This is the published version of a paper published in .

Citation for the original published paper (version of record):

Tryggvason, Á. (2023)
Agnostic teaching: Four principles
*Journal of Curriculum and Pedagogy*, 1-21
https://doi.org/10.1080/15505170.2023.2284694

Access to the published version may require subscription.

N.B. When citing this work, cite the original published paper.

Permanent link to this version:
http://urn.kb.se/resolve?urn=urn:nbn:se:oru:diva-110001
Agonistic teaching: Four principles

Ásgeir Tryggvason

School of Humanities, Education and Social Sciences, Örebro University, Örebro, Sweden

ABSTRACT
The aim of this article is to synthesize theoretical and empirical research on agonism in education into teaching principles. Agonistic theory underscores the role of conflict, emotions, and collective identities in democratic classroom discussions. Empirical studies on agonism in education provide empirical insights into how these aspects are played out in teaching practices. By synthesizing both theoretical development and empirical findings on agonism in education, this article suggests four principles for agonistic teaching. The suggested principles aim to function as a synthetization of research valuable to the research field of democratic education and as tools for teachers who want to explore the possibilities of agonism in their teaching.

Introduction
Stating that Western democracies are under pressure has almost become a mantra in introductions to articles on democratic education. The intensified polarization of public debate can be seen to cast long shadows on democratic education and raise fundamental questions about how to educate students so they can both participate in, and change, society (Sant, 2021; Zembylas, 2022). Although the scholarly discussion on the relation between democracy and education is not new, the hostile polarization of public debate does accentuate the role of democratic education (McAvoy & Hess, 2013; Zembylas, 2021a). However, besides accentuating the importance of democratic education, it also raises fundamental and challenging questions for teachers, such as: What should democratic education aim for? What should students learn? How should political issues and discussions be handled in the classroom? (McAvoy & Hess, 2013; Sant, 2021). In policy and research about democratic education, we find different answers to these questions based on different understandings of what
democratic education is. One understanding, which can be found in policy, emphasizes that democratic societies rely on citizens that are able to participate in democratic practices. A conclusion is therefore drawn that education has a central role in preparing students to become democratic citizens. In problematizing this understanding, Biesta and Lawy (2006) describe it as an idea of “citizenship as outcome” where young people are positioned as “not-yet-being-a-citizen” (p. 72). In contrast to this instrumentalist understanding of democratic education, others, such as Dewey (1916/2004), underscore the close and intertwined relation between democracy and education where both democracy and education are understood as a shared form of life. In this understanding, democratic education is not reduced to mere preparation, but is about living and growing with others in pluralism. Many theoretical accounts of democratic education are found between these two poles (see Sant, 2019), one of those is agonistic democratic education. Agonism has been suggested as an educational approach for teachers to deal with political polarization and conflicts in times of populism and polarization (Sant, 2021). In short, agonistic education can be described as an approach that aims to support students’ participation in political and democratic life. It is grounded in an understanding that political conflicts between different visions of society are essential for democracy. Thus, as an educational approach it does not aim to overcome all conflicts but instead aims to “tame” conflicts so they can be played out in a democratic register. This means that agonistic education aims to transform hostile conflicts between enemies, which we are seeing in society, into democratic “tamed” conflicts between adversaries (Ruitenberg, 2009). For this, there is a need to acknowledge the role of emotions and identities in students’ political and democratic life (Sant, 2021; Tryggvason, 2018). The practical outcome from the research field has been the suggestion of several principles and ideals, which I will return to below (see Ruitenberg, 2009; Sant, 2019). What is lacking, though, is a synthetization of previous research and findings into teaching principles. If the full potential of agonistic education is to be of practical value for teachers when addressing political polarization and populism, then agonistic theory and empirical findings need to be synthesized into concrete teaching principles.

The aim of this article is to synthetize theoretical and empirical research on agonistic democratic education in order to formulate, and normatively suggest, concrete teaching principles. I suggest agonistic principles for teaching for three reasons. First, and as indicated above, a synthetization of agonistic research into teaching principles could be valuable for teachers facing the pedagogical challenges of polarization and populism in democratic education. Second, a synthetization of this nature would shed light on the educational consequences and potentials of agonistic thought and
could therefore contribute to the theoretical development of agonism in education. Third, considering that researchers have developed teaching principles for other versions of democratic education, explicitly formulating and making agonistic teaching principles available could be valuable for teachers and the research field of democratic education alike. For instance, teachers could use the principles of deliberative education to establish a rational consensus in political discussions (Englund, 2006). Principles from the tradition of critical education could be used to emancipate students from societal structures and cultural hegemony. In similar fashion, this article sets out to formulate agonistic teaching principles for teachers who want to maintain the political nerve and dimension (conflicts, identities, passions) in the classroom whilst still upholding the democratic values of liberty and equality for all. In this sense, the agonistic principles could be seen as one available tool, among many, for teachers to use in their classroom.

The article is structured in five sections. After this introduction, I describe previous agonistic educational research and its different theoretical roots in political theory (primarily Chantal Mouffe and Hannah Arendt). Following this, I describe the method of synthesizing research into teaching principles and the methodological challenges that this entails. Thereafter, the four principles are outlined. The article ends with a discussion about what it means to suggest normative teaching principles from the perspective of an educational researcher and how the problems of “ivory tower” research could be addressed.

**Agonism: A political and educational theory**

This section presents previous research on agonism is divided into four sub-sections. In the first I describe the general characteristics of agonism as a political theory. In the second sub-section I describe theoretical studies of agonism in education, and in the third empirical studies of agonism in education. Finally, I describe and discuss the agonistic principles that have been formulated in the research field.

**Agonism as a political theory**

Agonism has mainly been developed as a political theory by political scientists and philosophers. As a political theory, it emphasizes the role of dissent, collective identities, and the affects in political life. A starting point for agonistic theory is that society is pluralistic, meaning that people have different identities, values and ideas about what a good life is, and how society should be organized (Gürsözlü, 2022). A main issue for agonistic scholars is therefore how to understand pluralism and also how to
understand boundaries between “us” and “them” (Tryggvason, 2021). Without going too deep into the field of political theory, agonism can be described as stemming from a diverse collection of political thought and political theorists, such as Hannah Arendt, Friedrich Nietzsche, and Carl Schmitt (Glover, 2012; Karagiannis & Wagner, 2008; Schaap, 2007). In the field of educational theory however, agonism has primarily been developed from the work of Chantal Mouffe (2005), who draws on Schmitt. Besides the Mouffe-oriented agonism, an Arendt-inspired version of agonism has also been developed within educational research (Koutsouris et al., 2022). The difference between these two versions of agonism can be described using Mouffe’s own categorization. Mouffe calls her version of agonism a dissociative agonism, as it recognizes the need for closures in political life, i.e., the need for decisive moments that temporarily close debates and fix the frontiers between “us” and “them.” In contrast, the Arendtian version of agonism can be described as an associative agonism, in that it aims at “preventing the closure of debate and keeping identities, institutions and practices open to challenge and disruption” (Glover, 2012, p. 90). In short, in terms of political philosophy and theory it is the Mouffeian and Arendtian versions of agonism that have entered the field of agonistic democratic education.

**Theories of agonism as democratic education**

To see how agonism has been developed as an educational theory we need to turn to Claudia Ruitenberg’s (2009) highly influential article “Educating political adversaries: Chantal Mouffe and radical democratic citizenship education.” Even though agonism has been developed and discussed in educational research since the early 1990s (Koutsouris et al., 2022), Ruitenberg’s article constitutes a keystone for how agonistic education has developed over the past decade. Besides being the most cited article, where agonism in education is a central topic, it has also generated substantial debate within the field of education (e.g., Englund, 2016; Leiviskä & Pyy, 2021; Tryggvason, 2017). Ruitenberg formulates three components for a democratic education that aims at educating political adversaries, which in this article I call “agonistic education.” First, she outlines the need for educating political emotions. This means that students’ emotions, such as anger about injustices or feelings of solidarity, have a relevant and legitimate place in democratic education. Thus, education needs to attend to the emotional investment in political issues that arises in the classroom. As Ruitenberg argues, it “require that students learn to distinguish between emotions on behalf of themselves and emotions on behalf of a political collective” (Ruitenberg, 2009, p. 276). The second component of educating adversaries is the need for “reviving and understanding of ‘the political’”
in education. This means that students learn to distinguish between being adversaries and being moral enemies. The distinction between political adversaries and moral enemies is crucial in Mouffe’s agonistic theory. Political adversaries agree that liberty and equality for all are desirable values, yet disagree on how these values should be achieved. Moral enemies, or antagonists, sees the other as a threat to a person’s existence, and that antagonistic conflict is a path to violence (Mouffe, 2005, p. 16, 2013, p. 41). Finally, educating political adversaries requires that students develop political literacy, which means learning to read “the social order in political terms” (Ruitenberg, 2009, p. 278). Thus, students need to be able to identify how social structures, such as inequality, are the results of a political process and power relations and are therefore not given by nature but are instead parts of a social structure that can be changed.

Following Ruitenberg’s influential article, which set the tone for what a Mouffe-inspired education could look like, agonistic education has been explored and developed in several ways. One of the most influential researchers in the field is probably Michalinos Zembylas, whose work spans from concrete ideas on how agonism could be used to revitalize citizenship education in societies shaped by ethnic conflicts (Zembylas, 2011), to critical examination the Westerncentric perspectives that undergirds Mouffe’s agonistic theory (Zembylas, 2022). Even though Ruitenberg’s and Zembylas’ work can be seen as two gravitational points, as a lot of studies refer to their work, the research field can also be described as fragmented and disorganized, which is apparent in a recent literature review of how agonism is used in educational research (Koutsouris et al., 2022).

In order to synthesize previous research into agonistic teaching principles, I will use the results from a systematic scoping review of agonism in education conducted by Koutsouris et al., (2022). This scoping review provides a suitable starting point for identifying important results from previous research. In their review, Koutsouris et al., (2022) point to how questions about emotions are thoroughly developed in the field of agonistic education. The reason to why emotions are given such a significant role is found in the role that Mouffe gives to passions in political life. For instance, to want something to be changed in society cannot, from an agonistic perspective, be detached from the emotional investment of wanting. In that sense peoples’ political visions cannot be reduced to being rational calculations but must also be understood in terms of their emotional investment in different political visions. Given this understanding of the relation between emotions and political life, emotions have been a central theme for educational research and theory development of agonistic education (see for instance: Sant et al., 2021; Sætra, 2021; Tryggvason, 2017, 2018; Zembylas, 2018).
Furthermore, Koutsouris et al. (2022) only identify two articles where agonism is described as a pedagogic tool to be used with students in the classroom (Clarke, 2006; Lo, 2017). One of those is the study of Matthew Clarke (2006) who suggests an agonistic practice that enables students to understand how identities are hybrid and to recognize what they have in common with others. Thus, the agonistic education that Clarke formulates is an education that enables students to form collective identities that are not tied to essentialist claims or binary oppositions, such as good/bad or traditional/modern (cf. Zembylas, 2011).

Another way of how agonism can be a pedagogic tool is found in Jane C. Lo’s (2017) study of classroom discussion. Lo (2017) develops the concept of agonistic deliberation, which combines deliberative theory and agonistic theory with the aim of strengthening students’ engagement in political issues. What characterizes this combination of deliberation and agonism is that instead of just emphasizing rationality and consensus, it encourages students to “bring forth their emotions and their sense of fairness and justice (or injustice) rather than to simply look for logical commonalities between themselves and their peers” (pp. 6–7). Moreover, discussions need closures, and instead of aiming for a consensus in which students try to find points of agreement, the agonistic deliberation aims for negations as the closure, which “means coming to an actionable next step even if all are not satisfied with the results” (Lo, 2017, p. 6; see also Samuelsson, 2018; Thomas-Reid, 2018).

**Empirical studies of agonism in education**

Of the 33 articles in educational research identified by Koutsouris et al. (2022) with agonism as a central theme, seven articles are empirically based (Andersson & Olson, 2014; Bown & Sumsion, 2016; Clarke, 2006; Hammersley-Fletcher et al., 2018; Hasslöf et al., 2014; Johansson & Emilson, 2016; Pinto, 2014). In addition to these, I have identified seven additional empirical studies of agonism, or at least where agonism is central, that can be added to the list (García-Puchades & Martos-García, 2022; Håkansson et al., 2018; Öhman & Öhman, 2013; Roucau, 2022; Sætra, 2021; Sant et al., 2021; Van Poeck & Östman, 2018). What is interesting to note here is that out of these fourteen empirically-based publications, only Roucau (2022) and García-Puchades & Martos-García (2022) refer to any of the other twelve. A reason for this generally weak interconnection between empirical studies of agonism in education could be that they are published in different educational subfields, such as public pedagogy (Andersson & Olson, 2014), curriculum studies (Pinto, 2014), teacher professional development (Hammersley-Fletcher et al., 2018), or environmental and sustainability education (García-Puchades & Martos-García,
These fourteen empirical studies of agonism point to four conclusions. The first is that agonism in education, and the conflictual dimension it brings, seems to have a potential for a vital democratic education. Young people can express both their will and ability to handle political conflicts when discussing online (Andersson & Olson, 2014). However, in classroom settings there can be a strong orientation toward consensus, for example where students are able to identify conflicts in society but do not involve themselves in them (Öhman & Öhman, 2013). Some studies also point to strong emotions emerging and to some students seemingly being able to handle them without becoming enemies, even if that is not always the case (Sætra, 2021). When compared to older people, young people seem to be more positive to the conflictual dimension in political discussions (Sant et al., 2021). Even in preschools, agonistic conflicts seem to have a potential for democratic learning (Johansson & Emilson, 2016). Moreover, some studies point to how agonistic communication can be a way of learning (Pinto, 2014) how to, in a broader sense, handle differences in a plural world (Sant et al., 2021).

Secondly, teachers can open up for “the political” in their teaching (Van Poeck & Østman, 2018) and show competence to handle conflicts as well as an “agonistic democratic ethos” (Hammersley-Fletcher et al., 2018). As agonism normalizes conflicts (Sant et al., 2021), it could develop teachers’ own appreciation for dissent and conflicting viewpoints (Hasslöf et al., 2014). Furthermore, agonism could also “contribute to teachers’ learning about children’s life-worlds, a learning that can be seen as a prerequisite for knowing how to challenge young children’s critical thinking” (Johansson & Emilson, 2016, p. 33).

Thirdly, the empirical articles point to how children (Johansson & Emilson, 2016), young people (Andersson & Olson, 2014; Roucau, 2022), students (Håkansson et al., 2018; Sætra, 2021), pre-service teachers (Clarke, 2006), and policy actors (Bown & Sumson, 2016) establish collective identities in conflicts and discussions. Such formations of unity and diversity (Johansson & Emilson, 2016) and “adversarial collective identities” (Roucau, 2022) can be seen as important aspects of agonistic education (Johansson & Emilson, 2016; Roucau, 2022; Sætra, 2021).

Finally, besides normalizing conflicts and enabling collective identities, agonistic education can “create channels for the expression of political emotions” (Sant et al., 2021, p. 240), which can be seen as fundamental given that emotions are an inherent part of political opinions, discussions, and conflicts (Bown & Sumson, 2016; Håkansson et al., 2018; Johansson & Emilson, 2016). Agonistic education does not only channel emotions, though, but also tightly connects to the formation of political
identities. As Sætra (2021) points out, this connection between emotion and identity can be so strong that some “students had problems distinguishing between their (political) opinions and their personal identity” (p. 8).

Given the similarities between the empirical contributions outlined here, it is surprising that only two of them refer to others, even taking into account that they are published in separate subfields of educational research. The lack of interconnectedness between them accentuates the need for a theoretical synthesis that brings together empirical results and theoretical development as teaching principles. Before describing my methodological consideration of synthesizing agonistic research, previous agonistic teaching recommendations need to be addressed.

**Previous agonistic teaching principles**

In an influential literature review of theories of democratic education, Sant (2019) lists the five recommendations for agonistic education pointed to by previous theoretical research. These are: agonistic education should (i) open a space “where it is safe to dissent” and (ii) enable opportunities for students to act and speak as equals. It should (iii) aim to educate students to become political adversaries, and (iv) encourage them to “articulate themselves with others” (Sant, 2019, p. 679). Moreover, agonistic education should (v) establish an environment “where students can articulate their emotions” (Sant, 2019, p. 679). These suggestions from previous theoretical research give a good overall picture of the potential educational implications of agonistic theory. In my synthetization of previous research I use these five suggestions as a valuable starting point, although at the same time I also attempt to formulate more extensive and concrete teaching principles that are synthesized from both theoretical and empirical research.

**Method: Synthesizing research into teaching principles**

The method I use for synthesizing research draws on the work of Öhman and Sund (2021), who synthesized 20 years of research to formulate a model for sustainability commitment. Öhman and Sund use the notion of retroduction, which they describe as:

> the process by which a researcher adopts hypotheses and constructs theories. Retroductive reasoning starts with studying the facts (observations derived from experience) and devising a plausible conjecture or hypothesis (theory) to explain them. (Öhman & Sund, 2021, p. 4)

Moreover, this process is iterative, which means that the researcher starts to study the facts again after a hypothesis has been devised (Glynos
& Howarth, 2019; see also Mårdh, 2019). By using this form of retroductive reasoning, Öhman and Sund bring together both theoretical and empirical results into a model that provides new perspectives on both theory and practice (Öhman & Sund, 2021).

While Öhman and Sund use retroductive reasoning to construct a model, the aim of this article is to formulate teaching principles. In order to have guidance in formulating principles, I take inspiration from Tomas Englund’s (Englund, 2006, 2016) work on deliberative communication. Englund formulates five teaching principles for deliberative communication (Englund, 2006). A key aspect of these teaching principles is that they are attentive to teachers’ professional judgment. They can be used by teachers as aims for their teaching and as tools for reflecting over their own teaching. For instance, instead of using the principles as a blueprint for launching deliberative communication, teachers can use them to pose reflective questions, such as: Could traditional views be questioned during my lesson? Did I encourage the students to listen to each other in a way that established respect for the concrete other?

By using Öhman and Sund’s (2021) way of synthesizing research, and with inspiration from Englund’s (2006) construction of principles, the methodological process in this article is structured by three questions:

1. Which agonistic concepts and principles have been provided by previous educational research?
2. How do these concepts and principles overlap?
3. Which normative teaching principles can be formulated from the identified overlaps?

Question 1 is answered in the previous research section above. Thus, describing previous research has a methodological function for the syncretization, rather than merely being a summary of previous findings. Question 2 is answered in the thick descriptions, below, of what the principles mean and what they require. Question 3 is answered by formulating the principles as distinct principles for teaching. This means that the principles point in certain directions for teachers’ actions. The principles are normative in the sense that if agonistic education is desirable then these actions are prescribed. In answering the third question, I draw inspiration from Englund’s (2006) way of formulating teaching principles that are attentive to teachers’ professional autonomy and judgment. This last aspect is important, as it points to a general criterion for the principles, which is that they need to be context insensitive. In order to function as principles for action, and at the same time leave room for teachers’ professional judgment, they cannot be situated or restricted to certain
types of classrooms. I will return to this aspect of principles and context in the discussion section.

Four principles for agonistic teaching

In this section I present four principles for agonistic teaching. Each subsection follows the same structure; first a formulation of the principle and its premises, followed by a description of what the principle means and what it requires.

Articulation of political demands

Principle:
The teacher should encourage students to articulate political demands.

Premises:

- Articulations are already in education.
- Articulations of political demands are not epistemic claims.

What it means. The principle of articulating demands can be found in Ruitenberg’s (2010) argument that democratic education needs to teach students to articulate demands. Without this, students will not become politically educated:

  If a person has no idea how to translate her or his ideas about a desirable social order into actions that aim to bring this social order about, then I would argue that we cannot call this person “politically educated.” (Ruitenberg, 2010, p. 377)

This principle is also found in Mårh and Tryggvason’s (2017) work on populism and in Sant’s (2021) work on “pedagogies of articulation.” The common ground for these ideas of articulation is based on Laclau and Mouffe (1985; see also Szkudlarek, 2011).

In order to formulate articulations of demands as a teaching principle, it needs to be clear what articulation and demands mean. Articulation is an action that establishes relations between identities (Laclau & Mouffe, 1985; Ruitenberg, 2010). Another way of describing it is to say that it is the process of naming and connecting. However, as articulation relates to any action that connects (and forms) identities, it is not limited to verbal expressions, such as “we want” or “I want.” In that way, an articulation is not necessarily a verbal expression but a practice that establishes relations between identities and relations between collective identities (Laclau & Mouffe, 1985; cf. Tryggvason, 2017). For example, taking the knee as a symbolic gesture against racism is an articulation, in that it establishes a relation between identities and between the subject who takes the knee
and between a collective identity, or “we.” In short, demands stem from dissatisfaction with a certain problem or issue. Demands can be fulfilled so that the dissatisfaction disappears, but when they are unfulfilled they can connect to other unfulfilled demands through articulatory practices (Ruitenberg, 2009, 2010). When connected to other unfulfilled demands, they can turn into “a cause” that forms and unites a political movement. In this way, articulating demands and connecting them with other demands is related to collective identities as this process draws a line between “us” who are fighting for this cause, and “them” who hinder their fulfillment (Mårdh & Tryggvason, 2017; Ruitenberg, 2010).

**What it requires.** Drawing on this understanding of articulations and demands, the first premise for this teaching principle is that articulations of demands are already present in schools and classrooms (Szkudlarek, 2011). In a more practical sense, the principle calls on teachers to acknowledge which articulations are already present in the classroom. When these articulations are non-verbal, it requires an attentiveness as well as an in-depth knowledge about the students and their context. But acknowledging the articulations of demands that are already present does not mean that teachers should simply accept and uphold them. Rather, they need to normatively judge whether these articulations should be a legitimate part of the students’ democratic education or not.

The second premise is that articulations of demands are not epistemic claims. This may seem obvious and therefore unnecessary to make explicit. We usually take for granted that articulations of political demands, such as “we want a raise,” is not the same kind of statement as “a raise is an increase of salary.” But these distinctions risk being blurrier in schools, in that they have the specific task of teaching students about the world through epistemic claims. In a more practical sense, the risk is that teachers could transform every articulation of demands into an epistemic/analytical question. One way of describing this is that the articulation of demands simplifies the issue at hand, while turning it into an epistemic/analytical issue makes it more complex (cf. Tryggvason & Mårdh, 2019). In outlining “pedagogies of articulation,” Sant (2021) contrasts it with controversial issues in education: “in contrast to controversial issues, pedagogies of articulation do not aim to favour rational inquiry or agreement of a course of action but to mobilise students’ affects towards the political debate” (p. 131). Finally, an important aspect to highlight here is that articulating demands is not the same as just expressing one’s already formed demand, instead the demands are shaped in and by the very process of articulating them. In that sense, agonism shares a resemblance with deliberative theory.
in viewing communication as a basis for forming opinions and not just as a means of expressing them (cf. Samuelsson, 2016, p. 2).

**Political emotions**

Principle:

The teacher should legitimize students’ expressions of political emotions when they encounter the teaching content.

Premises:

- Political emotions are a certain type of emotions.
- Political emotions are a crucial part of democratic citizenship.

**What it means.** Emotions are addressed in many studies of agonism in education (Roucau, 2022; Ruitenber, 2009; Sætra, 2021; Sund & Öhman, 2014; Tryggvason, 2017; Tryggvason & Öhman, 2019; Zembylas, 2021b). Even if these contributions theorize emotions in different ways, they share a common understanding that some, but not all, emotions have a legitimate place in agonistic teaching. For example, the role of political emotions in agonistic teaching could be to enable students to develop the “ability to feel anger on behalf of injustices committed against those in less powerful social positions rather than on behalf of one’s own pride,” as Ruitenberg (2009, p. 277) puts it. It could also mean that teachers are attentive to how emotions relate to collective identities and to the boundaries between “us” and “them” when political issues are discussed in the classroom (Roucau, 2022; Sætra, 2021; Tryggvason, 2017, 2018). Thus, the first shared understanding is that political emotions are relevant for democratic education, even though not all emotions are to be considered political (see Ruitenberg, 2009, p. 276). Another shared understanding in the field is that emotions are not things that are added to education, but that it is rather about giving them a legitimate place in the educational process. As Sund and Öhman (2014) point out, many of the moral problems that students encounter are those that can “neither be avoided by rational planning nor solved by intellectual process of consideration” (p. 654). The principle of legitimizing political emotions can therefore be understood as a legitimization of the emotions that are already present in the classroom. Moreover, it is also about legitimizing political emotions as a fundamental part of democratic life and students’ encounters with political issues in democratic education.

**What it requires.** Given this understanding of political emotions in agonistic education, the principle requires that teachers distinguish between political emotions and other (irrelevant) emotions. Educational research provides three
ways of discerning political emotions from other emotions. These are emotions related to (i) societal issues or objects (Ruitenberg, 2009), the (ii) character of the problems they encounter (Sund & Öhman, 2014) or the adversarial boundaries between “us” and “them” (Tryggvason, 2017). Discerning political emotions from other emotions is necessary but not sufficient. Teachers also need to make room for political emotions as a legitimate presence in the classroom. To give a concrete example, if students are upset when learning that nine million people on this planet die from starvation each year, this kind of anger is, from an agonistic perspective, seen as a legitimate way of encountering the teaching content. However, in order to make room for political emotions in the classroom, two pitfalls need to be avoided. The first is that of the therapeutization of political emotions, which means that even if teachers make room for political emotions, their role is not to seek the cause of these emotions by digging into the individual’s psychological dispositions. The simple reason for this is that the classroom is not a therapy room. The second pitfall is the rationalization of political emotions, which means that teachers seek to justify students’ emotional responses in rational terms, and in that way reduce the emotions to rational behavior. For example, let us suppose that a teacher presents the students with the case of a wind farm being built in a nearby forest in order to show them that environmental and sustainability issues are both complex and conflictual. Let us then suppose that a student becomes angry that the nearby forest will be cut down to make room for the wind farm. It would be easy for the teacher to ask the student to justify their anger by asking: “what are your arguments, why should the forest be preserved?” The simple answer, “I love that forest” would not count as a valid argument in a rational discussion. Even though this kind of analytical exercise could be important from, it is, from an agonistic standpoint, important that not all political emotions are transformed into analytical exercises. The agonistic principle of making room for political emotions in the classroom is about making room for them precisely as political emotions. Thus, political emotions are legitimate in the agonistic classroom and are not dependent on external justification, such as being suitable content for analytical exercises.

**Political identity formation**

**Principle:**

The teacher should encourage students to explore and form political identities relating to the teaching content.

**Premises:**

- Students form their identities in relation to collective identities.
• Democracy requires that political identities trump essentialist identities.

*What it means.* Encouraging students to explore political identities relating to the teaching content means that the teaching content does not just address intellectual or analytical questions, but also relates to who the students are in relation to the content. However, this should not be understood as an individual, existential, or therapeutical exploration of “who am I?” It is rather about encouraging students to explore political identities, and is therefore closely related to the principle of articulating demands. Within agonistic theory, political identities are collective identities relating to different visions of society (Mouffe, 2005). Thus, political identities are about what “we” and “they” want, rather than who “we” and “they” essentially are. For example, if a teacher raises recent instances of police violence in the community and connects them to societal structures and injustices, then the agonistic approach would encourage students to explore what this content means in relation to who “we” are and what “our community” means (cf. Ljunggren, 2010; Tryggvason, 2023). In outlining agonistic citizenship education, Zembylas (2011) underscores the importance of not reinscribing essentialist identities, because they can reproduce ethnic and antagonistic conflicts. Instead, Zembylas argues that agonistic citizenship education should emphasize political identities:

[...] an agonistic democracy in citizenship education embraces plural belongings, not in essentialist terms but rather in contingent ones. This means, [...], a refocusing of the emphasis from social engagement on the basis of ethnic identities to that of political engagement and its potential to inform and transform the formation of our political communities—on a new set of criteria such as common social and political interests. (Zembylas, 2011, p. 64)

As a teaching principle, this means that teachers actively steer students away from reinscribing essentialist identities when encountering and discussing the teaching content, and instead encourage them to relate to the content through contingent political identities.

*What it requires.* This definition of the principle requires two things from teachers. First, it requires that teachers actively destabilize students’ formation of essentialist identities in relation to the teaching content. Going back to the example about police violence, if students approached this in terms of essentialist identities about who “we” are, rather than political identities, then the teacher should actively question and challenge the essentialist identity formation in order to encourage political identities. Second, if the teacher is to encourage the formation of political identities, then such identities need to be available and reachable for students. Thus,
it is not enough for the teacher to destabilize essentialist identities and then leave the students to figure out new political identities for themselves. Instead, the teacher needs to present viable options for the students if political identities are to trump essentialist identities. This should not be understood in a narrow context of U.S. politics as being either liberal or conservative. As Zembylas (2011) points out, agonism embraces plural belongings and for such plural belongings to be actualized, they need to be available for the students to embrace. Relating to the case of police violence in a community, the questions “what does this mean for who we are?” and “what is our community?” can be answered in plural ways. For instance, the teacher could present the students with several different political positions from which these questions can be answered.

The hegemony of democracy

Principle:
The teacher should uphold the hegemony of democracy in classroom discussions and teaching.

Premises:

- Hegemony is unavoidable in political life; some position will always be hegemonic.
- The hegemony of democracy in Western societies is under pressure from non-democratic discourses that also strive for hegemony.
- Liberty and equality for all are desirable hegemonic values for democratic education.

What it means. A starting point for Mouffe’s (2005, 2013) agonistic theory is that pluralism is part of democratic and political life. A society with no plural opinions and ideas about how to achieve a good life cannot be democratic. Thus, for Mouffe, pluralism is not a problem to overcome but the very life nerve of democratic society. When this idea is discussed in relation to education, there is a general consensus amongst agonistic scholars that agonistic teaching starts in pluralism (Koutsouris et al., 2022; Sant, 2019; Tryggvason & Öhman, 2019; Zembylas, 2021b). However, what is emphasized in Mouffe’s dissociative agonism is that while pluralism is constitutive for democracy, democracy also requires temporary decisions. Without decisions and closures, democracy becomes a life form that is unable to act. Moreover, it is in those decisive moments that some opinions on how to achieve the good life will become hegemonic. As the first premise formulated above, something will always be hegemonic, and therefore the main question is not whether we want hegemony or not, but
about *what* should be hegemonic. Mouffe's (2005, pp. 121–122) answer is that the values of liberty and equality for all should be hegemonic. When this understanding of decisions, hegemony, and values is brought into education the normative teaching principle can be formulated: Teachers should uphold the hegemony of democracy in classroom discussions and teaching. This means assuming a partisan position and siding with the democratic values of liberty and equality for all in teaching.\(^5\)

*What it requires.* This principle requires teachers to defend and uphold democratic values as hegemonic and relates to the second premise presented above, namely that Western democracies are under pressure from non-democratic discourses and movements (Cole, 2019; Zembylas, 2021a). In concrete terms, this means that teachers need to actively challenge statements and arguments that go against the values of liberty and equality for all. However, this principle does instruct teachers in detail about how to handle students who express anti-democratic positions and opinions. Such actions must be based on a teacher’s professional judgment and knowledge about their students. There is also substantial research literature that can help teachers in these situations (e.g., Arneback & Jämte, 2022). What the principle does require, however, is that teachers normatively draw a line between what is legitimate in democratic classrooms and what is not. A consequence of this could be that some students may experience that teachers are not on their side. It is therefore crucial that students are able to change their minds and are not stuck in positions that go against the values of liberty and equality for all.

Another important aspect is that teachers identify and acknowledge which position is hegemonic in a particular discussion (see Sund & Öhman, 2014). Naming the hegemony, and making it explicit to the students, could be a way of reaching a closure without reaching consensus. Thus, such naming is not about ending the conflict, but about ending the particular discussion (Tryggvason, 2019, p. 5). What the agonistic principle requires is that teachers support the positions and opinions that relate to the values of liberty and equality for all. Thus, they do not need to support or uphold specific positions and opinions in the discussion, but only stand on the democratic side in the discussion.

**Discussion**

Teachers face a challenging political landscape that both enters and affects their classrooms. With political polarization, where conflictual lines are sometimes drawn along (perceived) essentialist identities, teachers face the task of not only handling these conflicts, but also dealing with them pedagogically. Educational research can support teachers in different ways,
but there is also a risk of educational research becoming “ivory tower” research in relation to what goes on in the classroom. The aim of this article has thus been to provide teachers and the research field with agonistic teaching principles that are both theoretically and empirically based. However, these principles should not be understood as scripts for agonistic teaching, but rather as suggestions for teachers to use and consider in relation to their particular teaching context. A starting point for formulating and suggesting the four principles is that they should not be understood as direct instructions to follow, instead their implementation relates to the teacher’s autonomy, reflective practice and judgment. This means that they could be used as tools for teachers to reflect on and plan their teaching, in a similar fashion as Englund’s (2006) principles for deliberative communication. Given this starting point, teaching is not reduced to a practice that is about following scripts or recipes. From a research perspective, this implies that educational research cannot, and should not, formulate detailed scripts or instructions on how teachers should conduct their teaching, because that would undermine the concept of education (cf. Biesta, 2019). What educational research can do is to formulate and suggest tools that could be useful for teachers, although at the end of the day it is always the teacher who decides which tools are suitable. In relation to the four principles for agonistic teaching, this means that it is important for them to be seen as context insensitive. Not only do they need to be context insensitive to have relevance across contexts, they also need to be insensitive, because it is the teacher who is sensitive to the context and knows their students. To conclude, it is not the distance from teachers’ everyday practices that makes “ivory tower” research problematic. Rather, what becomes problematic is when detailed scripts for teaching are formulated from this distance. In the end it is the teacher who handles political polarization and conflict in educational settings and not the researcher.

Notes

1. Of the 50 articles analyzed by Koutsouris et al., (2022) 33 had agonism as a central topic. According to citation information from Google Scholar (September 7th, 2022), Ruitenbergs’s (2009) article is the most cited.
2. In the following I use the term emotions, rather than passions or affects, and do not develop a theoretical distinction between them. For a discussion on the terminology, definitions and distinctions between emotion/passions/affect in agonistic education, see (Sætra, 2021; Tryggvason, 2017; Zembylas, 2018).
3. I identified this by reading the articles and going through their list of references. I have excluded the fact that van Poeck and Östman (2018) refer to Håkansson et al.’s (2018) publication.
4. The five principles for deliberative communication are: (a) “different views are con-
fronted with one another,” (b) there is a respect for the concrete other, (c) there is a collective will-formation that aims for consensus, (d) traditional views can be questioned, and (e) there is deliberative culture where students can continue the discussion even after the lesson (Englund, 2006, p. 512).

5. For a critical discussion of this agonistic position in democratic education, see Zembylas (2022).

Acknowledgments

I would like to thank the research group ESERGO at Örebro University for valuable comments and suggestions on an early draft of this article. I would also like to thank the two anonymous reviewers for valuable comments and suggestions.

Disclosure statement

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

Notes on contributor

Ásgeir Tryggvason, PhD, is a senior lecturer in education at Örebro University’s School of Humanities, Education and Social Sciences. He is a member of the research group ESERGO (Environmental and Sustainability Education Research Group Örebro). His research focuses on the political dimension in education, and he has previously written about agonism in education. Currently, he conducts both theoretical and empirical research with an emphasis on the political dimension in environmental and sustainability education.

ORCID

Ásgeir Tryggvason http://orcid.org/0000-0002-0327-9989

References


