



Politicised or Political: On Agonism and School as ‘Free Time’

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Abstract

At the centre of this paper is the distinction between a politicised school, and school as a political space. We take note of Papastephanou’s (2005) warning not to make education the passive receiver of political thought. Based on Masschelein and Simons (2013), we criticise the tendency to conceptualise democratic education, particularly agonistic democratic education, as the implementation of political theory in a school context. We draw on their idea of school as free time, to argue that democratic education should envision the classroom as political in itself, that is, as a place for negotiation and renewal, where the ends are not predetermined. When school becomes a place to implement political theory, when it is politicised, then it is stripped of its own political potency. In scholastic terms, it is tamed. In this paper, a fusion of Mouffeian agonism with Masschelein and Simons’ conception of school, works to form an understanding of agonistic democratic education as a time and place for the formation of community and for the negotiation of identity, under protection from the non-accountability (Arendt 1961) that characterises scholastic practice.

Keywords Agonism · School · Democratic education · Mouffe · Masschelein & Simons

Introduction

The last two decades have seen a rising interest in agonistic versions of democratic education, mainly drawing on the work of political theorist Chantal Mouffe (2005). Mouffe’s ideas on ‘the political’ have inspired educational thinkers to theorise the classroom as a political arena, and to make suggestions about how agonism can inform the education of

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democratic citizens (Lo 2017; Roucau 2022; Sant et al. 2021; Zembylas 2011). In accordance with Mouffe's critique of Jürgen Habermas and John Rawls, a cornerstone in the construction of agonistic democratic education has been countering the rationalist foundation of deliberative proposals for democratic education (Ruitenberg 2009). In contrast to deliberative educational models, an agonistic democratic education is proposed that is founded on an understanding of the democratic state as conflictual, hegemonic and contingent.

In this paper, we take the growing agonistic subfield of democratic education as our starting point, and claim that greater attention should be paid to educational theory. When agonism is brought to the field of democratic education, we see a tendency for agonism itself, rather than education, to be placed in the foreground. If agonistic political theory is not coupled with educational theory, there is a risk that education is treated as a passive receiver of political thought (Papastephanou 2005). In drawing educational conclusions based on Mouffe's thoughts on the political, we risk obscuring the specific characteristics of education, characteristics that distinguish school from society at large. We readily admit that we have ourselves struggled with this methodological tendency. In our own earlier work, it has become clear to us that the development of agonism as an educational theory needs to be more attentive and sensitive to the specificity of education and teaching (Tryggvason 2017, 2023; Tysklind et al. 2024). In short, it needs a conceptual understanding of what school is.

In their theory of *the scholastic*, Jan Masschelein and Maarten Simons (2013) provide one such understanding. They trace the school back to its ancient Greek origin, the word *scholē*, meaning 'free time' (2013, p. 9), time free for study. For Masschelein and Simons, school is always society suspended. What students study in school is not the world, but the world in suspension, in the form of subject matter. School is a place for the old generation to present to the new generation what they think is important, and it is a place for the new generation to form, as a generation, in reaction to what is presented. In this way, school provides students with the opportunity, the free time, to bring something new into the world. Stripping school of its possibility to provide free time, for example through politically prescribing clear expected outcomes, is a sign of an 'irresponsible society that no longer follows the path of political change' (2013, p. 94). It is, for Masschelein and Simons, an act of *taming* school. We will claim that this taming means stripping school of its own political potential. Presenting their argument, Masschelein and Simons echo Arendt (1961), and her call for education to save the world from the ruin that inevitably follows if it is not constantly renewed. For Arendt, education must be separated from the political realm of the public (Arendt 1961, 2018). The public is a place of accountability, whereas education is a place for maturation – for *becoming*. Students in school, Arendt argues, must therefore be protected from the accountability of the public realm.

A central question is, then, can school provide protection from the public realm, and at the same time be regarded as a political space? Moreover, can school be political, without being politicised? We will argue that viewing education through the lens of political theory always implies the risk of taming education through politicisation, and that if the specific characteristics of school are not acknowledged, agonistic theory runs the risk of inadvertently taming democratic education. By bringing scholastic thought into the field of agonistic democratic education, this paper aims to explore possibilities of an agonistic democratic education that is attentive to that which sets school apart from the public realm (Arendt 1961). Informed by the idea of education as suspension, using the scholastic ideal of Masschelein and Simons as a tool for developing Mouffean agonism in education, we provide

an argument for an 'untamed' agonistic democratic education, one that is attentive to the characteristics of school, yet still acknowledges its unavoidable political dimension. In three sections, we first map out agonism and its path through the educational field, second, we account for scholastic theory and its relevance as way to envision a democratic education, and third, we fuse agonism and the scholastic ideal to propose a view of school as political in itself, rather than politicised.

Agonism in Education

In this section, we outline agonism as implemented in educational research. After a brief account of Mouffe's (2005, 2013) theory of agonism, focusing on her understanding of 'the political' and what it means in terms of collective identities, we show that when Mouffe's theory is translated into the field of education it comes with the risk of framing education as passive in relation to political thought (Papastephanou 2005). Based on this, we criticise the procedure of 'implementing' agonism in education and teaching, and claim that there is a need for a thorough understanding of what sets education and school apart from the public (Arendt 1961).

Chantal Mouffe's Agonism

Agonism is a diverse political theory (see Glover 2012). As noted, in educational research it is often the agonism of Chantal Mouffe that is focused upon (Koutsouris et al. 2022). Central in Mouffe's agonism is the idea of 'the political' and its relation to the formation of identities. In contrast to those she calls *associative* agonists, a group which she counts Hannah Arendt as belonging to, Mouffe emphasises the *dissociative* move in identity formation – the undeniable need for an 'other' in order for any identity to take shape. In other words, to establish a collective identity, an 'us', there is a need for a 'them' (Hansen & Sonnichsen 2014). Drawing on the work of Carl Schmitt, Mouffe sees 'the political' as the conflictual boundary between collective identities (1999) – 'the political' is the boundary between 'us' and 'them'.

A consequence of her dissociative understanding of collective identities, and her view of 'the other' as essential for the creation of a 'we', is that the task for democratic institutions is to transform antagonistic (friend–enemy) relations between 'us' and 'them' into non-violent agonistic relations between adversaries. Adversaries, in contrast to enemies, share a commitment to the values liberty and equality, but disagree both on what liberty and equality means, and on how these values should be promoted. It is this disagreement that constitutes both 'us' and 'them'. Identity is thus a crucial factor in political processes, and the identities available must be found desirable and valuable.

In order to act politically, people need to be able to identify with a collective identity which provides an idea of themselves they can valorize. Political discourse has to offer not only policies but also identities which can help people make sense of what they are experiencing as well as giving them hope for the future. (Mouffe 2005, p. 25)

In short, political discourse must offer visions, within democratic limits, that people can feel passionate about. These visions must be connected to collective identities that are of value to people. If politics is unable to provide this, collective identities will form based on non-political divides, what Mouffe calls ‘essentialist’ identities¹ (Mouffe 2005, pp. 29–31). The unavoidable boundaries between ‘us’ and ‘them’ will then not be based on political democratic visions. If politics revolves around perceived essentialist collectives, because they are valued higher than political visions, the risk is that ‘the other’ becomes an enemy rather than an adversary, and that negotiation is rendered impossible.

For Mouffe, antagonistic conflicts between ‘essentialist’ collectives ensue when the role of collective identity formation is neglected. Her critique of deliberative democracy, as proposed by Habermas, is then that in its eagerness to tame political life into rationality, it unintentionally ends up fuelling antagonistic conflicts. Mouffe’s agonistic theory is in itself built on an idea of taming ‘the political’, but only insofar as antagonism is tamed into agonism. This must be done without depriving political discourse of the necessary boundaries between ‘us’ and ‘them’ (Mouffe 2005, p. 20). Turning to how Mouffe’s theory has informed the field of education, we see that her critique of how deliberative theory tames ‘the political’ is mirrored in educational research.

‘Implementing’ Agonism in Education

In a scoping review of how agonism is used in educational research, Koutsouris et al. (2022) identify 50 articles, both theoretical and empirical. Most of them are based on Mouffe’s work. From this scoping review, as well as from a systematic theoretical literature review of democratic education by Sant (2019), we conclude that Mouffe’s political theory is mirrored, both in terms of identity formation, and in terms of her critique of deliberative democracy.

We now return to the issue outlined in the introduction, namely that of translating political theory to educational practice. When examining how agonism is brought to the field of education, we see that agonism tends to be put in the foreground. The tendency of giving political theory the active role, while education becomes the passive context in which political theory is implemented, is something that Papastephanou (2005) pointed out as a general problem for educational theory almost two decades ago. As scholars in the field of agonistic democratic education, we are struggling with this tendency ourselves (Tryggvason 2017, 2023; Tysklind et al. 2024); an agonistic understanding of democracy has been our starting point. The aim of our work has been to explore how democratic education can become more agonistic, hoping that achieving this could by extension result in societal change. However, when agonistic strategy is put in the foreground, and education primarily becomes the place in which agonistic strategy is carried out, the risk is that school itself is tamed through politicisation. We risk politicising school if we prescribe too clear an outcome, and overlook the possibility of renewal affiliated with a school that is conceptualised as free time (Masschelein and Simons 2013).

¹ As Mouffe understands identity as a consequence of articulatory practices, the notion ‘essentialist identities’ should be understood in terms of identities that are *perceived* as essentialist and not truly essential in any sense. What characterises ‘essentialist identities’ is that they are built on terminology and ideas of who ‘we’ essentially *are*, and how ‘we’ essentially differ from ‘them’. Political identities, on the other hand, revolve around what ‘we’ want, and how ‘our’ cause differs from what ‘they’ want (see Mouffe 1992 pp. 235–238; see also Laclau and Mouffe 2014, pp. 75–78, pp. 91–94).

We are not alone in this struggle; we see the same tendency across the field of agonistic democratic education. What we see is a general tendency towards implementation— of politicisation – in which the quest is to let agonism inform education, rather than give agonism and education equal theoretical status. For example, in developing an approach of agonistic deliberation, Lo (2017) describes how agonism can be *incorporated* into classrooms ‘by implementing curricula that are centred on deliberation’ (p. 6). Wenceslao García-Puchades and Daniel Martos-García (2022) outline how to *use* ‘agonistic debates as an instrument for students to understand the different positions involved in conflicts according to “left” and “right” political projects contributed to making them politically literate’ (p. 1667). Zembylas (2011) outlines what an agonistic framework *means* for citizenship education, but pays more attention to school life itself. For him, an agonistic educational framework ‘means that citizenship education should explicitly problematize the normative narratives of otherness (for example, us-the-good versus them-the-evil) and should teach children and youth how to identify the ways in which hegemonic discourses and practices are embodied in day-to-day routines of school life’ (p. 63). Though political life in school is recognised here, school is still given the status of a context. The agonistic framework is foregrounded; it is a lens through which school is viewed.

When the deliberation-agonism debate is mirrored in the field of education, we see the same proneness to implementation of political thought. The agonistic critique of deliberation, and the debate that has been ongoing in the field of political theory since the 1990s (Gürsözlü 2009; Knops 2007), seem to have ‘trickled down’ to the field of education in the last decade (Englund 2016; Samuelsson 2018; Tryggvason 2018; Zembylas 2018). Mouffe’s (2005) argument, that deliberative theory tames ‘the political’, echoes in the field of agonistic democratic education, where deliberative theory is accused of taming the political in democratic education. However, while deliberative theory in education has (rightly) been criticised for taming the political, the development of a deliberative theory in the field of democratic education shows an attentiveness to the specific characteristics of school (Englund 2006; Samuelsson 2018), which we claim the development of agonistic education is still in want of.

Given the problems that arise from attempting to implement political thought in education, we want to pursue another path. We are not formulating an argument that educational theory should talk back to political theory, and in that way escape its passive role. Neither are we formulating an argument that scholars need to be more reflective over and attentive to the specific character of education when implementing agonistic theory in education. Our aim is instead at overturning the very idea of implementation, turning to questions of how we can think of education with the help of agonistic concepts and ideas. When developing agonistic educational thought, we need to start in educational theory, rather than in political theory.

School as Free Time

In the following, when we refer to school, we refer to Masschelein and Simons’ (2013) use of the term, rather than to its everyday use as a modern institution. This section focuses on three aspects of their scholastic argument – aspects that challenge current notions of school. The first aspect is the idea of school as suspension, and of subject matter as profane (Agam-

ben 2007), based on their exposé of school, tracing it back to its origin. The second aspect is love. With Arendt, Masschelein and Simons advocate for love as a guiding scholastic principle; love for the subject and love for the world lie behind the view of school as a space for the formation of a new generation. Third, we discuss their warning against attempts to tame school, that is, to reject its scholastic character.

Suspension, Profanation, and Love

For Masschelein and Simons (2013), it is central that school is free time. Free time, in an ancient Greek sense, is not time for relaxation, as the contemporary use of the term connotes. Time in school is free in the sense that it is not for work, neither is it meant to be used to prepare for work. School is a time and place that is freed up for the future generation, to form its generation. School as free time is an ideal, and this is how it must be understood. In some ways, it is an ideal that has its risks. Tracing school back to its etymological origin, one risks turning it into an essentialist concept with characteristics that are dependent on what it was in a distant past. In addition, one can question whether this ideal was ever a reality. However, it is an ideal that we find productive for thinking about democratic education in agonistic terms. It is also an ideal that stands in contrast to many contemporary educational systems. The etymological origin of school is not primarily what gives it its relevance. Envisioning school as free time is a way to open school up to be a political space. Free time implies the possibility for students to act in non-determined ways, and this is a possibility that is limited in many current educational systems.

School, For Masschelein and Simons, is a time and a place to *study*, and the object of study in school is *subject matter*. What this means is that students do not study society in any form it takes outside school; a classroom is not a replica of society. Subject matter is always a suspended version of the world, in that objects of study are freed from their original use. But not only is subject matter the world suspended, school is also a place where societal inequalities are suspended. Their reasoning revolves around different variations of the word ‘presence’. The scholastic ideal is to bring students into the present tense, and the teacher brings her students into the present tense by freeing them ‘from the weight of sociological and other dynamics that otherwise push them down into a psyche of worthlessness’ (2013 p. 61). School is separated from the realm of the household (Arendt 1961, 2018), as students’ preconceived identities become open for renegotiation. Presence – being in the scholastic now – ideally frees students from presupposed interests and talents, and the classroom becomes a place where subject matter is studied by equals. Presence is, in this way, bidding defiance to perceived ‘natural’ orders.

The school goes against the ‘laws of gravity’ (e.g. the ‘natural law’ that says students from a given socio-economic status have no interest in a given subject or thing) and refuses to legitimise differences based on students’ specific ‘gravity’. Not because the school, in its naivety, denies the existence of gravity, but because the school is something of a vacuum in which young people and students are given time to practice and develop. (Masschelein and Simons 2013, pp. 63–64)

What defying gravity is, is ridding it of its importance. It is not blindness to difference, or blindness to the fact that gravity is a reality; it is regarding the classroom as a place where

preconceptions of student identities are not sedimented. It is teaching in a manner that *presents* subject matter, brings it to the present, so that it can be approached by students in a novel way. This is an act of profanation; subject matter is profane in that it is something from the world that is transformed by the teacher into a common good, available to students in its open state. In presenting subject matter, the teacher brings students into the here and now, where predetermined identities, 'essentialist' identities to speak with Mouffe (2005) are open for reformation.

It is in the upheaval of thinking of student identities in essentialist terms that we find the scholastic ideal helpful, conceptualising an agonistic democratic education. An educational situation in which gravity is rendered irrelevant is, for us, not a situation that is free from influential power relations. This would be an agonistic impossibility – power relations will always be at play in some form, in all social situations (Mouffe 2005, p. 18). What the educational situation is, however, is a place for negotiation, and this entails the negotiation of both individual and collective identities. This will be discussed in further detail below, in our upcoming suggestions for 'untaming' democratic education.

When the teacher presents subject matter, brings it to the present, she chooses what she finds important. What is to be presented, that is, what is to be put on the table for students and freed for novel use, is chosen by the teacher out of love for the subject, out of love for the world and out of love for the future generation (Masschelein and Simons 2013). Masschelein and Simons make this argument with reference to Arendt, who concludes 'The Crisis in Education' (1961) by pointing to the fundamental role of love in education.

Education is the point at which we decide whether we love the world enough to assume responsibility for it and by the same token save it from that ruin which, except for renewal, except for the coming of the new and young, would be inevitable. And education, too, is where we decide whether we love our children enough not to expel them from our world and leave them to their own devices, nor to strike from their hands their chance of undertaking something new, something unforeseen by us, but to prepare them in advance for the task of renewing a common world. (1961, p. 196)

In short, education must be a time and a place for renewal, if we love the world, and want to save it from deterioration. Renewal means neither reproducing a new generation that mimics the old generation, nor does it mean leaving students without influence from the old world. It means temporarily suspending the world by making it profane, and in that same moment dissolving prescribed student identities, in order to create the possibility of a foundation for something new.

Taming School

Critiquing attempts to predetermine education, Masschelein and Simons list a number of efforts to tame school, by constraining it to 'tasks that are impossible to fill without abandoning the school itself' (2013, p. 94). One of their main criticisms is of a politicisation of school, as we have hinted above. They warn against conservative educational projects as well as progressive ones, on the grounds that they have in common a mission to control the outcome of school. Conservatives, in their will to preserve the old world, and progressives, with their all too clear idea of what the new should be, both tame school in that they 'leave

nothing to chance' (2013, p. 10). The ambition is, in both cases, to control the formation of the new generation.

One might be led to believe that striving for a school in which free time leaves things to chance is an apolitical ambition. It is not (Snir 2016). On the contrary, it is a project that allows for the classroom to become a political space. If the political issues are solved by conservative or progressive pedagogues or politicians outside school, prior to students entering the classroom, the political space of the classroom is hindered. Masschelein and Simons conclude that taming school 'implies reining in its democratic, public and renewing character' (2013, p. 91). It is rather when things are left to chance, when school is free time, that the classroom itself can become political. *Nota bene*, leaving things to chance must be understood in relation to the argument above. Renewal through openness to the unforeseen requires attention to the old, but in a manner that strives neither to preserve the old order, nor to determine the new path.

Attention to the old world is in itself a requirement for avoiding taming the *student*. Stripping school of its scholastic potential is a way of ensuring that 'students are kept small' (2013, p. 92). School must be a place for maturation, a place for students to *become* (Arendt 1961). If students are encouraged to think that their own experiences alone are a solid enough ground for a new world, they are denied access to the larger world. Building blocks must be provided, but with a flexible building chart. It is only when subject matter is 'put on the table by the older generation *and* unhandled' (2013, p. 92, emphasis in the original), that it is the foundation on which a new generation can build itself, and education is a place where students can become.

As students are in the process of becoming, Arendt warns against exposing children to the public realm (1961). Precisely because young people are in a state of becoming personalities, inflicting on them the responsibilities of the public is unfair. It is, to Arendt, re-making the mistake that was made by past educational efforts – it is viewing the child as an adult, only smaller. In order for students to have the chance to become, they must be given space to 'mature undisturbed' (1961, p. 188), away from the public eye.

Protecting students from the public realm, in Arendtian terms, is not to be confused with impeding the public state of subject matter, as controverted by Masschelein and Simons (2013, p. 38). When Arendt refers to the public, it is as a realm of publicity, where everything is seen and heard (2018). The public requires responsibility of its partakers; it is not a place for maturation, but a place of accountability. In contrast, making something public, in scholastic terms, is suspending it, turning it into a common good, and so opening it up for novel use (Masschelein and Simons 2013, p. 38). If education comes to resemble the Arendtian public, it is unable to provide free time; students are tamed in the sense that they are not given the opportunity to shape their new generation, they are 'kept small', and the world is deprived of the prospect of renewal. The public character that school has for Masschelein and Simons, is to do with the profanation of the world, as it is turned into subject matter, and made common.

It is time to go back to the questions posed in the introduction. Can school provide protection from the public realm, and at the same time be regarded as a political space? And can school be political, without being politicised? In the following section we propagate for a democratic education that recognises the classroom as political, but does so without abandoning the idea of school as a place for maturation and renewal. In other words, we propose a way to untame democratic education.

Untaming Democratic Education

It is important first of all to note that the very ambition to untame a politicised school is political (Snir 2016). When subject matter appears to be non-political, it is because of a political act. But it is also important to note that when school leaves things to chance, and opens up for the formation of a new generation, this formation is a political process. In agonistic terms, it is dissociative, as the new collective is a parting from the old. While the formation of a new generation is always in some way a continuation of the old, it is at the same time a contrast to, and a break from the old. In this way, we argue that the scholastic ambition to provide a time and place for the formation of something new, must be understood as providing a political space. The classroom is political, because it is a place provided for reformation.

With the ambition to let political theory influence education comes the risk of taming school, through falling into the trap of politicising it. In our own earlier work, we confess to teetering on the edge of this trap, sometimes falling into it, wanting but missing safeguarding fence. For us, filtering agonism through a scholastic lens has helped put up that fence; it has directed our attention at some of the characteristics of school. With this paper, we argue that for school to be a political space, it must be set free. The tamed institution that is the modern school, must be released from its confines. This is true for school at large, but also, as is the focus of this paper, for agonistic proposals for democratic education. Below, we attend to agonism through three particular characteristics of school.

First, for Masschelein and Simons, school is tamed if it is put in service of political community building projects. School, in its ideal form, is simply not implementation. This does not mean that the idea of community is abandoned; it means that school is 'the time and place where the very experience of community is at stake' (Masschelein and Simons 2013, p. 74). School is a time and place where a community becomes, if it is not restricted by narrow ideas of what it should be. It is therefore important that agonistic democratic education does not become a case of implementation – a case of imposing a political logic on school. Rather, it is in the very idea of putting the experience of community at stake that agonism can inform education. What goes on in the classroom is in many ways to do with the creation of community, and this must in itself be taken seriously, valued in its own right, here and now.

This leads us to the second particular characteristic of school, which is identity formation. Perhaps the clearest point of intersection between the agonistic and the scholastic, we find in a call for an openness to renegotiating pre-set identities. It is imperative that school suspends what we, with Mouffe, call 'essentialist' identities (2005), identities that due to historical sedimentation seem impossible to get rid of. School must, in this sense, defy gravity, through rendering it presently irrelevant. If the classroom is to be regarded as a democratic space, then it must, to paraphrase Mouffe, offer possibilities of identification that are of value to its members. We are aware that in making this argument, we are dangerously close to the fence that we put up. Mouffe makes this point in relation to the role of passion in the political realm, and the reasoning is therefore not directly translatable to school. We do want to stress, however, that the consequences that agonism warns will follow when no valued modes of identification are offered, are of importance in an educational context as well. When essentialist identities are sedimented, that is, when no new valuable modes of identification are offered, it is a sign that education has failed to bring students

into the present tense. As a result, education will inevitably push some of its students, as Masschelein and Simons put it, ‘into a psyche of worthlessness’ (2013, p. 61). Daniel Pennac, whose *School Blues* (2011) is a recurring source of inspiration for them, introduces the term ‘dunce’ (*cancre* in French²), to refer to an unsuccessful and unsatisfactory student. For school to be a time and place where the dunce identity is not fixed – cultivated and refined even – it must be a time and place where preconceived identities are suspended. The guiding principle behind this suspension is love (Arendt 1961) – for the world, for the student and for the future generation.

While suspension and becoming take place, school must be recognised as a dominion that is freed from the responsibility and accountability of the public realm (Arendt 2018). This is the third point to attend to – allowing students to ‘mature undisturbed’ by lovingly protecting them from the world, but also lovingly protecting the world from students still in the process of maturation (Arendt 1961). In short, school is not politics. With this in mind, we still argue that the identity of ‘student’ cannot be the only one offered in school. To make this case, it is insufficient to look to scholastic theory; we need agonism. If we are to envision the classroom as a political space, and take this space seriously, the classroom must offer opportunities for political identification. There must be a plurality of such possibilities for identification, and identification must be understood in individual as well as collective terms. The subject matter that is presented, must not only offer the chance for students to become *someone* in relation to it; it must offer the chance to become a political subject and part of a collective. We will conclude this section by attending to what this means for our understanding of subject matter and of the political student subject.

When political issues are presented to students in a profane state, students meet them in a way that differs from how citizens meet political issues in the public realm. The public is a place where political questions demand answers. When the same questions become profane, they are asked in a manner that does not demand answers, since school is not a place of decision making. If a political issue, such as economic inequality, is presented as subject matter, students are offered the opportunity to study it. Studying economic inequality does not *require* political positioning. However, while positioning must not be required, the opportunity for positioning must be *offered* by the teacher. The mere fact that political questions are asked in the classroom can function as an invitation for students to explore other identities than ‘student’. In their profane state, political issues as subject matter invite political subjectification, but let subjects mature undisturbed, by not demanding that decisions are made.

Finally, the shaping of individual and collective political subjects is always both a dissociative move, and a contingent one. Recognising that it is a dissociative move, we claim that the classroom must offer the opportunity for students to position themselves not only in relation to subject matter, but also in relation to other students and to their teacher, with subject matter as the basis. In the case of economic inequality, this could mean inviting students to inquire into who they are in relation to economic inequality, who they would like to be in relation to economic inequality, and also, what kind of us/them division they would subscribe to regarding economic inequality. In terms of contingency, Zembylas has argued that ‘an agonistic democracy in citizenship education embraces plural belongings, not in essentialist terms but rather in contingent ones’ (2011, p. 64). As we have pointed out above, school

² In French, *cancre* is a word that has been used since the mid-1600s, to refer to a student who is unsuccessful in school (Pennac 2011, p. xii).

must be a time and place open for re-negotiation of identities. Fusing agonism with scholastic theory helps specify what it means to educate political adversaries (c.f. Ruitenberg 2009) – through recognising contingency in the shaping of student identities, and through recognising the importance of free time to the shaping of the future generation.

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Declarations

Conflict of Interest On behalf of all authors, the corresponding author states that there is no conflict of interest.

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