Copyright Disclaimer under Section 107 of the Copyright Act 1976, allowance is made for "fair use" for purposes such as criticism, comment, news reporting, teaching, scholarship, and research. Fair use is a use permitted.
Education and the Democratic Person: Towards a Political Conception of Democratic Education

GERT BIESTA
University of Exeter/Örebro University

Background/Context: Ever since the Enlightenment, there has been a strong tendency in educational theory and practice to think of education as the "production" of a subject with particular qualities, most notably the quality of rationality. This way of thinking has deeply influenced the theory and practice of democratic education and has led to an approach that is both instrumentalistic (it sees education as the instrument for the production of the democratic person) and individualistic (it conceives of the democratic person as an isolated individual with a pre-defined set of knowledge, skills and dispositions).

Focus of Study: In this article, I argue that the way in which we understand democratic education has everything to do with our conception of the democratic person. Through a discussion of the work of Immanuel Kant, John Dewey, and Hannah Arendt I present three different answers to the question as to what it means to be a democratic person. I refer to these as an individualistic, a social, and a political conception of democratic subjectivity, respectively. I argue that each provides a different rationale for democratic education. While the individualistic and the social conception are closely connected to ideas about democratic education as the production of the democratic individual (either by educational strategies directed at this individual, or by creating opportunities for individuals to participate in democratic life), I suggest, using ideas from Hannah Arendt, that there is a different way to articulate what it means to be a democratic subject. This way of understanding what it means to be a democratic subject, to which I refer to as a political understanding of the democratic person, no longer focuses on the production of democratic individuals and no longer thinks of itself as having to prepare individuals for future democratic action. Instead, it focuses on opportunities for democratic action and democratic "learning-in-action."

Conclusions/Recommendations: What schools can do—or at least should try to do—is to
make democratic action possible. This involves creating conditions for children and students to be subjects and to experience what it is and means to be a subject. The learning related to this is not something that comes before democratic subjectivity. It rather follows from having been or not having been a subject. It is learning about the fragile conditions under which action and subjectivity are possible. Because subjectivity is no longer something that only occurs or is created in schools, the approach to democratic education that follows from my considerations puts the question about the responsibility for democratic education back where it actually belongs, namely, in society at large. I argue that it is an illusion to think that schools alone can produce democratic citizens. In so far as action and subjectivity are possible in schools and society, schools can perform the more modest and more realistic task of helping children and students to learn about and reflect upon the fragile conditions under which all people can act, under which all people can be a subject. A society in which individuals are not able or not allowed to act, cannot expect from its schools to produce its democratic citizens for it. I therefore conclude that schools can neither create nor save democracy—they can only support societies in which action and subjectivity are real possibilities.

DEMOCRATIC EDUCATION REVISITED

Questions about democracy have always been closely intertwined with questions about education. Ever since its inception in the *polis* of Athens, political and educational thinkers alike have asked what kind of education would best prepare the people (*demos*) for their participation in the ruling (*kratos*) of their society. Although our complex global world bears little or no resemblance to the *polis* of Athens, the question of the relationship between education and democracy is as important and urgent today as it was then. In new and emerging democracies, schools are considered to have a pivotal role to play in the formation of a democratic citizenry and the creation of a democratic culture. In old and established democracies, education is seen as central to the preservation of democratic life and is nowadays often called upon to counter political apathy, particularly amongst the young. The increasing marketization of education and the subsequent loss of democratic control over schools is a further reason why in many countries around the world questions about the relationship between education and democracy are high on the agenda again (see, for example, Englund, 1994; Apple, 1993; 2000; Torres, 1998; Saltman, 2000; McLaughlin, 2000; McDonnell, Timpane, & Benjamin, 2000; McNeil, 2002 Wells, Slayton & Scott, 2002; Biesta, 2004a).

But how should we understand the relationship between democracy and education? And what is the role of schools in a democratic society? In this article, I argue that an answer to these questions crucially depends on our views about the democratic person. Stated in more philosophical terms: it depends on our ideas about the kind of subjectivity that is con-
sidered to be desirable or necessary for a democratic society. One influential line of thinking holds that democracy needs rational individuals who are capable of their own free and independent judgments. This idea, which was first formulated by Enlightenment philosophers more than two centuries ago and has remained influential up to the present day (see, for example, Rawls, 1993; 1997; Habermas, 1996; Dryzek, 2000), has led to the belief that it is the task of schools to "create" or "produce" such individuals. It has promoted the idea that schools should make children "ready for democracy" by instilling in them the knowledge, skills and dispositions that will turn them into democratic citizens.

There are, however, several problems with this view of democratic education. The first is that this way of thinking rests upon an instrumentalistic conception of democratic education, one in which education is seen as an "instrument" for bringing about democracy—and hence as the institution that can conveniently be blamed if it fails to do so. The problem here is that schools are maneuvered into a position in which they seem to have to carry the whole responsibility for the future of democracy (and we all know how easily politicians point the finger at schools when there are problems with democracy). It is not only not fair to burden schools with this task; it is also unrealistic to assume that schools can "make or break" democracy. The second problem with the idea of education as the "production" of the democratic person is that it entails an individualistic approach to democratic education, one in which the educational efforts are focused on equipping individuals with the proper set of democratic knowledge, skills and dispositions, without asking questions about individuals' relationships with others and about the social and political context in which they learn and act. This is closely connected to the third problem, which is that this view of democratic education rests upon an individualistic view of democracy, one in which it is assumed that the success of democracy depends on the knowledge, skills, and dispositions of individuals and on their willingness as individuals to act democratically. What is particularly problematic here is the assumption that democracy is only possible if all citizens are "properly" educated and act accordingly. The question this raises is whether we take democracy seriously enough if we assume that it can only exist if it is founded on a common identity (see Honig, 1993). Isn't it the case that the challenge of democracy lies precisely in our ability to live together with those who are not like us (see Säfström & Biesta, 2001; Biesta, 2001; 2004c)?

In this article I wish to advance a different understanding of democratic education, one that is not centered around the idea that democratic education is about the "production" of the democratic person, one which does not conceive of the democratic person as an isolated individual with
a pre-defined set of knowledge, skills, and dispositions, and one in which it is acknowledged that democracy is about plurality and difference, not identity and sameness. I wish to explore, in other words, whether it is possible to overcome the instrumentalism and individualism that is characteristic of the idea of democratic education as the “production” of the democratic person. I believe that it is important to challenge such an understanding of democratic education, not only because of the unrealistic expectations it raises about what schools can actually achieve, but also because of the fact that it puts the burden for the future of democracy too much on schools and too little on society at large.

My contribution in this article is mainly of a philosophical nature and centers around a discussion of three different answers to the question as to what it means to be a democratic person. I begin this article with a brief discussion of the definition of democracy. Following Dewey, I suggest a broad, social definition of democracy, in which democracy is not merely seen as a mode of government but is understood as a “mode of associated living” characterized by inclusive ways of social and political action. Next, I look at the ways in which democratic education is commonly conceived. I show that there is a strong tendency to think of democratic education as the preparation of children for their future participation in democratic life through the cultivation of a particular set of knowledge, values, and dispositions. There are different views about the way in which this should happen. Some argue that democracy should simply be taught, while others maintain that the best way to create the democratic person is through participation in democratic structures and processes. Although there are important practical differences between the two approaches, I argue that both exemplify an instrumentalistic and individualistic view of democratic education: a view that focuses on the question of how best to engender the democratic individual. I then ask whether it is possible to overcome the instrumentalism and individualism in democratic education and what kind of theoretical frameworks we would need to do so. I focus the discussion on the question as to what it means to be a democratic person. I present three different answers to this question: an individualistic conception of democratic subjectivity, a social conception of democratic subjectivity, and a political conception of democratic subjectivity. The first is Immanuel Kant’s answer, which he developed in order to make clear what kind of subjectivity was necessary in the new, emerging democracies of the European Enlightenment. I refer to Kant’s view as an individualistic conception of subjectivity since he locates subjectivity in the human capacity for independent rational thought. I then discuss John Dewey’s social conception of subjectivity. Dewey sees the democratic person as the person who both shapes and is shaped by the democratic form of
life. For Dewey the democratic person is the one who possesses social intelligence, a form of intelligence that is acquired through participation in social interaction and cooperative problem-solving. Unlike Kant, Dewey acknowledges the social character of human subjectivity and the social processes through which individuals become socially intelligent subjects. While Dewey offers a social conception of the democratic subject, the educational implications that follow from this view are still characterized by instrumentalism and individualism, in that the focus is on the creation of the democratic subject—albeit that for Dewey this is a thoroughly social process rather than a process of the unfolding of innate, rational capacities. This is where the third view, Hannah Arendt's political conception of subjectivity, introduces a different perspective. Arendt argues that we should not understand subjectivity as an attribute of individuals, but that we should rather think of it as a quality of human interaction. Arendt holds that we are subjects when our initiatives are taken up by others in such a way that the opportunities for others to bring their initiatives into the world are not obstructed—which means that for Arendt, subjectivity is only possible in a world of plurality and difference. If democratic subjectivity is a quality of human interaction and not a set of characteristics individuals can “possess,” then it follows that the educational task is no longer that of equipping individuals with such characteristics. It should instead focus on what can be learnt from those transient situations in which democratic subjectivity was achieved. In the final section of this article, I discuss the implications of an Arendtian understanding of democratic subjectivity for the theory and practice of democratic education and for research in this field. I argue that the Arendtian view can help us to overcome instrumentalism and individualism in our understanding of democratic education. I also argue that this view can help us to be more realistic about what can be expected from schools and about what should be expected from society at large. I conclude that schools can neither create nor save democracy. They can only support societies in which democratic action and democratic subjectivity are a real possibility.

DEFINING DEMOCRACY

Any discussion about democracy raises questions about its definition. Although the literal meaning of democracy is not difficult to grasp—rule (kratos) by the people (demos)—many different interpretations of what democracy might mean have been put forward over time (see, for example, Held, 1987; 1995; Gutmann, 1993; Mouffe, 1992). These interpretations not only differ in their answer to the question as to what ruling actu-
ally means (for example, direct participation or indirect representation), and who should be considered to be “the people” (for example free men, landowners, women, children, all human beings). They also differ in their justification of the idea(l) of democracy, ranging from democracy as the optimal context for human flourishing to democracy as “the worst form of government except all those other forms that have been tried.”

One of the main problems with the idea(l) of democracy is that it has become a concept that not many people do not want to be associated with. As Held correctly observes, “(n)early everyone today says they are democrats, no matter whether their views are on the left, centre or right” (Held, 1987, p.1). There exists, therefore, a real danger that democracy has so many meanings that it has ceased to have any meaning at all. In response to this, some have argued that we should understand democracy as an “essentially contested concept” (Gallie, 1955), that is, a concept which meaning is constantly challenged and disputed, not because people cannot agree on its definition, but because the very idea of democracy calls for a continuous discussion about and reappraisal of what it actually means and entails. This is what John Dewey had in mind when he wrote that the very idea of democracy “has to be constantly discovered, and rediscovered, remade and reorganized” (Dewey, 1987a[1937], p.182). How then, should we define democracy?

We could use Abraham Lincoln’s broad definition of democracy as “the government of the people, by the people, and for the people” (Lincoln, quoted in Torres, 1998, p.159). Beetham and Boyle, in their book on democracy commissioned by UNESCO, suggest a slightly more precise definition of democracy as entailing “the twin principles of popular control over collective decision-making and equality of rights in the exercise of that control” (Beetham & Boyle, 1995, p.1). Their definition embodies the ideal that decisions which affect an association as a whole should be taken by all its members, and that each should have an equal right in taking part in such decision making. In doing so, their definition hints at Dewey’s insight that democracy is “more than a form of government,” and that it is “primarily a mode of associated living” (Dewey, 1966, p.87). Such a social conception of democracy (Festenstein, 1997) acknowledges that democracy is not exclusively about collective decision making in the political domain, but that it has to do with participation in the “construction, maintenance and transformation” of social and political life more generally (see Bernstein 2000, p.xxi; see also Barber 1984; 1998). A social conception of democracy expresses, in other words, that democracy is about inclusive ways of social and political action.

If this suffices as a working-definition of democracy, how, then, can the relationship between democracy and education be understood? I will
refer to the two most prevalent answers to this question as “education for democracy” and “education through democracy.”

EDUCATION FOR DEMOCRACY

The most common way in which the relationship between democracy and education is understood, is one in which the role of education is seen as that of preparing children—and “newcomers” more generally—for their future participation in democratic life. In this approach, the role of democratic education is considered to be threefold: (1) to teach about democracy and democratic processes (the knowledge component), (2) to facilitate the acquisition of democratic skills such as deliberation, collective decision making and dealing with difference (the skills component), and (3) to support the acquisition of a positive attitude towards democracy (the disposition or values component).

Many educationalists and politicians indeed believe that schools and other educational institutions have a crucial role to play in preparing the next generation for their participation in democracy (see, for example, Westheimer & Kahne, 2000). We can find this line of thinking expressed in such book titles as Schooling for democracy (Giroux, 1989 Educating the democratic mind (Parker, 1995), Creating citizens (Callan, 1997), or Developing democratic character in the young (Soder, Goodlad & McMannon, 2001). Amy Gutmann, in her Democratic education (1987), also exemplifies this view when she defines political education as a process of “the cultivation of the virtues, knowledge, and skills necessary for political participation” and argues that the purpose of political education is that it “prepares citizens to participate in consciously reproducing their society” (Gutmann 1987, p.287; emph. added).

There can be no doubt that the preparation of children and other newcomers for their role in democracy is an important task for schools and other educational institutions (although, as I will argue below, there are important questions to be asked about the exact nature of such “preparation”). One of the key issues in recent debates is whether schools should actively promote democracy (the disposition or values component), or whether they should only focus on the teaching of knowledge about democracy and the acquisition of democratic skills (the knowledge and skills components). Carr and Hartnett in their book on democratic education argue that the primary aim of education for democracy should be “to ensure that all future citizens are equipped with the knowledge, values and skills of deliberative reasoning minimally necessary for their participation in the democratic life of their society” (Carr & Hartnett, 1996,
Gutmann takes the similar view that "a society that supports conscious social reproduction must educate all educable children to be capable of participating in collectively shaping their society" (Gutmann, 1987, p.39; emph. added). Both, therefore, appear to refrain from the idea that schools should actively promote democracy and democratic values.

**EDUCATION THROUGH DEMOCRACY**

Although there are many good reasons for supporting the thrust of education for democracy, there is a limit to what can be achieved by means of deliberate attempts to teach democracy. As research on political socialization has shown, students not only learn from what they are being taught; they also learn—and often learn more and learn more strongly—from many of the other situations in which they take part (see, for example, Torney-Purta, Lehmann, Oswald, & Schulz, 2001). Schools may have exemplary curricula for the teaching of democracy and citizenship, but if the internal organization of a school is undemocratic, this will undoubtedly have a negative impact on students' attitudes and dispositions towards democracy.

It is for precisely this reason that many educators have argued that the best way to educate for democracy is through democracy, that is, by means of democratic forms of education. In their *Democratic schools* (1995), Apple and Beane explain that democratic schooling entails both the creation of "democratic structures and processes by which life in the school is carried out," and the creation of "a curriculum that will give young people democratic experiences" (Apple & Beane, 1995, p.9). The examples they provide reveal that democratic schooling is possible although it definitely isn't easy. It requires continuous attention to the democratic quality of the school and the learning environment more generally. Apple and Beane emphasize that it is "in the details of everyday life," and not "in the glossy political rhetoric" that "the most powerful meaning of democracy is formed" (Apple & Beane, 1995, p.103).

Schooling through democracy can thus be seen as a specific way of schooling for democracy, one in which it is maintained that the best way to prepare for democracy is through participation in democratic life itself. This argument extends, of course, to life outside the walls of the school. Although the school occupies an important place in the lives of young people, they also live and learn at home, on the street, as consumers, as internet users, and so on (see Biesta & Lawy, 2006). From an educational point of view it is, therefore, also important to raise questions about the democratic quality of these environments. It is with this in
mind that proponents of participatory forms of democracy have argued that "the major function of participation in the theory of participatory democracy is...an educative one" (Pateman, 1970, p.42). The assumption here is that the experience of participation indeed "will develop and foster the democratic personality" (p.64).

DEMOCRACY AS A PROBLEM FOR EDUCATION?

Although there are significant differences between "education for democracy" and "education through democracy," they are similar in at least one respect, in that both focus on how best to prepare children and young people for their future participation in democracy. By focusing on the preparation of individuals—either by equipping them with the "right" set of knowledge, skills and dispositions or by fostering the qualities of the democratic personality in them—both approaches seek to give an answer to the question how the democratic person can best be created or engendered. In this respect, both education for democracy and education through democracy display instrumentalism and individualism in their approach to democratic education. One way of putting this is to say that both approaches conceive of democracy as a problem for education: a problem that is "given" to educators, that is defined "elsewhere," and for which educators, schools, and other educational institutions have to provide a solution (and, as I said before, can thus be blamed if democracy goes wrong).

The question is whether this is the only possible way to understand the role of education in a democratic society. I wish to suggest that how we answer this question depends on our views about the democratic person. In the next sections, I will present three different answers to the question as to what constitutes the democratic subject: Immanuel Kant's individualistic conception of the democratic person, John Dewey's social conception, and Hannah Arendt's political conception. I will argue that Kant's individualistic view indeed leads to the conclusion that education should "produce" the democratic individual. Dewey's social conception acknowledges that the democratic person cannot be created in isolation but can only emerge through participation in democratic life. Although Dewey has a social conception of the democratic person, his view of democratic education, however, is still characterized by instrumentalism and individualism. Arendt's political conception of democratic subjectivity makes it possible to go beyond the idea of education as the producer and the safeguard of democracy.
IMMANUEL KANT: AN INDIVIDUALISTIC CONCEPTION OF THE DEMOCRATIC PERSON

Kant's philosophy has its roots in the European Enlightenment. Enlightenment thinkers such as Kant responded to the changing political situation in those European countries that were in transition from absolutist rule towards more democratic forms of government (primarily Prussia, France, and Scotland). This raised the question about the qualities people needed to be effective citizens in the new civil society. It raised the question, in other words, about the kind of subjectivity needed to make democracy possible. Basically, the answer Enlightenment philosophers gave was that a democratic society needs individuals who can make up their own minds and can think for themselves. Kant captured this idea very well in the definition of Enlightenment he gave in his 1784 essay "An answer to the question: What is Enlightenment?".

Enlightenment is man's [sic] release from his self-incurred tutelage. Tutelage is man's inability to make use of his understanding without direction from another. It is self-incurred when its cause lies not in lack of understanding but in lack of resolution and courage to use it without direction from another. Sapere aude! "Have courage to exercise your own understanding!"—that is the motto of enlightenment (Kant, 1992, p.90).

Kant not only provided a clear definition of Enlightenment, he also made an explicit connection between Enlightenment and education. In his treatise on education (Ueber Pädagogik), Kant wrote that the "propensity and vocation for free thinking" of the human being—which he saw as the "ultimate destination" and the "aim of his [sic] existence" (Kant 1982, p.710)—could only be brought about through education. He thus argued that human beings could only become human through education (see Kant 1982, p.699).

Kant's answer to the question about the kind of subjectivity needed in a democracy focuses on the ability of individuals to make use of their own reason without direction from another. Kant sees this ability as part of the natural "make up" of human beings, and this reveals the individualism in his conception of the democratic subject. The democratic subject is the person who can think for himself, who can make his own judgments without being led by others. The Kantian subject is therefore a rational subject. This is not only because its subjectivity depends upon the ability to think rationally, but more precisely because its subjectivity is located in, or simply is the ability to think rationally. The central idea in Kant's conception
of the democratic person is therefore that of rational autonomy. And it is the task of democratic education to "release" the rational potential of the subject so as to make the subject into a rationally autonomous being.

Kant's idea of subjectivity as rational autonomy has had a profound impact on modern educational theory and practice. There are, for example, direct lines from Kant to the work of Piaget and Kohlberg, whose theories of cognitive and moral development build upon Kant's epistemology and moral philosophy, respectively. The idea of rational autonomy is also a guiding principle for liberal education, and plays a central role in discussions about critical thinking as an educational ideal (see, for example, McPeck, 1981; Siegel, 1988; Thayer-Bacon, 2000). Some even argue that rational autonomy is not simply an educational aim, but that it is the one and only aim of all education (for a critical discussion and "deconstruction" of this idea see Biesta & Stams, 2001). Kant's thought has also strongly influenced democratic education, both directly through the idea that the task of democratic education lies in the creation of the rational autonomous person, and indirectly through the idea that education is about the production of rational subjectivity.

Although the Kantian understanding of subjectivity has been very influential, it has also been fiercely criticized, both for its individualism and its rationalism. Thinkers such as Nietzsche, Freud, and Foucault have all in their own way argued that the origin of subjectivity is not to be found in the subject's own rational thinking, but that subjectivity is constituted by forces and processes that are beyond rational control. Habermas has also criticized the individualistic rationalism of Kant, arguing that rationality is not the offspring of individual consciousness, but emerges from the life of communication. In a similar vein, pragmatists like George Herbert Mead and John Dewey have questioned the Kantian framework, both for its individualism and its rationalism. For my discussion, Dewey is the most significant thinker, since his critique of and alternative for Kant's conception of subjectivity is closely connected to questions about education and democracy.

JOHN DEWEY: A SOCIAL CONCEPTION OF THE DEMOCRATIC PERSON

Dewey's conception of subjectivity is, in a sense, as far away from the Kantian approach as possible. While for Kant, everything begins with the thinking activity of the rational being—Kant literally writes that the "I think" (Ich denke) is the "highest point to which we must ascribe all employment of the understanding" (Kant, 1929, B134)—Dewey holds that mind is not "an original datum" but that it represents "something
acquired” (Dewey, 1980, p.60). It is “an offspring of the life of association, intercourse, transmission, and accumulation rather than a ready-made antecedent cause of these things” (1980, pp.60–61). This is Dewey’s self-confessed Copernican Revolution in which “(t)he old center was mind” and the “new center is indefinite interactions” (Dewey, 1984b, p.232). Against the “false psychology of original individual consciousness” (Dewey, 1983, p.62), Dewey posits human beings as “acculturated organisms” (Dewey, 1988, p.15), that is living organisms who, through their interaction with a social medium form their habits, including the habits of thought and reflection.

The interaction with a social medium is not a one-way process in which newcomers simply take in the existing meanings and patterns of action of the group or culture they are part of. Interaction is participation, and participation is central to Dewey’s understanding of communication. For Dewey, communication is not the transfer of meaning from a sender to a receiver. It is a process of making something in common “in at least two different centers of behavior” (Dewey, 1958, p.178); it is “the establishment of cooperation in an activity in which there are partners, and in which the activity of each is modified and regulated by partnership” (p.179). Communication, therefore, is a thoroughly practical process (Biesta, 1994) in which patterns of action are formed and transformed, in which meanings are shared, recreated, and reconstructed and through which individuals grow, change, and transform.

Dewey, of course, does not want to deny that human beings have the capacity for thought and reflection, and that in this respect they are rational beings. What he does want to challenge is the whole philosophical tradition in which it is assumed that this capacity is an innate endowment. “Intelligence and meaning,” as he writes in Experience and Nature “are natural consequences of the peculiar form which interaction sometimes assumes in the case of human beings” (Dewey, 1958, p.180). The “actuality of mind,” as he writes elsewhere, “is dependent upon the education which social conditions set” (Dewey, 1954, p.209). The ability to think and reflect—to which Dewey refers as “intelligence”—can therefore be said to have a social origin, which is one way in which it can be argued that Dewey holds a social conception of subjectivity.

In a more general sense, we can say that for Dewey we only become who we are through our participation in a social medium. This is what Dewey has in mind when he writes that education is a “social function, securing direction and development in the immature through their participation in the life of the group to which they belong” (Dewey, 1966, p.81). If this is so, then there are important educational questions to be asked about the “quality” of the life in which the immature (Dewey’s term) or new-
comers (my term) participate and learn. This is precisely the point Dewey makes in *Democracy and Education* when he argues that a social group in which there are many different interests and in which there is full and free interplay with "other forms of association" is to be preferred over a social group which is isolated from other groups and which is only held together by a limited number of interests. In the former kind of association there are many opportunities for individuals to develop and grow, while in the latter, these opportunities are limited and restricted. The education such a society gives, Dewey writes, is "partial and distorted" (Dewey, 1966, p.83). A group or society, on the other hand, in which many interests are shared and in which there is "free and full interplay with other forms of association" (p.83) secures a "liberation of powers" (p.87). The "widening of the area of shared concerns," and the "liberation of a greater diversity of personal capacities" are precisely what characterizes a "democratically constituted society."

It is important to see that Dewey is not simply saying that a more plural society provides more opportunities for individuals to choose from in developing their powers and capacities. Although this line of thinking is part of Dewey's social conception of subjectivity, Dewey does not conceive of the relationship between society and individuals as a one-way process in which individuals are shaped by society. For Dewey, the point is not the mere existence of different interests. What is crucial is the extent to which different interests are *consciously shared*, that is, the extent to which individuals are aware of the fact that their actions are part of the wider "social fabric" so that, each individual "has to refer his own action to that of others, and to consider the action of others to give point and direction to his own" (p.87). This, then, adds a further dimension to Dewey's social conception of subjectivity, in that he argues that to be a subject or, as he sometimes calls it, an "individualized self" (Dewey, 1954, p.150), also means to take part in shaping the contexts which in turn shape individuality (see Festenstein, 1997, p.70). The idea of the subject as a shaper of the conditions that shape one’s subjectivity, is the central idea in Dewey’s notion of the democratic person.

The kind of intelligence that is at stake in the shaping of the conditions that shape one’s subjectivity is *social* intelligence. Social intelligence is both a requirement for and the outcome of participation in intelligent co-operation. As Carr and Hartnett put it:

By participating in this process, individuals develop those intellectual dispositions which allow them to reconstruct themselves
and their social institutions in ways which are conducive to the realization of their freedom and to the reshaping of their society. (Carr & Hartnett, 1996, p.59).

For Dewey this is what democracy is about, because in a democracy "all those who are affected by social institutions (...) have a share in producing and managing them. The two facts that each one is influenced in what he does and enjoys and in what he becomes by the institutions under which he lives, and that therefore he shall have, in a democracy, a voice in shaping them, are the passive and active side of the same fact." (Dewey 1987b, p.218).

For Dewey there is an intimate connection between democracy and education. This is first of all because he holds that democracy is that form of social interaction which best facilitates and supports "the liberation of human capacities for their full development" (Festenstein, 1997, p.72). It is secondly because we become a democratic person, that is a person with social intelligence, through our participation in democratic life—which shows how Dewey's point of view exemplifies the idea of education through democracy. Along both lines, we can see how Dewey's conception of the democratic person overcomes the individualism of the Kantian approach. In his views about democratic education Dewey does remain caught, however, in an instrumentalistic approach, in that he sees participation in democracy as the way in which the socially intelligent person is created or produced. In this respect, we could even say that there is a trace of individualism in his views about democratic education, since for Dewey the democratic person is an individual with certain "attributes" or "qualities" (i.e., social intelligence) and the purpose of democratic education is to engender this individual. It is precisely at this point that Hannah Arendt's conception of the democratic person offers a fundamentally different perspective.

HANNAH ARENDT: A POLITICAL CONCEPTION OF THE DEMOCRATIC PERSON

Hannah Arendt's conception of subjectivity is rooted in her understanding of the vita activa, the active human life. Arendt's philosophy centers around an understanding of human beings as active beings, as beings whose humanity is not simply defined by their capacity to think and reflect, but where what it means to be human has everything to do with what one does. In this respect, Arendt's philosophy is an antidote to the mainstream of Western philosophy in which the question of what it
means to be human has always been answered in terms of reflection, thinking, rationality, and contemplation.

Arendt distinguishes between three “modalities” of the active life: labor, work, and action. Labor is the activity that corresponds to the biological processes of the human body. It stems from the necessity to maintain life and is exclusively focused on the maintenance of life. It does so in endless repetition: “One must eat in order to labor and must labor in order to eat” (Arendt 1958, p.143). Work, on the other hand, has to do with the ways in which human beings actively change their environment. It has to do with production and creation and hence with “instrumentality.” Work brings an artificial world of things into existence, distinctly different from all natural surroundings. It is concerned with making and therefore “entirely determined by the categories of means and end” (p.143). While labor and work are concerned with the interaction with our environment, action is defined as the activity “that goes on directly between men[sic],” without “the intermediary of things or matter” (p.7). Action thus has to do with the domain of the social. But what does it precisely mean to act? What does Arendt mean by “action” and how is “action” different from labor and work?

To act first of all means to take initiative, to begin something new, to bring something new into the world. Arendt characterizes the human being as an initium, a “beginning and a beginner” (Arendt 1977, p.170; emph. added). She argues that what makes each of us unique is not the fact that we have a body and need to labor to maintain our body, nor the fact that through work we change the environment we live in. What makes each of us unique is our potential to do something that has not been done before. This is why Arendt writes that every act is in a sense a miracle, “something which could not be expected” (p.170). Arendt likens action to the fact of birth, since with each birth something “uniquely new” comes into the world (see Arendt 1958, p.178). But it is not only when human beings are born that something new comes into the world. It happens all the time. We continuously bring new beginnings into the world through what we do and say. This is of course not to deny the role of routine and repetition in our everyday lives. But it is to acknowledge that to a very large extent, we indeed do and say things that have not been done or said before—not in the least for the simple reason that they have not been done or said before by us: the child who utters her first words, or the student who suddenly understands a mathematical principle. Although action is about invention and creation, we shouldn’t think of it as something exceptional or spectacular. Action can be very mundane. Action thus ranges from the words and deeds that are widely visible, to the things that are almost (but not totally; this is explained below)
hidden from view. It ranges from scientific breakthroughs and inventions to the ways in which we care for others; it ranges from being a political leader to casting one’s vote—or, for that matter, refusing to vote; it ranges from saying “yes” to saying “no.” Through all these words and deeds we begin, we bring something new into the world, and, most importantly, we bring ourselves into the world. “With word and deed,” Arendt writes, “we insert ourselves into the human world and this insertion is like a second birth” (pp.176-177).

Against this background, we can see that for Arendt the question of subjectivity is the question of action. To be a subject—and the emphasis on “being” is crucial here—means to act, that is, to begin and to bring one’s beginnings into the world. And it is through action—and not through labor and work—that our “distinct uniqueness,” that which makes me different from you, is revealed.

It is crucial to see, however, that “beginning” is only half of what action is about. Although it is true that we reveal our distinct uniqueness through what we do and say, we should not think of this as a process through which we disclose some kind of pre-existing identity. Arendt writes “that nobody knows whom he reveals when he discloses himself in deed or word” (p.180). Everything depends—and this point is absolutely crucial for an adequate understanding of Arendt’s notion of action—on how others will respond to our initiatives. This is why Arendt writes that the agent is not an author or a producer, but a subject in the twofold sense of the word, namely one who began an action and the one who suffers from, who is subjected to its consequences (p.184).

The basic idea of Arendt’s understanding of action is therefore very simple: we cannot act in isolation. If I speak but no one listens, we might as well say that I have not spoken. If I write a paper and no one reads it, we might as well say that it has not been written. My speaking and writing only exist if they are taken up by others. In order to act, in order, therefore, to be someone, to be a subject, we need others who respond to our beginnings. If I were to begin something, but no one would respond, nothing would follow from my initiative and, as a result, my beginnings would not come into the world. I would not come into the world. I would not be a subject. But if I begin something and others do take up my beginnings, I do come into the world, and in precisely this moment I am someone, I am a subject.

The problem is, however, that others respond to our initiatives in ways that are not predictable. As Arendt reminds us, we act upon beings “who are capable of their own actions” (p.190). Although this always frustrates our beginnings, Arendt emphasizes again and again that this frustration is the very condition that makes our disclosure, our action and hence our
subjectivity possible. The “impossibility to remain unique masters of what [we] do” is at the very same time the condition—and the only condition—under which our beginnings can come into the world (p.220). We can of course try to control the ways in which others respond to our beginnings—and Arendt acknowledges that it is tempting to do so. But if we were to do so, we would deprive other human beings of their opportunities to begin, we would deprive them of their opportunities to come into the world. We would deprive them of their opportunity to act, and hence of their opportunity to be a subject.

Teachers are well aware of this predicament. On the one hand, it is their task to help their students to come to see and understand things in a particular way—not any way will do. For this, they want to have control over the ways in which their students take up their teachings. Yet on the other hand, students are not simply the empty vessels waiting to be filled with the teacher’s wisdom. They are human beings with their own capacities, their own potential, their own ideas, and their own dreams. They are all unique beginners in their own right, and it is also the teacher’s responsibility to allow students to develop their talents and express themselves in their own, unique ways—which is precisely why Arendt argues that we should not strike from the hands of the next generation “their chance of undertaking something new, something unforeseen by us” (Arendt 1977, p. 186).

Action is never possible in isolation. Arendt even goes so far to argue that “to be isolated is to be deprived of the capacity to act” (p.188). Action is not something we can do on our own. In order to be able to act and hence to be a subject, we need others—others who respond to our initiatives and take up our beginnings. This also means, however, that action is never possible without plurality. As soon as we erase plurality— as soon as we erase the otherness of others by attempting to control how they respond to our initiatives—we deprive others of their actions, and as a result we deprive ourselves of our possibility to act, and hence to be a subject. This is why Arendt concludes that “plurality is the condition of human action” (p.188).

There is one final observation to make about Arendt’s ideas, which is that Arendt’s understanding of action does not so much lead to the question as to what action actually is or what it looks like. In a sense, action is nothing special because everything we say and do can become action. But whether our beginnings do indeed become action, crucially depends on how others respond to them. It depends on whether others will take up our beginnings in such a way that they can bring their beginnings into the world as well. The key question is therefore not what action looks like. The key question is how action is possible.
Several conclusions follow from Arendt's ideas. The most important one for our discussion is that Arendt provides us with a conception of subjectivity in which subjectivity is no longer seen as an attribute of individuals, but is understood as a *quality of human action*—which, from Arendt's point of view, is always interaction. Arendt shows us that subjectivity only exists *in action*—"neither before nor after" (Arendt 1977, p.153). This is why she suggests that we should understand action and subjectivity through the lens of the performing arts. The main reason for this is that performing artists need an audience to show their "virtuosity" (Arendt), "just as acting men [sic] need the presence of others before whom they can appear" (p.154). The difference between performing arts and creative arts is, of course, not that creative arts—the arts of "making"—can do without an audience. The crucial point is that the work of art of the performing artist only exists *in* the performance. The script for a play may have endurance just as a painting; but it is only in the performance of the play that the play as a work of art exists. Similarly, individuals may have democratic knowledge, skills, and dispositions; but it is only in action—which means action which is taken up by others in unpredictable and uncontrollable ways—that the individual can be a democratic subject.

While we could refer to Arendt's position as a social conception of subjectivity—Arendt argues, after all, that we cannot be a subject in isolation—I prefer to call it a *political* conception. The main reason for this is that Arendt holds that *my* subjectivity is only possible in the situation in which others can be subjects as well. Not any social situation will therefore do. In those situations in which we try to control the responses of others or deprive others of the opportunity to begin, we cannot come into the world either; our subjectivity is not a possibility. Arendt relates subjectivity, in other words, to the *life of the polis*, the public sphere where we live—and have to live—with others who are not like us. It is here that we can see the link between Arendt's political conception of subjectivity and the idea of democracy, in that democracy can precisely be understood as the situation in which *everyone* has the opportunity to be a subject, in which everyone has the opportunity to act and, through their actions, bring their beginnings and initiatives into the world of difference and plurality (see Säfström & Biesta, 2001).

**EDUCATION AND THE DEMOCRATIC PERSON**

Kant's conception of the democratic subject is clearly individualistic. He locates subjectivity in the individual's capacity for rational thinking. This is, of course, not unimportant since to be a subject in a democratic soci-
ety definitely involves the ability for critical and independent judgement. Although education plays an important role in Kant's approach, it is only to bring about rational powers that are already assumed to be there in some form or other. Education is supposed to support a process of the rational development of the individual. Moreover, Kant assumes that the rational powers of all individuals are basically the same. Rationality is not historically or socially contingent but ultimately universal. All individuals can, in principle, reach the state of enlightenment, the situation in which they can think for themselves. As long as they have not reached this stage, their development is not yet complete. Kant's conception of subjectivity is therefore also individualistic in its educational implications, because the task he sets for education is one that is aimed at the isolated individual. Kant provides, in other words, a rationale for a form of democratic education that focuses on the development of the individual's knowledge, skills, and dispositions—which is characteristic of what I have referred to as "education for democracy." The question Kant does not raise, is the one about the social, material, and political conditions for subjectivity.

Dewey's social conception of the democratic person clearly brings these contextual dimensions into view. He acknowledges that we only become who we are through participation in a social medium and that to be a democratic subject or an "individualized self" means that we participate in the conditions that shape our individuality. Moreover, Dewey acknowledges that the intelligence we need for participation in social life is not a natural endowment, but is the outcome of our very participation in social interaction. We acquire social intelligence through our participation in democratic forms of co-operation. This places education in a different relationship to democracy, because with Dewey we can argue that education needs to provide opportunities for the formation of social intelligence, which means that education itself must be democratically organized. Dewey's conception of the democratic person thus provides a rationale for a form of democratic education that focuses on participation in democratic life as the way in which the democratic person is created—an approach characteristic of what I have called "education through democracy." In his views about democratic education, however, Dewey remains bound to an instrumentalistic and individualistic view, in that he sees participation in democratic life as the way in which the democratic person is created or engendered and also in that he sees the democratic subject as an individual with particular attributes or qualities, most notably the quality of "social intelligence."

Arendt's political conception of the democratic person introduces a different way of understanding human subjectivity. For Arendt, subjectiv-
ity is not defined by the attributes of an individual but is understood as a quality of human interaction. Arendt radically situates our subjectivity in action—neither before, nor after. We are a subject in those situations in which our initiatives are taken up by others in such a way that the opportunities for others to bring their initiatives into the world are not obstructed. This line of thinking, as I will suggest in the next section, provides a rationale for an approach to democratic education that is distinctively different from the views that follow from a Kantian or Deweyan conception of the democratic person.

THREE QUESTIONS FOR DEMOCRATIC EDUCATION

By locating subjectivity in the sphere of human interaction instead of "inside" the individual, Arendt allows us to think differently about the relationship between education and democracy. Her political conception of democratic subjectivity suggests a new set of questions for democratic education. While traditional educational strategies focus on the question how to prepare children and newcomers for their future participation in democracy, Arendt urges us to get away from understanding education as the domain of preparation for something that will come later. Following Arendt, we can say that education should not be seen as a space of preparation, but should be conceived as a space where individuals can act, where they can bring their beginnings into the world, and hence can be subjects. The educational question is therefore no longer that of how to engender or "produce" democratic individuals. The key educational question is how individuals can be subjects, keeping in mind that we cannot continuously be a subject, since we can only be a subject in action, that is, in our being with others (see Biesta, 2001; 2004c).

From the point of view of democratic education, this means that the first question to ask about schools and other educational institutions is not how they can make students into democratic citizens. The question to ask rather is:

What kind of schools do we need so that children and students can act?

Or, to put it in a way that can be used to examine actual educational practices:

How much action is actually possible in our schools?

We might read this as Dewey's question about the democratic quality of educational institutions. Yet for Dewey and others who argue that the
best education for democracy is education through democracy, the overarch-
ing aim is still to engender or “produce” democratic individuals. For me the issue is not how we can make schools (more) democratic so that children and students will become democratic persons. The question is whether democratic subjectivity is actually possible in schools. The question is, in other words, whether children and students can actually be democratic persons in the school. What we need to ask, therefore, is whether schools can be places where children and students can act—that is, where they can bring their beginnings into a world of plurality and difference in such a way that their beginnings do not obstruct the opportunities for others to bring their beginnings into this world as well.

What would this ask from schools? On the one hand, it requires an educational environment in which students have a real opportunity to begin, to take initiative. It requires an educational environment that is not exclusively focused on the reproduction of the subject matter of the curriculum—an environment focused on filling empty vessels—but one that allows students to respond in their own, unique ways to the learning opportunities provided by the curriculum (see Biesta, 2004b). This also requires a different understanding of the curriculum itself as well, one in which the curriculum is not simply seen as a set of knowledge and skills that needs to be transmitted to the students, but where different curricular areas are explored and utilized for the particular opportunities they provide for students to bring their own unique beginnings into the world. (For example, it requires, that we do not approach language as a set of skills that students simply must acquire, but that we see it is as a human practice in which students can participate and through which they can find new ways of expressing themselves, new ways of bringing themselves into the world.) It further requires educators who show a real interest in the initiatives and beginnings of their students. And it requires an educational system that is not obsessed with outcomes and league tables, but which allows teachers to spend time and effort on finding the delicate balance between the child and the curriculum so that there are indeed real chances for children and students to undertake something new, “something unforeseen by us” (Arendt, 1977, p. 186).

We should not forget, however, that action is not only about beginning; it is also about the ways in which these beginnings are taken up by others who, as Arendt reminds us, are not only capable of their own actions, but who should have the opportunity to act themselves as well. To act, that is to be a democratic person in a world of plurality and difference, is therefore as much about doing and saying and bringing oneself into the world, as it is about listening and waiting, creating spaces for others to begin, and thus creating opportunities for others to be a subject. This means
that a democratic school, a school in which action is possible, is not a child-centered school if, that is, we understand child-centeredness as self-expression without concern for others. Action is anything but self-expression; it is about the insertion of one’s beginnings into the complex social fabric and about the subjection of one’s beginnings to the beginnings of others who are not like us. The Arendtian conception of the democratic person thus calls for an approach to democratic education that is not child-centered but action-centered, one that focuses both on the opportunities for students to begin, and on plurality as the condition under which action is only possible. It thus entails a double educational responsibility: a responsibility for each individual and a responsibility for “the world,” the space of plurality and difference as the condition for democratic subjectivity.

While these suggestions may seem rather general and abstract, they do hint at some of the key conditions under which action might be a possibility in schools. In this respect, they do translate into concrete suggestions about how to make schools into places where action might happen and where individuals can be subjects, just as they indicate what might obstruct such opportunities. Schools that show no interest in what students think and feel, where there is no place for students to take initiatives, where the curriculum is only seen as subject-matter that needs to be put into the minds and bodies of the students, and where the question about the impact of one’s beginnings on the opportunities for others to begin is never raised, are clearly places where it is extremely difficult to act and be a democratic subject. Yet such schools do exist, and young people are surprisingly well aware of the limitations this puts on their ability and the ability of others to come into the world and be a subject. In a recently conducted pilot study on the ways in which young people learn democracy through their participation in a range of different settings and practices (such as the family, the school, leisure, consumption; see Biesta, Lawy, & Kelly, 2005), many young people singled out the school as the environment with the least opportunities for taking initiative, having a say and being heard—the environment with the least opportunities for action and being a subject. One of the students in the study, a 15-year-old boy, expressed a significant discrepancy between school where, as he put it, “you can’t just say what you think” and where “it depends on what you’re talking about” whether your opinion is valued or not, and his mountain board club where he did have the opportunity to take initiative and where he did feel that “adults are hearing my opinion” (see Biesta, 2004d).

This may look like a rather insignificant example, yet it is precisely here, in the routines of everyday life, that the experience of democracy
is "lived" and becomes real. Examples like these show why the question as to how much action is actually possible in school, is such an important question. It also shows that the Arendtian conception of the democratic person does not ask for a curriculum that produces the democratic individual, but instead asks for schools in which democracy—understood as action-in-plurality—is a real possibility. Such schools are not necessarily schools that are "democratic" in the more formal sense, for example, schools with a student parliament or schools based on the idea of democratic deliberation. Deliberation is, after all, only one of the ways in which individuals can act, can be a subject, and can come into the world—and it is not necessarily the way that fits everyone. There is, therefore, no blueprint of what a democratic school might look like, nor is there a guarantee that what works at one point in time in one situation will also make action possible in other times and places. The question as to how much action is possible in schools needs to be asked again and again and requires our constant attention.

If we give up the idea that education can produce the democratic individual, and see democratic subjectivity as something that has to be achieved again and again, the question of action and democratic subjectivity is no longer one that is only relevant for schools: it extends to society at large and becomes a lifelong process. From the point of view of democratic education, we should therefore not only ask how much action is possible in schools. We should also ask:

\textit{What kind of society do we need so that people can act?}

Again, this question can also be phrased as a question for investigation into the democratic condition of a society:

\textit{How much action is actually possible in society?}

Both Dewey and Arendt can help us to see that there is no point in blaming individuals for so-called anti-social or non-democratic behavior, because individuals are always individuals-in-context. What Arendt can help us to see, is that we also shouldn't expect that the problem can be solved by giving individuals a "proper" democratic education. Individuals do matter, but in a society or social setting in which individuals are not allowed to act—or in which only certain groups are allowed to act—we cannot expect that everyone will still behave in a "proper," democratic manner. What the Arendtian conception of the democratic person brings into view, therefore, is that we cannot simply blame education for the failure of democracy. The only way to improve the democratic quality of soci-
ety is by making society more democratic, that is, by providing more opportunities for action—which is always action in a world of plurality and difference.

It may seem that the Arendtian emphasis on action implies that there is nothing left for educators to do. I do not think that this conclusion is correct. What my explorations do suggest, however, is a different way to understand the relationship between learning, subjectivity, and democracy. As I have shown, traditional approaches to democratic education ask how individuals can learn to become a democratic person. If democratic subjectivity only exists in action, if it is about coming into the world through the ways in which others respond to and take up our new beginnings, then the question of learning is not about how to become a subject, but about learning from being and having been a subject. The third question for democratic education suggested by the Arendtian point of view, is therefore as follows:

What can be learnt from being/having been a subject?

The learning at stake here is learning from and learning about what it means to act, to come into the world, to confront otherness and difference in relation to one's own beginnings. To understand what it means to be a subject also involves learning from those situations in which one has not been able to come into the world, in which one has experienced for oneself what it means not to be able to act. Such an experience of frustration may, after all, be far more significant and have a much deeper impact than the experience of successful action. The role of schools and educators is therefore not only that of creating opportunities for action—both by allowing individuals to begin and take initiative and by keeping into existence a space of plurality and difference in which action is only possible. Schools and educators also have an important role to play in inviting and supporting reflection on those situations in which action was possible and, perhaps even more importantly, those situations in which action was not possible. This might foster an understanding of the fragile personal, inter-personal, and structural conditions under which human beings can act and can be a subject. It might foster an understanding of the fragile conditions under which everyone can be a subject and hence democracy can become a reality.

By asking these three questions—How much action is possible in our schools? How much action is possible in our society? What can be learnt from being/having been a subject?—I propose to shift our thinking about democratic education away from an approach which puts the burden on individuals to behave democratically and on schools to create
democratic individuals, towards an approach that conceives of democracy as a situation in which all individuals can be subjects, in which they can all act in the Arendtian sense, in which they can all come "into the world." This, as I have tried to argue, does not mean that we all can simply do what we want. The crucial insight Arendt provides—an insight that is of immense importance for the "world of difference" (Säfström & Biesta, 2001) we live in today—is that we can only be a subject in a world we share with others who are not like us and who are capable of their own actions. To be a subject, to "come into the world," is only possible if our beginnings are taken up by others in unprecedented, unpredictable, and uncontrollable ways. In this sense, being a subject has indeed a dimension of being subjected to what is unpredictable, different, and other. Yet this is the paradoxical condition under which subjectivity can appear and under which democracy can become possible.

CONCLUSION

Ever since the Enlightenment, there has been a strong tendency in educational theory and educational practice to think of education as the production of a subject with particular qualities, most notably the quality of rationality. This way of thinking has deeply influenced the theory and practice of democratic education and has led, as I have shown in this article, to an approach that is both instrumentalistic and individualistic. In this article, I have shown that the way in which we understand and practice democratic education has everything to do with our conception of the democratic person. I have presented three different answers to the question as to what it means to be a democratic person: an individualistic, a social, and a political conception of democratic subjectivity. I have shown that each provides a different rationale for democratic education. While the individualistic and the social conception are closely connected to ideas about democratic education as the production of the democratic individual (either by educational strategies directed at this individual, or by creating opportunities for individuals to participate in democratic life), I have shown that there is a different way to articulate what it means to be a democratic subject and I have shown that this different, political conception of democratic subjectivity suggests a different set of questions for democratic education and hints at different educational practices.5

Such an approach no longer focuses on the production of democratic individuals and no longer thinks of itself as having to prepare individuals for future democratic action. What schools can do—or at least should try to do—is to make action possible, and hence create conditions for children and students to be subjects, to experience what it is and means to be
a subject. The learning related to this is not something that comes before democratic subjectivity, it is not a kind of learning that produces democratic citizens. The learning that is at stake follows from having been or, as I have also suggested, from having not been a subject. It is learning about the fragile conditions under which action and subjectivity are possible—my subjectivity as much as the subjectivity of all others. Because subjectivity is no longer something that only occurs or is created in schools, the approach to democratic education that follows from my considerations puts the question about the responsibility for democratic education back where it actually belongs, namely, in society at large. It is an illusion to think that schools alone can produce democratic citizens. In so far as action and subjectivity are possible in schools and society, schools can perform the more modest and more realistic task of helping children and students to learn about and reflect upon the fragile conditions under which all people can act, under which all people can be a subject. A society in which individuals are not able or not allowed to act, cannot expect from its schools to produce its democratic citizens for it. The ultimate task for democratic education therefore lies in society itself, and not in its educational institutions. Schools can neither create nor save democracy—they can only support societies in which action and subjectivity are real possibilities.

Notes

1 In a recent article, Westheimer and Kahne (2004) have shown how different programs for democratic education are informed by different ideas about good citizenship. Their overall approach and the distinction they introduce between three kinds of citizens—the personally responsible citizen, the participatory citizen, and the justice-oriented citizen—bear an interesting resemblance to the ideas that I present in this article. I do believe, however, that their analysis is based on a conception of democratic education that focuses on the ways in which the democratic person can be “produced” or engendered.

2 The meaning of the notion of “subjectivity” may not be as straightforward and clear-cut in the English speaking world as it is for those familiar with the Continental (particularly German) educational tradition. In the latter tradition, “subjectivity” refers to the individual as a person who is able to act, who is in control of his or her own life, and who is able to take responsibility for his or her own deeds and actions. This may come close to what in the English tradition is sometimes referred to as “agency,” yet my reason for using “subjectivity” rather than “agency” has to do with the fact that the latter concept derives its meaning mainly from the structure-agency problem in sociology, that is, the question whether an adequate explanation of social action should begin with structures or with agents. A particular problem for English readers might be that “subjectivity” has the connotation of being a subject of a monarchy and hence of being subjected to the monarch. Such a reading seems to suggest that subjectivity is about anything but
agency. This, of course, is not what I have in mind, although I will argue that there is a sense in which being a subject also means being subjected (namely, being subjected to the responses of others in the social field). Bartels (1993), in his history of the idea of subjectivity in philosophical discourse, shows that over the past centuries, the meaning of the notion of “subjectivity” has changed from “being subjected to” to being a subject or origin of one’s own actions.

3 It is important to keep in mind that for Kant, “autonomy” does not simply mean something like “independence.” Kant uses autonomy in its most literal sense, in that to be a subject—to be a free subject, to be a moral subject—means to be one’s own moral lawgiver (autos: self; nomos: law). This is not to say that rational beings can simply invent their own moral universe. Moral action, according to Kant, is bound by the categorical imperative, by the moral duty for all rational beings. Yet the categorical imperative is not an external cause that simply forces us to act morally. Kant assumes that rational beings as rational beings will freely choose the categorical imperative, they will freely choose the universal moral law. In this respect, they are themselves both the source of and subjected to the moral law. This is expressed in the idea that “the will of any rational being [is] a universally legislative will” (Kant quoted in Körner 1984 p.149). This idea of rational autonomy is not only central to Kant’s moral philosophy, but extends to his understanding of human action more generally (see, for example, Alison, 1983).

4 This way of phrasing the question shows that the approach I advance in this article also has implications for research on democratic education. Instead of asking about the most effective ways to “produce” the democratic individual, the approach presented in this article suggests that research should aim to understand what students learn from the activities and communities in which they participate, both inside and, as I will argue below, outside the school. I am currently engaged in empirical research on young people’s democratic learning in everyday life situations, focusing on young people’s opportunities for democratic action and learning in a wide range of different contexts and settings (see www.gertbiesta.com).

5 The distinction between the three conceptions of democratic subjectivity cannot only be used, as I do in this paper, to articulate a different approach to democratic education. It can also be used as an analytical framework for examining different practices of democratic education (see, for a similar approach, Westheimer & Kahne, 2004).

References


GERT BIESTA is Professor of Educational Theory and Director of Research in the School of Education and Lifelong Learning, University of Exeter, and Visiting Professor for Education and Democratic Citizenship at the Department of Education, Örebro University, Sweden. He conducts theoretical and empirical research on the relationships between education and democracy, with particular attention to the role of communication in education. He takes inspiration from pragmatism and post-structural philosophy. Recent books include *Derrida & Education* (Routledge, 2001, co-edited with Denise Egéa-Kuchne), *Pragmatism and Educational Research* (Rowman & Littlefield, 2003, co-authored with Nicholas C. Burbules), and *Beyond Learning: Democratic Education for a Human Future* (Paradigm Publishers, 2006).
COPYRIGHT INFORMATION

TITLE: Education and the Democratic Person: Towards a Political Conception of
SOURCE: Teachers College Record 109 no3 Mr 2007
PAGE(S): 740-69

The magazine publisher is the copyright holder of this article and it is reproduced with permission. Further reproduction of this article in violation of the copyright is prohibited.