# Poststructural Democratic Education? Assessing the Potentialities of a Non-Individualistic, Non-Instrumental, "Action"-Oriented Democratic Education

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## Abstract

This research is a philosophical study into the potentialities of realising a poststructural democratic education through considering the reflections of educators involved in various "democratic" educational programmes. Utilising the conceptual tools of Biesta (2006), as inspired by Arendt (1998), this study explores what it would entail to create a non-individual, non-instrumental, "action"-oriented democratic education. It seeks to do this motivated by a lacuna of research into the question of translating a poststructural educational theory into practice. The findings reveal that the educational programmes that the educators are involved with resemble poststructural ideas in their pedagogy, and most notably in their educational structures, but the guiding philosophy and overall aims of the programmes appear to endorse more moderate visions of democratic education. In taking this idea further, this study suggests that the enactment of poststructural democratic education demands a social context that too is democratic in the poststructural way envisioned. In this way, it can be said that this research exposes the limitations and challenges of the realisation of such a philosophy where the surrounding climate is not in harmony with its ideals, as it would remain disconnected from the very society it seeks to democratically interact with.

**Keywords:** poststructural; postmodern; democratic education; philosophy of education; Biesta; Arendt; philosophy in practice; pedagogy; structure

## Introduction

In an era of increased standardised testing (Sahlberg 2011), where educational aims are becoming more and more individualised (Biesta 2006), and where schooling is viewed as

a national project to "create" a certain kind of person to "benefit" the state (Robertson 2008), we wanted to explore the possibilities and potentialities of enacting a more "human" and democratic educational philosophy. We were inspired by Biesta's *Beyond Learning: Democratic Education for a Human Future* (2006) that presents a poststructural vision of non-instrumental and non-individualistic education, and were intrigued to carry out a philosophical study on the extent to which it is possible to realise a poststructural democratic education.

Our angle into this study will be to focus on educators who lead and are involved with non-mainstream "democratic" education programmes—programmes outside of the formal education system that promote democracy and citizenship with secondary school-aged youth—in order to understand about the challenges and possibilities of the enactment of their educational vision. The participants all work in non-mainstream programmes, including an autonomous learning college for youth, a youth empowerment organisation, and an innovative learner-centred school, among others; the programmes are located in the UK, France, USA, Senegal, Haiti and Nicaragua. Further details for the participants, and the programmes they work in, are described in Table 1. We reasoned that educators' reflections would be most appropriate in the case of educational programmes operating outside of national education systems as they allow for more pedagogically ambitious and experimental ideas.

This paper will first explore the literature on democratic education and the various schools of thought to make it possible to situate the emergence of a poststructural critique. We have divided these "schools of thought" into three sections: classical, moderate, and radical conceptualisations of democratic education. This will pave the way for the delineation of Biesta's (2006) conceptual framework, inspired by Arendt. Following this we will outline our methodology to explain the ways in which we approached and framed the research design, detailing the data collection and analysis, as well as the considerations of the ethics and limitations of the study. Finally, the presentation of our findings from the interviews will be discussed with reference to Biesta (2006).

## Literature Review

### Classical Democratic Education

In the preface to *Democracy and Education* (1966) by arguably one of the founding fathers of democratic education, John Dewey outlines that his approach is "to detect and state the ideas implied in a democratic society and to apply these ideas to the problems of the enterprise of education" (Dewey 1966, iii).

Dewey summarises that education is a continuous reconstruction of experience, an idea that is different from "education as preparation for a remote future … as external formation, and as recapitulation of the past" (Dewey 1966, 80). This is central to

Dewey's idea that democracy "has to be constantly discovered, and rediscovered, remade and reorganised" (Dewey 1987 [1937] cited in Biesta 2006, 182).

Another aspect that features in Dewey's vision of democratic education is the importance of the human element; for Dewey, we only become who we are through our participation in a social medium. Crucially, he views the democratic educational experience as a fundamentally *social* process consisting of interdependent learning. His conceptualisation of democratic education is anti-individualistic in the sense that the individual is meaningful only when seen as an inextricable part of their society. His work encourages the idea of the creation of intersubjective worlds, which happens when individuals act together in order to achieve a common goal, where they are required to adjust their individual approaches, perspectives, and patterns of actions in such a way that a coordinated response becomes possible (Dewey 1966).

An idea that follows this is Dewey's understanding of social intelligence, the kind of intelligence that in practice is the shaping of the conditions that mould one's subjectivity (Dewey 1966, 87). Social intelligence is what is developed through participation, but it is also what is needed to participate. Democratic education consists of 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" (Dewey 1958, 179; emphasis added). Indeed, the point is not that people have different interests, but that 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" (Biesta 2006, 131). In Dewey's idea of democratic education *through* democracy, we become a democratic person, a person with social intelligence, through our participation in democratic life (Biesta 2006, 131).

**Moderate Revisions of Democratic Education**

There is an extensive group of educators who have contributed to the canon of democratic theories of education, particularly in contemporary literature. These thinkers have concentrated on the social purposes of democratic education, whereby the "aim" of democratic education is an engaged and active citizenry. Within this school of thought, "educational vision" is interrelated with "social vision." In Bernard Trafford's article, "Democratic Schools: Towards a Definition" (2008), he discusses these contributions and argues how for him, the democratic view is less concerned with balancing power dynamics and more interested in the creation of a climate and ethos in which people can genuinely participate. Indeed, Trafford contends that participation lies at the heart of democratic practice (2008, 411). He highlights the importance of the "feel," described by him as the way people live their lives within the institution, which is the direct result of the "ethos" (2008, 414). Inman and Burke (2002) contribute that "treating pupils with respect" is one of the most vital elements in the cultivation of a democratic ethos. They maintain that if children are treated as intelligent beings who are capable of developing and exchanging ideas, they will respond in kind (2002, 49). Their study on the characteristics of leaders of democratic schools (Inman and Burke 2002) reveals the

following as important: the ability to take risks and to be able to live with uncertainty, the ability to facilitate others to take leadership and power, to value staff as well as children, to be inclusive, to be at ease with making mistakes, and, to be self-reflective and analytical (Inman and Burke 2002, 35).

Daniel Schugurensky's work similarly encourages the creation and functioning of true democratic spaces that allow people to *learn democracy by doing it* (Schugurensky 2006, 180). Schugurensky's work also provides the important reminder that democratic education does not mean tokenistic democratic activities or inauthentic consultations and meetings. In line with the findings from his extensive fieldwork, he discusses the associational space known as participatory democracy (Schugurensky 2003). For Schugurensky, following Pateman (1970), participatory democratic models are not only conducive to more transparent, efficient, equitable and democratic ways of education, but also provide a "privileged" learning site for understanding the competencies and values of democratic citizenship (Schugurensky 2003). Pateman's theory of participatory democracy is built around the central assertion that individuals and their institutions cannot be considered in isolation from one another (Pateman 1970, 42). She argues that these spheres need to be created in such a way that they nurture socialisation (referred to by her as "social training") for the development of individual attitudes and psychological qualities that are necessary for good quality participation and the cultivation of a democratic character (Pateman 1970, 42).

Additionally, a central point in Pateman's (1970) theory is that once the participatory system is established, it becomes self-sustaining "through the educative impact of the participatory process" (Pateman 1970, 42). Hence, in a virtuous circle, the more the individual citizen participates, the better she or he is able to participate (Pateman 1970, 25). Indeed, Schugurensky notes that "the more democratic the enabling structures that nurture the deliberation process, the more significant the democratic learning will be" (Schugurensky 2006, 180).

**Radical Democratic Education**

Educational theorist-activists such as Paulo Freire approach democratic education from a radical and critical perspective that looks through the lens of power dynamics. Henry Giroux, for example, describes how critical pedagogy strives to be discerning and attentive to those places and practices in which social agency has been denied and produced (Giroux 2011, 3). He discusses his resistance towards an educational paradigm where young people are reduced to "cheerful robots" (Giroux 2011, 3). On a similar note, in *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1996), Freire distinguishes between the "banking model of education" and emancipatory education: for him, the banking model assumes a dichotomy between human beings and the world, in the way that a person is "merely *in* the world, not *with* the world or with others" (Freire 1996, 56). Poignantly, Freire draws on Erich Fromm's idea that the "necrophilous" person loves all that does not grow and all that is mechanical, comparing the treatment of students as objects or instruments to a

"necrophilous" drive to transform the organic into the inorganic (Freire 1996, 58). Thus, in his model of critical democratic education, teachers and students are both subjects, co-creators of knowledge; educators must be partners of the students in their relations with them (Freire 1996, 56). Similarly, within the current "decolonising" movement in education, Leibowitz and Bozalek (2016) argue that there is a reciprocal relationship between all scholarly activities, using Nancy Fraser's work to advocate for a critical social justice pedagogy and a "pedagogy of discomfort." Zembylas (2018) too advocates for a "pedagogy of discomfort" within the context of arguments to decolonise education, but importantly argues that such efforts must extend beyond pedagogic terms within schools and toward disrupting broader material and discursive regimes of race and racism. Here, critical co-subjectivity in non-mainstream education programmes offers transformative possibilities through democratic and decolonised education.

For Freire, a preoccupation with the content of dialogue is a preoccupation with the content of education (Freire 1996, 74). Crucially, Stanley Aronowitz's words denote a significant feature of Freire's pedagogy: "Freire's work has suffered the misreadings of well-meaning educators who have interpreted his work as a 'brilliant methodology'" (Freire et al. 2001, 8). This can be read as a poststructural sensitivity to localities and chimes harmoniously with Freire's disdain for educational "prescriptions" that are far removed from educational "praxis" in the field.

Gert Biesta's *Beyond Learning: Democratic Education for a Human Future* (2006) critiques democratic education from a poststructural lens; he conceptualises a non-individualistic and non-instrumentalist vision of democratic education. He contends that education is an intervention motivated by the idea of making life more rounded, and more human (Biesta 2006, 2). Biesta critiques Freire's "idea(l)" of rational autonomy, contending that this marker of what it means to be human is exclusive, leaving "all those who were considered to be not or not-yet rational, including children, in a difficult position" (Biesta 2006, 4). Kester (2017) similarly notes how critical pedagogy privileges some cultures of learning and forms of communication based on rationality, disadvantaging others that can be described as "embodied, circular, reflective, and indirect (supposedly non-rational) orientations" (2016, 13). For Biesta, education becomes an instrument when it becomes the *production* of the democratic person (Biesta 2006, 120; our emphasis). He critiques an education that focuses on the *preparation of individuals*—either by equipping them with the "right" set of knowledge, skills, and dispositions or by nurturing certain qualities of a pre-identified democratic personality in them. For Biesta (2006), such approaches conceive of democracy *as a problem for education*, a problem that is "given" to educators, that is defined elsewhere (2006, 126). He argues that this leaves educational research chiefly with the task of bettering educational techniques and strategies, rather than contributing to a critical discussion about the aims and ends of education (Biesta 2006, 74). Biesta accuses Dewey, as well as Pateman, of instrumentalist educational views. Quoting Pateman, he critiques, "the assumption is that the experience of participation indeed 'will develop and foster the

democratic personality'" (Pateman 1970, 64 cited in Biesta 2006, 125). He extends a similar critique to Dewey, in how Dewey sees participation in democracy as the way in which the socially intelligent person is created or produced (Biesta 2006, 132). Moreover, he points to traces of individualism in Dewey's views about democratic education, since for him the democratic person is an individual with certain "attributes" or "qualities" (e.g. social intelligence), and the purpose of democratic education is to create this person.

Biesta's (2006) work demarcates him from the more moderate revisions of democratic education as he is not concerned with philosophising about a "vision of society," but rather about radically rethinking educational interactions. He seeks a new way of looking at human subjectivity, as a question about how the subject as a unique singular being—as some*one*—comes into presence (2006, 46). This allows us to focus on the "uniqueness and singularity of the event of *coming into presence* without having to explain 'what' was there before 'it' came into presence" (Biesta 2006, 46; emphasis in original). Biesta argues that we should not approach education from the point of view of an educator trying to produce or release something; instead he argues that one should focus on the ways in which the new beginning of each and every individual can come "into presence" (2006, 9). It is precisely here that Biesta draws on Hannah Arendt's work to develop a different understanding of democratic subjectivity. For Arendt, subjectivity is not defined by the attributes of an individual but is understood as a quality of human interaction. Her views offer a poststructural way of looking at the subject; she radically situates our subjectivity *in* action—neither before, nor after (Biesta 2006, 137).

Crucially, in order to pursue our own "beginnings" we always have to rely on the actions of other beginners; action, as distinguished from fabrication, is therefore never possible in isolation (Biesta 2006, 85). Arendt illustrates how it is the impossibility to remain unique masters of what one does that is precisely the only condition under which our "beginnings" can come into the world (Arendt 1998, 220). If we are to try and control this, we would be making other human beings instruments for achieving our own purposes (Biesta 2006, 134). Biesta stresses that education perceived in this way cannot be understood in a technical manner because "there is no technology that will produce unique, singular beings" (2006, 115).

## Conceptual Framework

Inspired by Arendt, Biesta calls for an approach to democratic education that is "action-centred" (2006, 139), one that focuses *both* on the opportunities for students to begin and on plurality as the only condition under which such action is possible. The educational question thus becomes, how can we create spaces for Arendtian and Biestian action—the development of subjectivity through interactions with others—for non-individualistic and non-instrumentalist democratic education to take place?

Biesta (2006) outlines key concepts that form his vision. First is the idea that education only begins when the learner is willing to take a risk. For him, to engage in learning

always entails the risk that learning might have an impact on the learner, that learning might change the person (2006, 25). Another one of the constituents of the educational relationship is therefore trust "without ground," or "trust about what is incalculable" (Biesta 2006, 25). Biesta views education as a process that is a form of "transcendental violence"—an idea borrowed from Derrida—in that it interferes with the sovereignty of the subject by asking difficult questions and creating difficult encounters (2006, 28). This, however, does not imply that education should be violent, but stands instead as a recognition that educators are always interfering in the lives of students (2006, 28). Learning understood in this way is the activity of responding to "what is unfamiliar, what is different, what challenges, irritates, or even disturbs" (2006, 27). Thus, one last component that is outlined is that educators have an immense responsibility, extending beyond a "responsibility for the 'quality' of teaching or for successfully meeting the needs of the learner" to that of a responsibility for the *subjectivity* of the student, for what allows the student to be unique (2006, 29). A question to consider is therefore: how can this be done, and to what extent is it possible?

Biesta's (2006) work inspires the question: "what would it mean to educate by treating the question of what it means to be human as a radically *open* question: a question that can only be answered by engaging in education rather than a question that needs to be answered before we can educate" (Biesta 2006, ix; our emphasis). In considering these ideas, the following research question can serve as an overarching guide for this study: to what extent is it possible to realise a poststructural democratic education?

## Methodology

### Research Design

As we have decided to look into educators and their reflections on the potentialities and challenges of enacting ambitious visions of democratic education, we reasoned that an interpretivist methodology was the most appropriate approach through which to study the interpretations of these educators. We therefore designed an empirical study using a qualitative interview approach to gauge how the educators conceptualise and justify their practices. This seemed to be in harmony with a poststructural approach as we are primarily interested in the educators' explanations of their practices, focusing on their agency, rather than applying primacy to our theoretical interpretations as the researchers.

The research question will be explored from an interpretivist epistemological perspective, based on the grounds that surveys or questionnaires would be inadequate and inappropriate to capture the diverse and complex approaches of educators in their unique visions and ways of enacting education. This sensitivity to the individual experiences of educators also fits within a Biestian framework that acknowledges and appreciates the uniqueness of people and thus the uniqueness of the relationships that create the educational experience. Indeed, it seemed fitting to opt for qualitative methods also to respect the "humanness" of education that Biesta (2006), following Arendt, celebrates.

Regarding the selection criteria for the educators we interviewed, we considered the descriptions of the educational programmes that they were involved with, the educational aims and values, as well as their pedagogic approaches to students with the radical democratic education literature in mind. We chose to select our participants on this basis instead of founding the study on the requirement that they all be self-proclaimed democratic educators in programmes strictly defined as "democratic education" because, in line with a poststructural mindset, we wanted to maintain an openness to potential differences in terminology and descriptions of how educators define themselves and their educational work.

**The Data Sample**

We interviewed eight educators who are involved with non-mainstream educational programmes that fit the criteria in the way explained above. It should be noted that all of the educators interviewed work in the Global North, although the organisations they work for have centres across the world, and the educators have at one point worked within these centres. The following is a table that provides details about the participants.

**Table 1:** Details about the participants

| Pseudonym | Gender | Age bracket | Description of educational programme | Location | Professional title (in brackets their secondary title) |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Mathilde | Female | 30–40 | Youth-empowerment organisation | France, Senegal, Haiti and Nicaragua | Founder |
| Tim | Male | 40–50 | Responsible leadership development | UK | Educational facilitator (and university academic) |
| Richard | Male | 70–80 | Autonomous learning college for youth | UK | Founder |
| Nick | Male | 70–80 | Organisation for civic and democratic education | USA | Staff development educator (also retired teacher) |
| Casper | Male | 50–60 | Innovative learner-centred school | USA | Co-founder, Co-director |
| Catherine | Female | 40–50 | Organisation for civic and democratic education | USA | Staff development educator |
| Matt | Male | 30–40 | Youth-empowerment organisation | France, Senegal, Haiti and Nicaragua | Programme coordinator (and teacher) |
| Susan | Female | 40–50 | Democratic school | UK | Headmistress |

**Data Collection Procedure**

Following Rubin and Rubin's (2011) approach to qualitative interview research structures, we wrote up three main sections, each with approximately six follow-up questions and probes based on the literature that we decided would best indicate how the educational programmes measured up to the research claim. It would not have been appropriate to pose our overarching research question to the interviewees as it would have been too abstract and broad to elicit a meaningful answer (Rubin and Rubin 2011, 152).

The three main question sections were divided into the following:

- How would you define your educational vision? What does learning mean for you? What is the role of the educator in your programme?

- How do you go about organising your ideas to pedagogically implement your educational vision? What do you keep in mind when constructing a curriculum in line with your vision? What does preparation mean for you? To what extent is your educational practice informed by a structure?

- How would you evaluate the success of an educational experience? What are the greatest challenges in practising and implementing your educational vision? What advice would you give to an aspiring ambitious educator?

The interviews were all conducted over Skype, except for one, over a period of one month to cater for the availabilities of the educators. The average length of the interviews was 45 minutes.

The interviews provided roughly six and a half hours of recordings. These were all transcribed fully, word for word, to create 64 pages of transcriptions to work from. These transcriptions were coded for patterns using Saldaña's (2009) streamlined codes-to-theory model for qualitative inquiry.

## Ethics

We conducted this research project in full accordance with the British Educational Research Association's ethical guidelines (BERA 2012). Ethical clearance for this study was given by the Research and Investigation Ethics Panel at the University of Cambridge's Faculty of Education. The anonymity of the participants was protected through the use of pseudonyms, and the titles of their affiliated educational programmes were re-worded in such a way that would prevent possible identification.

## Limitations

It needs to be taken into account that a subjectivist epistemology informs this research since as the researchers we are using an interpretivist theoretical lens. As Sipe and Ghiso (2004) outline, qualitative coding of interview transcripts requires judgement calls, and thus one carries one's subjectivities, personalities, and predispositions into the work. Also, given that this research was operating with a sensitivity to poststructuralism, an openness and broad flexibility towards various styles of "democratic" education was maintained. We acknowledge that this presents a possible limitation, which we tried to mitigate by concentrating on the significance of commonalities and connections across the objects of analysis (Ellingson 2009).

## Findings and Analysis

The findings from the transcripts have been separated into three emergent areas of how democratic education was conceptualised by the educators interviewed: philosophy, pedagogy, and structures.

### Philosophy

*The "Social" and the "Human"*

The transcripts revealed that a key characteristic of education is the idea that it is an active, ongoing, and moving process, and that learning happens in the *process* of living and being with others who are different. The headmistress of a democratic school, Susan's comment captures this:

> Schools are the foundations of democratic societies, because they are the places where we come together with people who are not like us around some kind of common purpose, we learn how to be in conversation, how to negotiate, how to collaborate, how to argue.

A similar idea is apparent in Mathilde's remarks, who is the director and programme coordinator of a youth empowerment organisation:

> It's essential ... being confronted with people who might be your age or your gender, but from really different cultures and backgrounds, and having to live together for a certain amount of time.

All the educators mentioned the importance of people-oriented, interpersonal and socio-emotional competencies when asked about the aims of their educational vision. A staff development educator for democratic and civic education, Catherine, expressed "I most wanted my students to look underneath, to ask why do people act the way they do … we're learning about something in the human experience." The understanding of education as something much broader than the academic was what all the educational programmes, despite their slightly different aims and priorities, had in common. Richard, founder of an autonomous learning college, mentioned how his ultimate aim above all

else was for the young people to be "good human beings who can live a good life." Matt, an educational facilitator at Mathilde's youth empowerment organisation, said that "training our kids to be real people, that's the hardest part." Nick, a staff development educator at the same organisation as Catherine, expressed how he wanted to inspire "the sense of wonder … to learn about this fascinating world!"

Susan, reinforcing similar ideas, also referred to an additional component regarding the development of socio-emotional competencies, captured in her comment, "I think my vision would be that people all over the world would recognise that putting the emotions first is more important than the intellect." Casper, co-founder of an innovative learner-centred education movement referred to these as "soft-skills," and acknowledged that they were central to his programme as well.

*Acknowledgment of the Learner's Agency*

A commonality across the educational visions was the focus on the students' development of agency, autonomy, and independence. As well as being spelled out explicitly as such, other variations in how this was expressed was in the desire for learners to "feel ownership over their learning" (Susan), "to be able to advocate for themselves and look out for themselves" (Mathilde), or "to get up and run with a project" (Tim). Matt similarly said that "it's not just 'what do I know', but 'what can I do with it.'"

All the educators demonstrated an awareness of and respect for the agency of the learner as an active subject. This can be seen in paying close attention to the language they used; for example, the term most frequently used by the educators when speaking in relation to their students was "cultivation." As Nick clarifies, "the verb cultivate is very important for me because it suggests that it's already there, in the students, I'm watering the seeds. It's not something outside of them." Casper discussed how his main criteria for hiring staff was that they have to "have a philosophy that they're not trying to put knowledge into someone's head, but they are trying to help inspire."

*An Attitude of Openness and Patience*

When asked about the conditions required to put their vision into practice, the educators all expressed the necessity for breadth, suppleness, and openness. Tim discussed that for him the primary condition is *always* the disposition of openness: "on both sides, teacher and students, need to be ready to think, and feel differently." Nick also outlined that it is important "to have a humility, knowing that you don't have a corner on the truth."

Tim additionally noted that there are many factors that need to be considered in an education that truly respects the learner and that is concerned with their growth. He referred to Guy Claxton's "dispositions" which he rephrased in the following way:

People need to be ready, willing, and able, to learn … unless people are both ready to either see the opportunity to learn or to use their learning, and willing to do so, then ability doesn't even come into it.

Mathilde similarly commented that students need to be in "a mindset of willingness to learn in a new way, and to share and to be open to learn together." She also mentioned that educators have to be patient and if students "don't initially express those expectations, I believe that at one point they may be able to." Susan expressed an awareness of how "it takes a very long time to really get it into you what [her] school means or what it is about." Richard similarly commented about how in his learning college being sensitive to people's different developmental patterns requires flexibility and patience:

Each person is an individual. We've got a girl who is 17 and who is just about to take her GCSEs, because why not? Why not take them a year later?

Matt, Casper, and Catherine, too, elaborated on how learning takes time, mentioning how they try their best not to give up when at first they don't see results.

**Analysis**

The ideas the educators have about the development of "human" and "social" competencies can be said to be aligned with Biesta's (2006) idea to go "beyond learning," to recognise that education is an enterprise that is about human beings. There is also a harmony between the recognition of learning through and with others who are different and Biesta's Arendt-inspired notion of plurality. However, these findings could at the same time be subject to the same critique that Biesta (2006) extends to Dewey and Pateman about an education that seeks to develop a specifically socially competent person, which he deems to be an instrumentalism of sorts.

Broadly speaking, it would appear that these educators seem to have an overarching open and holistic philosophy of education that focuses on the growth and cultivation of the agency of the individual. Biesta (2006) would probably point to an underlying individualism in this, in how the qualities that he would instead endorse have the criterion of being thoroughly relational (2006, 27). Nick's explanation of "cultivation" can be understood as an educational philosophy that is sensitive to the inherent uniqueness of what the student already is, which can be positioned in the direction of Biesta's (2006) view of learning. However, the general approach identified in the findings can be seen as falling into what Biesta rejects about the educational "releasing" of something; he urges instead for a focus on the moment and the ways in which the new beginnings of each and every individual can come "into presence."

The next section on pedagogy will explore these ideas further.

**Pedagogy**

*Learner-Centred Pedagogy*

Richard stated that his focus was to concentrate on "how people learn," rejecting the term "education" because of its association with schooling. He made the following critique:

> The traditional model is that we teach kids solutions to problems they haven't thought about, so to distort the problem to fit the solution. Our view, instead, is that you find out about the person and then find out what they need to learn.

Richard's solution is to avoid the "educational model" by running a learning college that is centred around the belief that everybody learns differently, where learners are accompanied by what he calls "learning assistants" (instead of "educators") and their job is to "assist someone to learn." For Casper as well, "it's not about teaching, it's about learning." Catherine observed,

> So often an educator in the classroom has this massive list of things that they have to cover ... This is teachers serving their own needs, and not the needs of students.

The question of balancing the educational content with the learner emerged as a key pedagogic theme across the interviews. Catherine referred to this as the "educational art of matching up the challenge with the kid." Matt expressed this in the following way:

> It's really about the teacher paying attention and being present, and looking at students' work really carefully to say, this kid is having a hard time, here are the things I need to do to help him.

Matt explained how his pedagogic approach as an educator was to let the learners guide him, by being attuned to the learner's unique needs, "to think about the skills the kids need first, and then build from there." The root of the pedagogic attitude proved consistently to be that of having the learner in mind. Casper mentioned,

> My mantra when we started the school was what's best for kids. Everything is built around them … Not to make teachers happy or do a state curriculum.

The way in which Nick spoke about his aims for his students also supported this, as can be seen in the way he encourages learners to "express yourself in your original way and express the important learning for you." Tim's reflections revealed a similar sensitivity:

> Just because you write something on the board as an objective doesn't mean that people will learn it. What each person takes from any given lesson is likely to be different, and that's okay.

These educators appeared to have recognised the impossibility of applying the same approach to all, demonstrating an understanding of how learning differs because the

interactions with others, with the content, and with the "educator" vary due to personal factors. Tim's comments support this: "education, for me, is mostly about relationships," elaborating that sometimes because of the fragility of the personal connections, if a bond wasn't developing with a specific educator, then "someone else has to create it." He expressed:

> It's so important that they [students] get to engage with a variety of teachers, formally or informally. Because … the way that people pick up an aspect of their teacher, that they admire, for any given student, that just may not be you.

He added, "that's the magic of it, that excitement in the interaction."

*A Pedagogy of Self-Reflection on Challenges and Disruptions*

The pedagogy of learning was geared towards a recognition that in being exposed to, and in interacting with others, our knowledge expands. Catherine referred to this as "to disrupt the patterns of thinking that might have been a part of your life up to this point." She mentioned how she uses student journals to do this, describing how "teachers really need to read them and respond to them with questions to push thinking." Nick discussed his pedagogic method towards a similar goal:

> I would say to my students, I want you to write down the name of the student who influenced your thinking the most. That doesn't mean you agreed with her or him, but that they stretched your thinking, they got you thinking about something you didn't see before.

Catherine similarly noted, "success is when someone who disagrees with something remains engaged because they want to think about it more."

Mathilde reflected on the importance of getting the youth in her programme "to push themselves" out of their comfort zones; she stressed the importance of "working directly with other young people from other cultures." Tim similarly expressed how he maintained a pedagogy that gave the students "room for them to go wrong," where "they were given the opportunity to try and to fail."

The educators interviewed went further in conceptualising this idea, evoking an additional "meta" and reflective component to this process. Richard expressed:

> A lot of the time we are not encouraging people to learn something new, but to reflect on what happened when they learned it, what worked and what didn't work.

Tim referred to this in the following way:

> When they did try something and fail, I saw a gap between the person they thought they were in that situation and the person they would have liked to have been. Irritated, and motivated to close that gap … whereas I would've thought before that the learning might

come from them sitting down and discussing their differences and coming to a better solution, that turned out not to have been it.

*Creating the Appropriate Environment and Relationships*

A feature that stood out regarding the development of learners in open-ended and independent tasks was a concern for their "safety." Catherine explained, "it's difficult for kids to learn if they don't feel safe, if they don't feel to a degree accepted or respected." Mathilde repeatedly highlighted the importance of safety and accessibility, defining how "safe means to feel and to be able to be part of the learning process." Nick, too, emphasised the importance of "letting them know that this is a safe place for them to take a risk, and dive in and share." Perhaps it can therefore be said that a pedagogy of challenge that provides "room to go wrong," in Tim's words, requires a subsequent pedagogy of safety. Catherine's remark substantiates this: "I have to ask myself, 'what am I doing as a teacher to bring my kids safely in and out of this story?'"

When asked about what the creation of a safe environment consisted of, Nick responded, "always letting them know that they are respected people with deep dignity." Matt similarly expressed:

> Telling them over and over and over again: I support you … I think that, to be a teacher that kids trust, they need to see you not as a teacher, but as a person.

Susan's comments also suggested that the student–teacher relationship is an important component of a supportive learning environment, adding "you're just kind of teaching them on that equal level of just talking to friends, so they feel comfortable to be bold." Comparably, Matt's remarks suggest a horizontal relationship dynamic with his students:

> To show, here are my intentions that I have tried to share with you, why do we think that these aren't coming back; to make that problem theirs as well, and see if they are prepared to go on that journey with me.

**Analysis**

It can be argued that this learner-centred pedagogy that is sensitive to the differences between learners and the impossibility of using the same approach for all is in line with Biesta's invalidation of an instrumentalist approach based on the uniqueness of the learner. Similarly, in a way that Biesta (2006) would endorse, the educators placed a weighted pedagogic emphasis on the quality of interactions, striving for a non-hierarchical dynamic for ambitious and risk-taking self-expression. Indeed, for Biesta (2006), education only begins when the learner is willing to take a risk, stressing the importance of a respectful and trusting student–teaching relationship. He reinforces what these educators seemed to be practising and valuing: that the task of the educator is to create the opportunities and a climate in which students can respond (Biesta 2006, 28). However, while these educators showed extensive attention and responsibility to their

students' unique needs and initiatives, this is nonetheless different to the responsibility that Biesta attributes to the educator: that of taking responsibility for the *subjectivity* of the student, for that which allows the student to be a unique singular being (Biesta 2006, 29).

Nonetheless, the idea of stretching and challenging one's thinking can be interpreted as evocative of Biesta's (2006) "transcendental violence," of disruptions that push learners to grow. This was seen by the educators as a form of learning that entails the development of one's unique response, comparable to Biesta's (2006) theory. Furthermore, similar to what the educators expressed about the self-reflective component of this process, Biesta details as well that the question of learning is not about how to become a subject, but "*about learning from being and having been a subject*" (2006, 141; emphasis added).

This takes us to the third theme to emerge from the data: the underlying structures that support the educational vision.

## Structure

*Structures of Opportunity and "Action"*

These structures can be understood as spaces that are created to provide options and opportunity for learning. Tim's comment acknowledges this:

> You can't instruct people in how to develop as unique human beings so it's up to the teacher to create those spaces of opportunity and challenge.

He also referred to this as "the setting up of scenarios and dilemmas." The structural provision of choice and variety emerged more than once: Matt remarked, "showing kids all of these reading strategies and helping them decide the ones that work best for them." How these structures function was best explained by Tim, who explained the importance of "asking what are the tangible things that kids are able to engage with, and bounce off of to learn here."

Regarding the creation of a classroom community, it emerged that the structures—or "spaces"—need to be designed in a way that allows for and facilitates interaction. Nick mentioned the need for "creating space for diverse viewpoints." For Catherine this was "allowing students to talk to each other, and share their perspectives, so that it's not coming from the teacher, but it's coming from their own experiences with it." Richard described it similarly with his philosophy of "developing independence out of interdependence … organisations don't work unless people learn with each other." Casper expressed the benefits of interdependent learning: "There needs to be time and room for kids to interact, because kids are so moved by how what they say can influence each other's thinking."

*Characteristics of the Structures*

Richard described the structural framework in his learning college as a "robust, transparent structure," explained in the following way:

> We have rigid, empty structures, nothing in them … We need transparency, so you've got to see what everyone is doing, and it has got to be robust … It's a content-free structure.

Casper similarly commented:

> If you come visit our school, it doesn't look like it has structures, because the kids are all working on individual stuff … But there is an underlying structure that allows us to run the school one student at a time.

When asked about how these structures are managed, he responded, "it's careful preparation," pointing towards the need for efficiency: "I would say that the most important thing is how to build structures that allow what you want to get done to get done."

For Nick, this flexibility is accompanied by an intuitive and improvised educational approach. He compared teaching to playing jazz:

> I have set plans … but I have to have freedom to allow them to go off in different directions, and even change the lesson plans mid-class sometimes, when there is the right kind of energy there. In jazz, when they go off on solos, they play on structures but play off of it as well.

This educational sensitivity was echoed by Mathilde, who mentioned how "at the beginning of a workshop if there is not as much energy, it's good to know how to improvise … to not hesitate to talk about what might be happening." Catherine and Tim made very similar comments. However, despite this semblance of spontaneous adaptability and flexibility, there was a consistent acknowledgement by all educators of an intentionality guiding their pedagogical attitude. Matt expressed, "I think that going into teaching something not knowing what the kids are supposed to get out of it makes it really hard to help the kids get something out of it." The following reflective comment by Tim regarding the mixed success of an experience of his illustrates the tensions of this fragile balance:

> I wanted the initiative to come from them … but they couldn't get over the barrier of actually inviting and drawing on me as a resource … [Next time] I would give them more opportunities to choose more structure … to help them learn the tools of dealing with freedom, as well as just giving it to them.

In these pedagogic structures the interdependent learning within an interactive and responsive community appeared to be self-sustaining so long as the community was intact. There were various ways in which these structures self-regulated themselves. For Matt it was upholding specific codes of conduct. He mentioned, "one of [the] rules is that you can learn anything you want, but you're not allowed to stop other people learning." Nick referred to this as well: "you have to create a community of learners founded on mutual respect." Susan made sense of this through "community laws":

> They [students] will live through various anxieties or angers, and obviously they can't do it completely because the community laws won't allow that, but there is a recognition that you are free to be who you want to be to a degree.

She made the significant remark, "they need to learn to take responsibility for themselves, but that's kind of part of the system, we're not trying to do that." Richard, in the same vein, noted the following:

> You have a go at it, find out what you learn from doing it, getting continuous feedback from other people, and that's how you make the community work.

## Analysis

Although Biesta is wary of the idea of "preparation" in education, he suggests that education is "the paradoxical preparation for the incalculable" (2001, 32). In this light, what Richard and Casper describe as robust "content-free structures" can perhaps be seen as the pedagogic enactment of education that is paradoxically structured for openness. This can be seen as being in the direction of Biesta's (2006) outline of a deconstructive vision of education, following how he draws on negative functionalism in architecture: "it is not aimed at trying to prescribe how a building should be used and how the users should behave, but instead aims *not* to make some actions and events impossible" (Tschumi 1994 cited in Biesta 2006, 108). It can also be argued that Nick's loose jazz-inspired approach, and Mathilde's responsiveness to the classroom climate, can be compared to Biesta's understanding of educational responsibility as "the fine (or deconstructive) balance between engagement and openness" (2006, 148). Through a sensitivity to the atmosphere in the room and a flexibility responsive to this, the educators can be seen to be refraining from trying to control the ways in which others respond to one's "beginnings," which is what Biesta contends is what would make other human beings instruments for achieving one's own purposes (2006, 134).

Furthermore, in observing the "community" structures that operate in interdependent interactions, the key Biestian (2006) element of relationality springs to mind. The discussion about the "rules" of respect and the "community laws" also can be said to evoke Biesta's (2006) idea, following Arendt, that "action" is anything but self-expression without concern for others. The views expressed by the educators appear to

endorse the view of learning in a context of plurality and difference as the integration of one's beginnings into the "complex social fabric"—what Biesta describes as "the subjection of one's beginnings to the beginnings of others who are not like us" (2006, 140).

## Discussion

Following the analysis of the findings using Biesta's (2006) theoretical framework, this study can now proceed to a discussion on the extent to which it is possible to realise a poststructural democratic education. Foremost, in the way that the educators show a deep reflectiveness and criticality towards the aims and visions of education, it can be said that they have overcome the technological attitude that leaves educational theorising mainly with the task of bettering educational techniques and strategies rather than contributing to the critical discussion about the aims and ends of education (Biesta 2006, 74). However, while some aspects of the pedagogy, and particularly the structures, of the educational programmes studied can be said to demonstrate potentialities of poststructural education in practice, the overall aims and direction appear to be aligned with more moderate conceptualisations of democratic education that do not radically and thoroughly situate our subjectivity in the educational interaction itself. Rather, these findings show that most of the discussion on the philosophy of the educational vision focuses on what the learner can potentially be and do, with a pedagogy following on how this can be approached, rather than shifting the paradigm entirely to the moment of the educational interaction in a way that a Biestian (2006) poststructuralism would encourage. There are, of course, nuances and exceptions that spring to mind, such as the attention and responsiveness demonstrated towards the climate and "energy" in the room with an attitude of honesty and openness towards this, but we see this as expressions representative of pedagogic orientations rather than an overall philosophical approach to the education.

We would stress, nonetheless, that the purposes and characteristics of the underlying structures that carry these educational programmes bear a striking resemblance to a poststructural conceptualisation of education. The ideas that the educators discussed and revealed about how they organised and built the programmes demonstrate an understanding of the delicate balance between facilitative structures and an uninhibiting openness, echoed in the pedagogy of challenge and interruption that is balanced with the educator's withdrawal to give space to the learner to draw their own lessons from an experience. This can be said to capture the deconstructive aspect of poststructural democratic education, what Biesta, following Derrida (1992), refers to as "taking the contradiction seriously" (2006, 115), the double duty of being "committed to both spaces and events, to both design and the transgression of design, to both building and its undoing" (115).

Another observation that emerges from these findings is that the value and priority that Biesta (2006) gives to the "coming into presence" of people's unique beginnings did not appear to be appropriate for the needs of *all* students, precisely because of the paradox

that because people are all unique, their educational needs will be different. It can be said that these educators share Biesta's (2006) poststructural recognition and valuing of uniqueness, but make sense of it differently to him; they prioritise the needs and position of the learner, rather than a strict adherence to a poststructural philosophy that has particular views about where and how learning takes place. Following this thought, it can perhaps be said that a poststructural education such as Biesta's (2006) that is centred around the "humanness" and uniqueness that emerges through interactions with others in plurality, is a vision that is available in educational practice if it also so happens that that is what all learners need at that time. Put another way, there may be questions of access in terms of who and what a learner may *no longer* need out of an educational experience in order to get to a point where they are able to participate in a democratic education that concentrates solely on Arendtian "action." Taking this further, it can be concluded that students may need to learn the "elaborated code" (Bernstein 1971) of society, which might be in opposition to poststructural democratic ideals of education. Indeed, this turns into a wider critique that poststructural democratic education can only be celebrated as an educational philosophy in a wider social context that itself values poststructural ideas. This is echoed in Biesta's (2006) work where, to give up the idea that education can produce the democratic individual, "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" (2006, 141). In this way, it can be said that this research exposes the limitations and challenges of the realisation of such a philosophy where the surrounding climate is not in harmony with its ideals, as it would remain disconnected from the very society it seeks to democratically interact with.

## Conclusion

These educational programmes do, arguably, contribute to the improvement of the democratic quality of society in how, in line with Biesta's (2006) poststructural theory, they provide opportunities for action—which is always "action" in plurality and difference. That said, they cannot be defined as emblematic realisations of "poststructural democratic education" due to the philosophical incompatibilities with society as discussed above. Thus, it can be concluded that while it is possible to adopt a pedagogy and build an education that borrows from poststructural democratic values, the realisation of the vision itself requires a social context that favours and facilitates the adoption of an educational philosophy that focuses uncompromisingly on the moment of educational interactions where subjectivities "come into presence."

To draw a rounded conclusion, it must be recognised that there are notable limitations that have arisen in using Biesta's (2006) framework to guide this study. Strikingly, for example, a reassessment of the findings exposes how in Biesta's (2006) extensive theorisation about "transcendental violence" he does not discuss the issue of safety. The question of safety, however, emerged as a central theme when the educators spoke of a pedagogy of challenge. Furthermore, it can also be argued that Biesta overlooks the quality of patience that emerged as a key concept in dealing with an education that

focuses extensively on the building of interactive trusting and respectful relationships. As such, it can be seen that Biesta's (2006) framework neglects some of the demands and responsibilities of the practical enactment of this vision of education. These ideas can inform and should be developed further as a way forward for future research in this field. This study nonetheless remains tremendously indebted to Biesta's (2006) work, and through engaging with his ideas has sought to initiate a discussion and provide an angle into the possibilities of putting his ideas into practice.

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