order to get across the point that children have the right to choose differently, the message would need to be simplified. In the interview, we talked about the fact that the rights of parents were under-communicated in the series. This choice also followed from journalistic considerations centred on NRK Super's role as a channel for children. As Sivertsen said, NRK Super's main goal is to give children a voice and to 'make their rights visible'. In order to do this, the message needs to be simplified so that the 'receiver doesn't miss it'. This is a conscious choice because the message is so important that it is better to sharpen it and risk over-simplifying it than to make it 'all fuzzy so we're left with nothing'.

Save the Children - making the teaching material

The journalistic take on freedom of religion, with its strong focus on individual choice and the danger of religious parents' strong influence, is a governing idea of the finished product. As this product is made to be shown as part of the channel's own theme days, this is only natural. However, we would argue that this focus also 'spills over' to the teaching material promoted for use in RE classes. Save the Children was in charge of developing the educational part of the didactic design. This organisation specialises in making educational material aimed at schools and has both pedagogical experience and educational competence. However, Emilie Forbes Holmen, who works as senior consultant for schools in Save the Children and was in charge of the project, tells us that Save the Children has no special competence regarding religion. This was clear from the outset of the project, and the premise for the partnership was that Save the Children would not be involved in deciding the content of the shows. Their role was limited to the teaching material based on the media products produced by NRK Super.

There are two areas in which the journalistic approach to the right to freedom of religion has a strong influence on the finished teaching material: a) the choice of Save the Children in the

first place, and b) the way the produced series set the premises for what could be included in the didactic design. Concerning the choice of Save the Children as partner in the project, Sivertsen told us that he talked with several organisations. However, the only organisations considered were those that specialise in helping vulnerable children. Save the Children was primarily chosen because of its competence in this area. Forbes Holmen confirmed this:

It was first and foremost NRK Super who thought it was important to address this in the series. To show those that grow up in a faith where their rights are suppressed, so they can't live to their full potential so to speak. And this is also something we in Save the Children find very important. (...) This is a very important issue for us. Everything to do with, well themes like forced marriage, genital mutilation, and negative social control of course. So, it was important for us to help put a focus on the importance for children growing up in strict religious environments, that they have a right to get help to get away from it.

Thus, the journalistic focus on the potential problematic aspects of growing up in religious environments was prominent from the outset. This focus also influenced the final didactic design in another way. As Save the Children had little influence on the production of the series, the teaching material developed had to be based on the episodes they received from NRK Super. Forbes Holmen told us that the resource group of religious education teachers and researchers wanted to nuance the way freedom of religion was presented. However, she says, 'we needed to relate to the actual content of the series'. Although they did consider this, 'it would be strange to make educational material which deviated from the content of the series'. The premises were thus set and there was little room for other approaches to freedom of religion in the teaching material. Thus, although Save the Children actively worked to present a nuanced view on freedom of religion, supported and supplemented by input from a group of RE professionals and human rights experts, the journalistic approach prevails in the final didactic design.

Media-shaped freedom of religion, a mediatisation perspective

It is clear from the above analysis that although the final didactic design presented to schools through NRK Skole is partly created by pedagogically trained professionals, there are other considerations that shape its focus and content. The significant result is that freedom of religion is formatted according to journalistic standards. To explain this formatting, institutional mediatisation theory may be a useful analytical tool. According to this approach, various media have come to permeate most areas of modern society as most institutions rely on networked communication technology. Mediatisation occurs when the established standards and practices of media institutions come to overlap and partly shape the practices of these other institutions (Hjarvard, 2018). Studies have shown that such tendencies impact

on RE (Toft & Broberg, 2018; Toft, 2021) as media technology, platforms, material and discourses form an important part of the educational activities of the subject (cf. Lied & Toft, 2018).

We do not argue that this is an example of actual mediatisation of religious education and human rights education, as we do not have the empirical data to analyse how the didactic design is used in the classroom. However, the strong position of NRK and NRK Skole makes it prudent to highlight their ambivalent role as producers and distributors of educational material for use in schools. This ambivalence stems from the overlap of different divisions and editorial levels involved. In this case, we have seen that there were (at least) three different actors involved: a) NRK Super, which produced the series according to journalistic standards; b) Save the Children, which developed the teaching material according to pedagogical standards and their own stated aims of helping vulnerable children; and c) NRK Skole, which distributed and presented the complete didactic design as specifically relevant for RE in Norwegian schools. In evaluating *Selma and the Quest for the Perfect Faith* it is important to acknowledge the overlap of editorial and institutional considerations which results in this specific formatting of freedom of religion, and the risk of importing this into the classroom.

NRK Skole has earlier faced criticism for the content of various media products they have promoted as relevant to religious education. An episode of the comic TV series '*På tro og Are*' has faced severe criticism from The Norwegian Buddhist Society for portraying Buddhism in a negative and erroneous manner. This series is heavily promoted on NRK Skole and has been extensively used in Norwegian classrooms (Toft, 2021). In this case, the spokesperson from NRK Skole stated clearly that it is not the role of NRK Skole to critically evaluate the content they promote, except for ensuring that it is relevant for specific curricular learning outcomes and if it is age appropriate. The pedagogical responsibility lies with the teachers who choose to use the material.

In this article, we have shown that it is not only specific media products such as series and videos that should be critically examined. We also find that when complete didactic designs are offered and promoted as directly suited for use in schools, it is the journalistic formatting of religion and freedom of religion that prevails, even when the design is developed in cooperation with other, more pedagogically oriented, actors. Thus, it is important for teachers to have a critical awareness of these dynamics if such designs are to be used as part of religious education.

Balancing rights in human rights education and religious education

In this final section we discuss the role of the RE teacher, and the importance of a critical awareness when teaching about religion and freedom of religion. In the first section, we

argued that from the perspective of human rights jurisprudence, children's and parents' rights are interrelated, and consequently needed to be interpreted in light of each other. This interrelatedness has implications for HRE, as well as for RE and the role of RE teachers. According to the United Nations Declaration on Human Rights Education and Training (UNDRET), Article 2.1, the main objective of HRE is to 'promote respect for and observance of all human rights and fundamental freedoms' and to 'contribute to the building and promotion of a universal culture of human rights' (United Nations, 2011). This objective is also central to the Council of Europe's Charter on Education for Democratic Citizenship and Human Rights Education (2013). It seems reasonable to assert that a professionally sound HRE means strengthening respect for *all* human rights and, consequently, that both children's and parents' perspectives must be taken seriously. Since human rights are a part of the legal framework for (public) education, these requirements also apply to RE teachers and should therefore serve as a guiding principle for their professional practice.

This means that when RE teachers are planning teaching activities about both religion and freedom of religion in schools, they need to recognise and take both children's and parent's rights and interests into consideration. This does not mean taking children's freedom of religion off the educational agenda in order to respect the liberty of parents. Clearly, children's and parents' interests are not always identical and making children aware of their rights in this area is an important part of empowering them to become self-governing autonomous persons, and thus a central part of human rights education (Howe & Covell, 2020). There are, however, a number of ways of operationalising children's freedom of religion, and some of these have pitfalls. Choosing to promote children's freedom of religion in a spirit of strong autonomy, as we have shown to be the case in *Selma and the Quest for the Perfect Faith*, is problematic for several reasons.

The first of these reasons is that it undermines respect for parents' rights to give direction to their children, and to educate them according to their own convictions. Secondly, and perhaps more importantly, it discredits the family and community as the natural context for children's religious socialisation, which in turn may also prove to have negative consequences for the children's prospects of enjoying their own freedom of religion. In fact, the Preamble to the CRC clearly emphasises the family as the natural context and necessary condition for children's freedom of religion. In the fifth paragraph, the family is defined as 'the fundamental group of society and the natural environment for the growth and well-being of all its members and particularly children' (United Nations, 1989). So, even if freedom of religion is an individual right, the CRC recognises that the collective environment in which children live and the family and the group to which they belong are important in shaping identity and safety (Øystese, 2016, p. 276; Sundin, 2016, p. 70). The community-aspect of freedom of religion is presupposed also in the other articles in CRC where religion is treated, such as Articles 20 and

30. This means that if RE teachers are to take both perspectives seriously, they should not forget the importance of parents and the community when it comes to children's rights. As Bielefeldt, Ghanea & Wiener (2016, p. 221) point out, as a word of caution, human rights is not only an individualistic project and 'children's human rights can never be conceptualised in a spirit of "narrow individualism"'. Children's rights therefore clearly presuppose community ties and, above all, family ties without which the rights of the child cannot be realised. Children's individual right to freedom of religion and parent's rights to provide direction do not indicate parents' ownership of their children, but rather a partnership in which the child's evolving capacity is a guiding principle.

Finally, failing to balance the rights of both children and parents in RE is not only problematic from the vantage point of human rights, but also (arguably) at odds with core objectives of religious education itself. A religious education which aims to promote understanding, toleration, and respect for religious and life-stance diversity—as *Signposts* (Council of Europe, 2014) also emphasises—may easily find itself undermining these objectives if the role of the family as an (important) arena for religious socialisation is discredited or marginalised. This may in turn also jeopardise the all-important parental trust (Hansen, 2018). As RE teachers, we need to put children's freedom of religion on the agenda. However, at the same time we must avoid a default position whereby the family and religious communities and creeds are seen as problematic, imposing restrictions on individual choice and peoples' lives. RE needs to embrace the complexity of identity formation and the family and community as an integral part of that formation process. Therefore, RE teachers should be wary of a didactic design which puts children's religious freedom in opposition to the wishes of their parents.

Conclusion

There is a myriad of different actors promoting their material for use in schools. Increased availability through new digital solutions contributes to what is now a wide range of educational resources developed by actors that format content related to religion and human rights according to their own standards, aims and norms. Their own formatting, however, although often legitimate in itself, might not actually conform to the didactical standards of sound RE and HRE. This, as we have argued, is also the case for a media institution like NRK. Generally considered to be objective and trustworthy, educational material from NRK Skole is widely used. However, although NRK produces and promotes material for use in schools, it is first and foremost a journalistic institution and this has a profound impact on its educational material. As several studies show, the public face of religion in Norway is increasingly formatted according to the standards of the media, as they increasingly take over as a primary source of information and as the main arena for engaging with questions of religion (Furseth, 2018; Lundby, 2018, 2021). By taking an ambivalent role as both a media producer and a tax-

funded and state-mandated producer of educational material, NRK represents a sort of mix of institutional practices that contributes to the mediatisation of both education and religion. By this, we do not mean that NRK's material is unsuited for RE. We do, however, urge RE teachers not to import educational material uncritically into their classrooms.

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