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Politicizing the learning of Sustainable Development Goals through drama performances and agonistic debates: a teacher training experience from the perspective of radical democracy

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ABSTRACT

Based on empirical evidence, this research aimed to offer a methodical approach to politicizing the apprenticeship of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) through drama performances and agonistic debates from the perspective of the theory of radical democracy. A case study was carried out during an academic year in Physical Education Teaching Education (PETE). The analysis of the data obtained from the students ($N=45$) and teacher's journal showed evidence that this teaching proposal politicized the learning of SDGs since it allowed students to: (1) interpret SDGs as a conflictive and plural space; (2) read the SDGs in terms of 'left' and 'right' politics; (3) mobilize their political emotions; (4) explore the power relations implicit in the conflicts associated with SDGs; and (5) participate in collective decision-making processes. The text concludes by proposing some teaching strategies for politicizing the learning of SDGs.

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Introduction

The United Nations agenda for 2030 (UN, 2015) highlights that one of the most important and difficult challenges today is in achieving a more equitable and sustainable world. However, based on the idea that Education for Sustainable Development (ESD) is closely linked to local conflicts, some theorists have questioned the claims of neutrality of some of these educational proposals and have highlighted the importance of carrying out educational tasks through the political dimension (Ferreira 2009; Fien 2000; Håkansson, Kronlid, and Östman 2019; Håkansson, Östman, and Van Poeck 2018; Slimani, Lange, and Håkansson 2021; Sund and Öhman 2014).

Works on the analysis of the political dimension of research in environmental and sustainable education are on the increase. Håkansson, Kronlid, and Östman (2019) carried out a bibliographic review of these works and identified three approaches to the political dimension of ESD in relation to the phenomenon of conflict: a socially critical approach, a social learning approach, and a radical democratic approach. From the socially critical perspective, ESD must have a counter-hegemonic intention that seeks to change the socio-political system that sustains the

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dominant neoliberal regime through political action (Fien 1993; Huckle 1993). Unlike the socio-critical perspective, the social learning approach would advocate the construction of dialogical contexts in which different conceptions of sustainable development can be understood and analyzed by other positions. The result of social learning aspires to negotiate a final consensus capable of integrating the different positions (Jickling 1997; Jickling and Wals 2008). The radical democracy approach considers that ESD should be understood as a process of political education by which an individual adopts and rejects the positions of opposing social groups regarding the conflict of environmental sustainability (Hasslöf, Ekborg, and Malmberg 2014).

Comparing these three approaches, Håkansson, Kronlid, and Östman (2019) identify four trends when teachers develop the political dimension of ESD. In the first place, the inclusion of differences and consensus is encouraged, generating space for conflict in their teaching tasks (Fien 1993; Sund and Öhman 2014; Van Poeck and Vandenabeele 2014). Second, these tasks promote the development of the students' cognitive and emotional aspects (Van Poeck and Vandenabeele 2012; Sund and Öhman 2014). Third, they help uncover power relations (Huckle 1993; Jickling and Wals 2008; Sund and Öhman 2014; Wals 2010). Finally, decision-making processes are shown as an important skill when it comes to managing conflict and diversity (Hasslöf, Ekborg, and Malmberg 2014; Sund and Öhman 2014; Van Poeck and Vandenabeele 2012, 2014).

However, in their literature review, Håkansson, Kronlid, and Östman (2019) also state that the way in which these works present the current socioeconomic hegemony as the culprit of all environmental problems, has the risk of neutralizing its conflictive character in favor of a social consensus. They also consider that focusing on the control of their classes and the transmission of a predetermined content, teachers tend to redirect the conversation from the political to the moral or epistemological sphere, giving more importance to the cognitive-rational than the emotional component. (Van Poeck and Östman 2018). This poses a risk when it comes to articulating the students' real experiences and the practiced school curriculum (Hacking, Scott, and Barratt 2007), which is detrimental to an environmental education oriented towards social transformation (Slimani, Lange, and Håkansson 2021).

This text arose from the risk identified by Håkansson, Kronlid, and Östman (2019) and aimed to explore a model of educational practice that is capable of mobilize the political passions of students by linking their real experiences with the field of sustainable environmental education, political education and social transformation. For this, a perspective of radical democracy was adopted, which of the three perspectives indicated, is the one that explores 'more extensively' the political commitment based on the students' values, desires, needs and dreams' (Håkansson, Kronlid, and Östman 2019, 17). However, it is also considered that the use of debates on environmental conflicts to politicize ESD (Hasslöf, Ekborg, and Malmberg 2014; Håkansson, Östman, and Van Poeck 2018) is not enough to mobilize the political passions of students. For this reason, the following study aims to broaden the scope of knowledge of the politicization of ESD by proposing the use of drama performance as an introduction to agonistic debates (Ruitenberg 2009) that seek to present environmental conflicts as a confrontation between left and right political positions regarding different interpretations of environmental justice.

This research intends to demonstrate that the combined use of both resources favors the politicization of future PE teachers as it encourages them to be aware that they can confront the far-right political ideas regarding sustainability with their teaching. To account for this, the text describes and evaluates a educational proposal carried out in Physical Education Teaching Education (PETE) for learning the SDGs through drama performance and agonistic debates. Firstly, the theoretical premises on which our proposal is based are explained and the importance of carrying it out from the perspective of radical democracy is justified. It is then argued to what extent agonistic debates and drama performance are appropriate instruments for this. To assess the extent to which these instruments represent a novelty to the dominant trends in the politicization of EDS, we will take as an analytical framework the work of Håkansson, Kronlid, and Östman (2019). After the discussion, the text ends by proposing some teaching strategies

derived from our study, which broaden the scope of knowledge of the politicization of learning of the SDGs and pointing out future lines of research.

Political education seen through the theory of radical democracy

One of the consequences of the late capitalist society is the process of depoliticization of citizenship, called 'post-political' by a large number of scholars (Crouch 2020; Diken 2009; Mouffe 2005, among others). For Mouffe (2005) 'post-politics' occurs as a consequence of a blurring of the political border between the 'right' and 'left' as a consequence of a 'consensus at the centre' (10). According to Berman and Kundnani (2021), this is what happened in many European countries during the last decades of the 20th century, to the extent that 'centre-left parties moved to the centre on economic issues while some centre-right parties moderated their positions on traditional values, immigration, and other concerns related to national identity' (24). This convergence has left a high number of 'dissatisfied and disconnected voters', giving rise to 'political apathy and non-participation' (28). This context of democratic and political disaffection, together with the refugee crisis of 2015, allowed the proliferation of far-right populism, which has been able to mobilize the affections of a large part of the citizenry by proposing an idea of justice based on the recovery of traditional values and nationalist identities (Berman and Kundnani 2021; Mouffe 2018).

For Mouffe (2018), we are living in a fundamental moment to propose alternative economic and political models to the neoliberal one and counteract the xenophobic positions of the democratic debate. To this end, Ruitenberg (2009) proposes to 'educate political adversaries'. This author's proposal joins that of theorists such as Biesta (2011a, 2011b), Lo (2017), Todd (2008, 2009, 2010), or Tryggvason (2020), who drawing heavily on Chantal Mouffe's agonistic model of democracy, propose a model of citizenship education as a promising alternative to the deliberative and liberal models of democracy used mostly in schools to teach political and civic issues. For Knight and Mamlok (2019) there are three main differences between both models of democratic education: the first difference is that, unlike the liberal and deliberative model, the agonistic model does not focus on individual identity but on collective identities. The second difference is that for the deliberative model emotions take a secondary place in political discourses, while they are essential elements for the agonistic models. And the third difference focuses on the fact that while the model of democracy from the deliberative and liberal perspectives is based on the idea of consensus, the agonistic perspective considers that conflicts and disagreements are essential for a healthy democracy. At this point, Mouffe's (2013) distinction between 'antagonism' and 'agonism' becomes important. For this author, the success of a democratic society lies in its ability to help transform antagonistic confrontations -in which someone confronts an enemy with the intention of eliminating him- into agonistic relationships -in which someone confronts an adversary possessing a competing vision of what a just society is.

Agonistic debates for the politicization of citizenship

Theorists of agonistic political education coincide with those of deliberative in using classroom discussions around conflictive situations to favor citizen education (Lo 2017; Ruitenberg 2009; Tryggvason 2020). However, they criticize the fact that deliberative discussions, by adopting a conception of the political as a process of rational conciliation, ignore the emotional structures that underlie these conflicts, which is detrimental to political commitment (Lo 2017; Ruitenberg 2009).

In her model for educating the political adversary, Ruitenberg (2009) describes what these 'political debates' should be like and identifies three essential tasks: 1) To reveal the power relations of these positions and contextualize them within the neo-liberal economic paradigm.

2) To produce politically literate students by guiding them towards interpreting the different positions within a social conflict in terms of left/right political division, i.e. as disputes underlying a different interpretation of the principles of equality and freedom that constitute the notion of justice. 3) To transform moral emotions – ‘associated with a personal sense of entitlement or with a collective based on an essentialist conception of identity’ – into political emotions – ‘on behalf of a political collective, associated with views of particular hegemonic social relations’ (277).

In one of his latest lectures, Mouffe (2021) refers to these political debates as ‘agonistic assemblies’. For this author, these assemblies provide a space for dissent with the hegemonic order and allow alliances between the new agents of social movements (precarious workers, feminists, anti-racists, eco-activist, the LGBTQ community, etc.) in order to identify their common enemy. Therefore, it is a political process to establish a new hegemonic bloc against neoliberal injustices that, unlike the far-right wing political proposals, is anti-essentialist and radically pluralistic.

For Mouffe (2021), the success of these assemblies lies not only in their ability to articulate different action strategies, but also to mobilize political emotions. In this regard, some theorists of the agonistic models of democracy speak of the importance of mobilizing negative (or reactive) emotions such as indignation (Mihai 2014) or anger (Ruitenberg 2009) in the face of grievances. However, they also point out that these negative emotions should not be directed ‘at the destruction of adversarial politics’, but rather to ‘propose an alternative reading of the ethic-political values undergirding democracy’ (Mihai 2014, 45). Likewise, they also consider that it is important to mobilize positive emotions (or affirmative) such as hope (Amsler 2015; Mihai 2014), in the face of the vision that it is possible to achieve a fairer society, or the feeling of togetherness (Biesta 2011b) and collective solidarity (Bargetz 2015) among those who share the same interpretation of the idea of justice.

Artistic performance for the politization of citizenship

According to Mouffe (2008), art is one of the existing cultural practices that can play a more important role in establishing an anti-essentialist and radically pluralistic hegemonic bloc against neoliberal injustices. That said, it is necessary that these practices account for ‘the political in its antagonistic dimension, as well as the contingent nature of any social order’ (Mouffe 2008, 7). In this regard, the tragic and mimetic logic of drama performances makes them an adequate artistic practice for this task (Fisher 2017).

The relationship between tragedy and political action is the underlying factor of the theories of radical democracy. As Mouffe (2013) states, the essence of politics is tragic insofar as it places the *agon* (the struggle or conflict), at the very centre of ‘the political’. For theorists of radical democracy, mobilizing citizens to engage politically implies embedding the belief in its messaging that another social order is possible. This means addressing the reality of its tragic nature (Wenman 2013).

In this regard, the political character of the performing and theatrical arts need not be sought for in their capacity to transmit the appropriateness of a social order, but rather to symbolically represent the tragic nature of any social order. A performance is not political because it wants to communicate a model of society, but because it shows us that every model is incomplete and susceptible to being questioned by counterhegemonic possibilities. By giving voice to discourses that have been silenced within the framework of any existing hegemony, a drama performance could reveal what the dominant consensus tends to obscure – namely, the tragic conception of ‘the political’ (Mouffe 2008). The ‘relational antagonism’ and irreconcilable conflicts present in performance could be shown as a ‘critical force’ capable of appropriating and re-signing values and distancing thinking from the predominant and pre-existing consensus (Bishop 2004).

On the other hand, Shirin and Reinelt (2015) consider that performance is a means of producing narratives and influencing the audience in some way. Fisher (2017) claims that theatrical performance could mobilize political emotions by giving 'voice to what suffers in us and in others [...] and work with that suffering' (29).

Objectives

In the previous sections we have tried to show, from the perspective of the theory of radical democracy, to what extent drama performances and agonistic debates are an adequate teaching resource to politicize citizens to the extent that both prioritize conflict and emotions versus consensus and reason, respectively. This allows us to think of dramas and agonistic debates as suitable strategies to deal with the problem pointed out by Håkansson, Kronlid, and Östman (2019), regarding the risk of neutralizing the political dimension of ESD. On the one hand, the use of agonistic debates may prioritize the conflictive dimension of debates about sustainability (Hasslöf, Ekborg, and Malmberg 2014; Håkansson, Östman, and Van Poeck 2018) to the extent that they present them as a confrontation between radically conflicting and irreconcilable interpretations of environmental justice; on the other hand, the agonistic logic of drama (Mouffe 2008, 2013) could not only reinforce the presentation of the subsequent debates as a confrontation between antagonistic positions, but it could also favor the identification of the students with the agents involved in the conflicts, and the mobilization of their political passions. In summary, the following research aims to demonstrate that the use of drama performance as an introduction to agonistic debates (Ruitenberg 2009) politicizes the field of ESD to the extent that it mobilizes the political passions of students as a consequence of polarizing environmental conflicts and presenting them as a confrontation between left and right political positions regarding justice.

Method

The case study

The following text documents a teaching experience carried out during an academic course in PETE at the University of Valencia, Spain. The case study was designed according to qualitative methodology. The participants consisted of a total of 45 students between the ages of 19 and 30, all of whom were studying the Didactics of Expressive Physical Activities (DEPA). DEPA is a 60-hour course that includes theory and practice taught in the third year of the course and aims to inform future Primary Education teachers of the contents and teaching resources available for teaching Body Expression and Communication, one of the five blocks of content included in the national curriculum for PE in Spain.

In the first session, the students were introduced to the UN Agenda for 2030 and the SDGs. They were then formed into eight groups of between five and six members who were asked to choose one of the SDGs. During the next two sessions, each group was asked to perform a skit introducing their chosen SDGs. This dramatization could not be random, but rather had to be based on a text given to them that addressed specific objectives, which, without making any explicit references, reflected VOX's position on issues of sustainability (Vox is an ultraconservative political party that has recently entered the Spanish parliament). The students' dramatizations were recorded to be shown to the whole class during the fourth session. After each viewing, the contents were presented and discussed in the classroom following the premises of Ruitenberg's (2009) agonistic debates. The most relevant of these were collected in the Teacher's Journal (TJ).

In the fifth session, another work block began in which the students were asked to design a theatrical performance in which they could discuss the chosen SDGs however they wished.

The theatrical representations were performed after a rehearsal. In the eighth session, the second debate was held, in which, after watching the recording of each performance, a discussion was held on the content. As in the previous debate, the most relevant comments were collected in the TJ.

In Session 9 the third block of work was addressed. In this block, each group was asked to carry out an educational project whose intention was to make the chosen SDGs known by giving visibility to the work of existing local citizen practices. To do this they had to apply this project in a primary school in a neighbourhood or municipality of the Valencia community that had been experiencing SDG problems. To follow up this process and encourage the exchange of information among all the participants in the study, the students were invited to join the Facebook group 'Artistic Practices for an Agonistic Democratic Education'. This social media group, although restricted to the students of the course, could be accessed by any user of the network. Participation in this group was completely voluntary and information was shared on three topics: artistic and political performance practices, social conflicts in the Valencia community related to some of the SDGs, social or neighbourhood movements that had emerged as a result of conflicts related to sustainability issues, and school projects related to the education of some of the SDGs. The results of this process were collected in a dossier and presented to the class during Sessions 13-16 in a third debate. In session 17 to conclude the study the students were asked to reflect in writing the role of society, art and education in addressing the challenge of SDGs.

Data collection and analysis

The data obtained for this study were mainly from two sources: (a) Students' Journals (SJ), and (b) the Teacher's Journal (TJ). The students were asked for three different types of diaries: in Student Journal 1 (SJ1) and Student Journal 2 (SJ2) they included their experiences during the development, representation, viewing, and discussion of their first and second artistic performances (Sessions 1-4 and 5-8, respectively). In Student Journal 3 (SJ3), they included the experiences they had had during the process of design and implementation of their action plan, as well as the discussion carried out in the third debate.

The TJ served to collect the field notes by the teacher regarding the development of the sessions, the discussions carried out after the viewing of the different performances (Sessions 4 and 8), and the teacher's reflections regarding the learning-teaching process, plus any associated ethical dilemmas.

The data were analysed after a deductive analysis through a hybrid approach of inductive coding (derived from the data) and deductive coding (derived from the theoretical framework), as laid out in Fereday and Muir-Cochrane (2006). Firstly, a code manual was created with the intention of knowing to what extent our teaching proposal contributed some novelty to the dominant tendencies in the politicization of EDS (Håkansson, Kronlid, and Östman 2019). This manual was developed *a priori* and consisted of five categories: (1) 'the political' as inclusion and consensus, (2) 'the political' as including rational-cognitive elements, (3) 'the political' as including emotional elements, (4) 'the political' as a discovery of power relations and (5) 'the political' as part of decision-making processes. These categories were defined in detail in the manual. To check their applicability and reliability, part of the data was analysed using this template. This test was later given to an independent researcher, who recoded the same portion of the data in order to compare the results.

An inductive analysis of the data was then carried out to identify and define codes and categories (Thomas 2006). The result was a division into three primary categories that grouped the students' reflections according to their participation in the three types of tasks performed: artistic performances, debates, and the group teaching project design. Each of these categories gave rise to four secondary categories, which grouped the students' reflections on knowledge,

procedures, attitudes and emotions acquired while participating in these activities. In total, there were 12 secondary categories which were grouped into a total of 27 tertiary categories, as shown in Table 1.

Finally, as Fereday and Muir-Cochrane (2006) suggest, the interaction between deductive and inductive analysis was carried out. For this purpose, the themes developed and described *a priori* were applied to the codes obtained in the inductive analysis. The aim was to interpret the coded units inductively, according to the *a priori* thematic structure. The final result made it possible to give meaning to all the tertiary categories formed in the inductive analysis, according to the structure shown in Table 2.

Table 1. Relation between first, second and tertiary categories obtained from the inductive analysis.

Primary categories	Secondary categories	Tertiary categories	Descriptions
Artistic performance	Knowledge	The SDGs in the artistic performance	The student demonstrates knowledge of the SDGs while searching for information for the artistic performance
	Procedures	The artistic performance as a space for conflicting perspectives	The student reflects on the difficulties of representing people with opposing viewpoints
	Attitudes	Focus on character	The student reflects on the complications involved in maintaining focus on character
	Emotions	Individual emotions in the artistic performance	The student reflects on personal emotions that arise while participating in the artistic performance.
Debates	Knowledge	Collective emotions in the artistic performance	The students reflect on emotions that s/he identifies with, that arise from the collective while participating in the artistic performance.
		Learn different points of views than that of one's own	The student recognizes that the debates are necessary in order to learn different points of view with respect to questions about the SDGs
		Understand conservative political stances	The student demonstrates knowledge of stances taken by conservative parties with respect to the SDGs
		Understand progressive political stances	The student demonstrates knowledge of stances taken by progressive parties with respect to the SDGs
		Become familiar with actions taken by local activists	The student demonstrates having learned the actions taken by local socialists who work to carry out the SDGs
	Procedures	Understand today's social and political situation	The student's comments reflect knowledge of a growing understanding of today's social and political situation
		Defend opinions appropriately	The student comments on the importance of expressing ideas and opinions appropriately
		Present opposing opinions appropriately	The student comments on the importance of expressing opposing ideas and opinions appropriately
		Respect the opinions of others	The student comments on the importance of respecting the opinions and points of view of others
		Maintain one's original political stance	The student reflects on those who, in a debate, even though knowing that they are in the wrong, maintain their original political stance
	Attitudes	Be flexible regarding political viewpoints	The student reflects on those people who, in a debate, are flexible in relation to political viewpoints, and are able to adopt other opinions as they are presented
		Individual emotions during the debate	The student reflects on individual emotions that arise while participating in the class discussions
		Collective emotions during debates	The student reflects on emotions that come from the group while participating in class discussions, that correspond to her/his own

(Continued)

Table 1. Continued.

Primary categories	Secondary categories	Tertiary categories	Descriptions
Group Teaching Project Design	Knowledge	Become familiar with the local social conflicts derived from the SDGs	The student respects the different conflicts that have arisen from the SDGs
		Become familiar with the official educational curriculum	The student understands the importance of her/his growing knowledge of the official educational curriculum
	Procedures	Complete a teaching plan related to the SDGs	The student understands the importance of having developed a teaching plan related to the SDGs and one that is appropriate to be carried out in a school and in a real social conflict
		Collaborate in a group teaching project design	The student reflects on the importance of having participated and collaborated with colleagues in a group project
		Resolve conflicts in a group teaching project design	The student reflects on how to resolve conflicts within a group in order to move the project ahead
	Attitudes	Critical attitude towards social order	The student understands the importance of having a critical attitude when considering societal issues
		Critical attitude towards the role of education	The student reflects on the importance of education in schools in developing a critical attitude towards societal issues
		Rely on colleagues	The student understands the important of being able to rely on colleagues in order to be able to move a group project forward
	Emotions	Individual emotions in group teaching project design	The student reflects on individual emotions while participating in group teaching projects
		Collective emotions in group teaching project design	The student reflects on emotions that arise in groups while participating in group teaching projects

Table 2. Relationship of the tertiary categories to the subjects of analysis.

Subjects	Tertiary categories
'The political' as inclusion and consensus	Learn different points of views than that of one's own The artistic performance as a place of conflicting perspectives Be flexible regarding political viewpoints Maintain one's original political stance
'The political' as including rational-cognitive elements	Defend opinions appropriately Present opposing opinions appropriately Understand conservative political stances Understand progressive political stances Respect the opinions of others Understand today's social and political situation
'The political' as including of emotional elements	Individual emotions in the artistic performance Collective emotions in the artistic performance Individual emotions during the debate Collective emotions during the debate Individual emotions in group educational project design Collective emotions in group educational project design
'The political' as discovery of power relations	Become familiar with the social conflicts derived from the SDGs Critical attitude towards the role of education Critical attitude towards social order
'The political' as part of decision-making processes.	The SDGs in the artistic performance Focus on character Become familiar with the official educational curriculum Complete a teaching plan related to the SDGs Collaborate in a group teaching project design Resolve conflicts in group teaching project design Rely on colleagues Become familiar with actions taken by local social initiatives

Results

Attending to the categories identified in the analysis manual, this section will present to what extent the use of drama performances as an introduction to agonistic debates has contributed to the process of politicization of future PE teachers. Given that these categories have been extracted from the existing trends in the politicization of ESD (Håkansson, Kronlid, and Östman 2019), our intention will be to be able to compare our teaching proposal to know to what extent a different one contributes within the said field of study.

'The political' as inclusion and consensus

Our proposal for teaching the SDGs was based on the idea that a fair and sustainable world cannot be based on a rational consensus, but rather on the struggle between opposing positions. The starting hypothesis was that the agonistic structure of drama performances and political debates could be effective instruments for teachers in presenting the SDGs to students from Spanish 'left' and 'right' political projects. Through the dynamics created in the classroom, the students were obliged to judiciously consider Vox's objectives regarding the SDGs. This created a dialogue, as for most of them, Vox's position was diametrically opposed to their own beliefs regarding sustainable development, so that they were forced to question their own stances.

Having to position ourselves on the opposite side of the situation is a main contributor to considering our initial ideas from a different perspective (SJ1, Anna García).¹

On the one hand, the students had to dramatize points of view radically different from their own, forcing them to put themselves in the shoes of people whose opinions they did not share. This meant they had to include a diversity of perspectives in their narratives within the scope of the SDGs:

(...) listening to other points of view and understanding them leads us to respect other forms and lifestyles and to respect other opinions as well, without the need to change our own positions (SJ1, Anna García).

On the other hand, designing a narrative after considering Vox's ultraconservative positions led the students to create performances that more fully addressed the need for sustainable development. The development of Vox's ultraconservative discourses through the artistic performances helped the students to adopt social conflict and the political struggle as the axis on which to base their arguments on sustainability.

...the thinking of many people of extremely conservative ideologies infuriates me, and makes me sad to realize that, in reality their ideologies have little visibility and yet are a serious problem for society. I think that we should be fighting as a collective, so that their ideologies do not come to pass... (SJ1, Julia Muñoz).

'The political' as including rational-cognitive elements

The formula of creating political debates on their performances was used to challenge the participants and motivate their cognitive and rational competences, following the premises of Ruitenberg (2009) and Mouffe (2021). These discussions were developed on the basis of the conflict involved in reading the SDGs with 'left' and 'right' political ideas. Far from envisioning a possible consensus or an outright rejection of the ultraconservative proposals, the intention was to generate discussions on the conflicting viewpoints. The teacher guided the debate by inviting the students to reflect on what notions of justice, freedom and equality underlie each of the positions in the conflict. The intention was that, faced with strongly opposing ideas, the students would have to think more deeply about the legitimacy or illegitimacy of Vox's proposals.

My aim was to try to counter-argue the opinions raised in the debate by using conservative ideology. My experience as a teacher at PETE is that these up-and-coming teachers tend to have progressive ideology.

However, I have always had the feeling that they were using clichés from the left thoughtlessly. Debating their ideas using the ideas of the extreme right has made them look for more solid arguments for the ideas they already had (TJ).

Although the students did not change their initial position on the goals through these debates, some made an effort to understand them in relation to the historical and contemporary left and right-wings politics. This not only improved the understanding of their own ideas but also changed their perception of far-right political ideas, which went from being seen as irrational ideas that should be eliminated from any democratic debate, to being legitimate ideas that require an intellectual effort to be countered. As a consequence, testimonies like the following appeared in their journals:

... you cannot criticize a political party or criticize anything just because. You have to give solid arguments that counteract those other arguments and not react without having a solid base. Unfortunately, this is the way many people act (SJ1, Borja Palomar).

With the intention of 'educating political adversaries' capable of learning the SDGs from progressive ideas as a response to the policies of the extreme right, the teacher advocated asking students to design teaching projects in which they tried to give visibility to local citizen practices that today were already struggling to achieve some of the SDGs. By doing so, many of the students discovered the importance of these practices as a way of possibly creating a more just world:

I think that the society in which we live is tainted by machismo and that most of society favors the types of actions purported by this thinking. That is why those 'radical feminist groups' that raise their voices for the freedom and equality of women in this world are so important (SJ1, Julia Burriel).

'The political' as education of the emotional

One of the aspects that stood out most from the data analysed in this teaching experience was the quantity of allusions to emotions and attachment. In general terms, the students had consistent perceptions of how the visualization of social conflicts associated with the SDGs through performances and their subsequent discussions did not leave them indifferent. The following quote is an example of the emotions that surfaced:

We felt our hair curling. We felt our insides turned upside down, causing us to become more and more sensitive to each message. And yet, we have managed to keep learning (SJ1, Sergio Escudero).

The first emotion that appeared among most of the students was anger. After the first student performance and the subsequent discussion, there were many testimonies in their journals in which the participants expressed their indignation towards the ultraconservative political proposals that were presented and the absence of reactions by society. Reasoning and questioning appeared in their entries that were surprising and ostensibly unrelated to the hegemonic foundation – not only to the subject at hand, but also to the rest of their classes:

In each one of the objectives, I heard points of view that made me scream, that made me angry. I thought, 'we are not babies, but have sufficient capacity to think clearly. Why don't those people see certain issues in the same way as I do? Do they really believe what they are saying? Do they really want a future or a world like that for their children?' (SJ1, Zira Valiente).

However, the charge behind these passionate comments began diminishing during political debates as the students began to understand the principles on which the ultraconservative discourses were based. The strategy to encourage student participation in the debates was to turn classrooms into safe spaces where students felt free to express their opinions. It became

apparent that this was effective, as seen from the comments in the students' journals in which they show that they felt free to speak their minds:

A relaxed and pleasant atmosphere was created between the students and the teacher (...) It was very satisfying to be able to speak freely in class about topics that are very current, and to be able to hear different opinions or points of view of others (SJ1, Jorge Úbeda).

As the course progressed and the students developed their teaching project proposal, the hope that a change was possible began to arise. In part, this was possible because the students were aware of the existence of citizen practices that are currently working to achieve SDGs from postulates that they also defended. At this point, some of them also felt the need to collaborate in order to change the existing situation.

I see myself as very small in the face of all the issues, so I think that it is difficult to change the situation for the better, but I also think that throwing in the towel should not be an option, and that on the contrary it would be effective to forge a strong collaboration to be able to see improvement (SJ1, María Giménez).

'The political' as a discovery of power relations

The intention of the political debates was to encourage the future teachers to recognize that SDGs can never be ideologically neutral and that they are based on a certain interpretation of the principles of equality and freedom. With this idea, the teacher guided the discussions in the classroom to make the students reflect on the way in which the different positions in the conflict were placed with respect to the hegemonic socio-economic model. In fact, many of the students' reflections on their experiences pointed in this direction:

Through our debates, I understood the magnitude of the issues. I learned to present a point of view and defend it. This encouraged critical thinking. Understanding the world around us through the healthy practice of questioning everything and understanding that there are reasons behind things, has made me reflect on how easy it is to be manipulated when talking about a subject on which I was not previously informed, or one about which I had not already formed an opinion (SJ1, Julia García).

Other students started to see the university as an institution that works towards the transformation of social patterns instead of perpetuating them. This was evident when some of them spoke about their commitment as future teachers to being part of a movement towards a more just and sustainable world:

As a future teacher I would like to be able to educate my students in the possibility of being free of prejudice – individuals who know how to distinguish between false from true information, and I believe that to achieve this I would have to instill in them a spirit of critical thinking and discernment (SJ1, Carmen Ribot).

'The political' as a decision-making process

The strategy to encourage the participation in decision-making processes was to make them participate in collaborative projects through which they developed different strategies that put interpersonal commitment and trust before differences in individual interests and perspectives.

I would like to emphasize that we have been a group that has disagreed a lot, but at no time have we been angry or divided. (SJ3, Julia Burriel).

Although this process, as expected, was not without conflicts, each group resolved their differences by putting the collaborative project as the first priority. Although throughout the

course they had been forced to resolve their conflicts by participating in collective decision-making processes, perhaps it was when designing the performances that they were most aware of this:

Every problem we encountered we talked about and through communication we made one decision or another through the democratic process (SJ3, Anna García).

Finally, the students interpreted their participation in the experience as beneficial, not only professionally – as future teachers – but also with regard to being citizens of the world:

I found the task to be very interesting. It not only required that we work as a team and strengthen communication, but we were also educationally involved in projects that will train us as teachers and obligate us to reflect on what we want for our future students (SJ3, Julia Burriel).

Discussion

The previous section has presented empirical evidence on the extent to which our teaching proposal proposes new strategies for the politicization of EDS based on conflicts and the mobilization of student's passions. Accordingly, it is important to note that reading the conflicts associated with the SDGs as an irreconcilable confrontation of radically opposed positions implied highlights the tragic nature of these goals (Wenman 2013). In this regard, the disputes between characters in drama performances and the polarization of the agonistic debates as a confrontation between left and right political ideas were useful to mobilize political passions (Mouffe 2008, 2013), since the students were able to identify with the specific agents participating in the conflicts. In this sense, the proposal brings something new to the use of debates that have dominated the trends of politicization of ESD from the perspective of radical democracy (Hasslöf, Ekborg, and Malmberg 2014; Håkansson, Östman, and Van Poeck 2018).

Using 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 (Ruitenberg 2009). Through these conflictual deliberations (Håkansson, Östman, and Van Poeck 2018) the teacher made an effort not to try to overcome the 'us-them' dynamics, but instead establish this distinction in a way compatible with 'agonistic pluralism' (Ruitenberg 2009; Lo 2017; Mouffe 2013). For this reason the educator tried to make the students see the people who represent extreme right ideas not as moral enemies but as political opponents who hold a different interpretation of the democratic principles of equality and freedom (Sund and Öhman 2014; Håkansson, Kronlid, and Östman 2019; Huckle 1993; Fien 1993, 2000).

A key aspect in carrying out this process was to avoid converting questions on sustainability and the environment into moral issues. As stated by Slimani, Lange, and Håkansson (2021), when presenting environmental justice from a political confrontation this concept ceased to be seen as an abstract category that advocated the equal distribution of environmental resources and their costs and began to be conceived as a category of political action linked to concrete citizen practices that struggle to achieve a certain distribution of resources by putting into practice specific power relations.

In order to prevent learning SDGs from becoming simply a bureaucratic and technocratic process it was necessary for the students to bring to the table the passions that arise from their dreams and desires with respect to sustainability issues (Håkansson, Kronlid, and Östman 2019). In doing this, emotions played a special role (Van Poeck and Vandenaabeele 2012). During the presentation of the SDGs through drama performances, the students experienced anger at the suffering and injustice caused by the practices of those who benefited from the neoliberal economic model (Mihai 2014; Ruitenberg 2009). During the debates, part of the students transformed this initial indignation into an indignation associated with an alternative reading of ethical-political principles compatible with democracy (Ruitenberg 2009; Mihai 2014; Mouffe 2013). As they became aware of the existence of practices that struggled to repair these

injustices, some of them felt hope at the possibility of changing things (Mihai 2014). Similarly, throughout the projects and discussions held, many felt solidarity with those who thought like them about how to implement the SDGs (Bargetz 2015; Biesta 2011b). According to Vilas, Alzate, and Sabucedo (2016), these emotions are essential to promote citizen mobilization and have been considered as fundamental emotions to mobilize citizens to participate in processes of social transformation.

Finally, the experience shows that developing collaborative projects applied to social situations with environmental conflicts forced them to acquire the knowledge, attitudes and skills necessary to face disputes within the group (Fien 2000; Håkansson, Kronlid, and Östman 2019). As Biesta (2010) states, to a certain extent learning these collective actions would not only contribute to the acquisition of knowledge consistent with the educational goals of qualifying and socializing students, but to the social practice of democratic subjectivation as self-building (Slimani, Lange, and Håkansson 2021).

Conclusions

In the bibliographic review by Håkansson, Kronlid, and Östman (2019) on the way in which the political dimension is implemented in sustainable education, they spoke of the need to study in the field of practice, educational experiences capable of linking the real experiences of students with the field of sustainable environmental education, political education and social transformation. The teaching experience in this study sought to explore this need using the theories of radical democracy. According to the evidence found, it is possible to conclude that this teaching proposal politicized the learning of the SDGs since it allowed the students to: (1) interpret the SDGs as a conflictive space in which radically different positions can be taken regarding what environmental justice is; (2) make a reading of these conflicts through the contemporary and historical 'left' and 'right' political projects; (3) mobilize political emotions such as indignation at environmental injustices, or hope and solidarity in the face of discovering people who not only think like them, but also act like they would like to act; (4) identify the power relations within the current socio-economic system of the different positions in conflict, and (5) participate in collective decision-making processes when designing educational projects that give visibility to local struggles linked to the SDGs.

Based on the results obtained, we can thus identify three teaching strategies or movements that may be useful in favouring the politicization of teaching the SDGs.

1. Introducing the SDGs through conflicts between hegemonic and counter-hegemonic figures. Although it is possible to use any resource for this task that can persuade the students and facilitate their understanding of the antagonistic nature of such conflicts, the use of artistic performances is ideal for this task. As has been argued in this text, through them it is possible to build polarized scenarios in which opposing ideological discourses are represented through their characters. In addition, these representations not only help students understand the antagonistic logic of a conflict, but also mobilize their emotions through identifying with the characters.
2. Political literacy through conflicts linked to SDGs. In this phase, the conflicts on the SDGs are discussed as they were presented in the previous phase. For this it is necessary to build a safe space in which any student feels that they can express their beliefs, interests and wishes, without fear of reprisals from the teacher or other classmates. However, the teacher's task in these assemblies is not only to guarantee respect for the opinions expressed but also to try to orient their content towards understanding conflicts in a political key. Using pertinent questions, the teacher should get the students to reflect on the conception of justice, freedom or equality underlying the opposing positions in the conflict. The goal is to make them know who truly makes decisions that affect

sustainability in any given environment and how the conservative and progressive political views can influence the interests of the different social groups involved in any situation of conflict. All this would aspire to producing a moderation of the negative emotions experienced in the previous phase, to the extent that those who hold positions on sustainability different from theirs are not seen as enemies but as political adversaries (Mouffe 2013; Ruitenberg 2009).

3. Articulating social transformation projects to achieve SDGs. Political education through SDGs should not be limited to the students' political literacy, but should mobilize them to participate in real processes of social transformation. For this it is necessary for them to know the existence of groups that today have already started local struggles to achieve a more sustainable environment. In the case of teacher training, this knowledge can be linked to specific school projects. It is also advisable to favor dynamics so that the students share the projects they have carried out with the rest of their classmates. These dynamics can help the appearance of intergroup alliances. In this context, the positive emotions of hope and togetherness would complement negative emotions such as indignation, all of them related to citizen mobilization (Vilas, Alzate, and Sabucedo 2016).

However, it is also necessary to point out the small sample size as a limitation of this study, a fact that forces us to be cautious when generalizing the results obtained. Similarly, the results must also be understood in a specific socio-political context such as the situation of Spanish politics in recent decades. This forces us to relativize the transfer of our results to other contexts, since the political polarization strategy used in this teaching proposal arises from the need to mobilize students' political consciences with progressive ideas regarding sustainability to face the rise of ultra-right thinking among citizens. At this point, we would agree with Berman and Kundnani (2021) in stating that using this strategy in already polarized places, such as the United States, could be counterproductive.

Although the study shows that the students recognize the importance of the practices carried out by certain groups for the achievement of the SDGs, this research did not explore the learning outcomes obtained from them or their degree of commitment, beyond the projects carried out in the classroom. Prospective studies should be focused on how specific citizen practices influence learning SDGs. In this regard, a more extensive longitudinal study could be carried out to account for the real impact of this intervention on their future teaching.

Finally, it would also be appropriate to continue exploring in detail the political emotions associated with learning the SDGs, for example a good starting point can be found in the work of affective atmospheres (Zembylas 2020). From this point of view, it would be interesting to empirically investigate how the design of the learning environment through different tasks, contents and materials affect the politicization of learning SDGs.

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The Authors declare that there is no conflict of interest.

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