The Possibilities of Public Life: Educating in the Community

Chapter 11

The Possibilities of Public Life:

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Mark Smith

Current orthodoxy constructs the ideal of citizenship around the values of individualism and the politics of personal responsibility. Mark Smith, drawing on extensive experience of youth and community work and informal education, explores the curricular possibilities of a change of focus from education of the 'Active Citizen' to education for membership of the 'active society'. In seeking a 'more socially just discourse around citizenship', he examines sites outside the system of formal schooling to locate models of practice which help to engage participants with the possibilities of public life. Three main forms of 'educating in the community' are identified and critically evaluated as educative processes: encouraging leadership, enabling partnership, and developing mutual aid. The chapter concludes that education for citizenship in a democratic society must be negotiated through dialogue and experienced as an empowering process.

INTRODUCTION

The conditions in which we live today and the problems that confront us call for a fresh emphasis in the work of education on the social and civic responsibilities which inevitably await the intelligent citizen.

So wrote Oliver Stanley, then President of the Board of Education, in his foreword to *Education for Citizenship in Secondary Schools* (Association for Education in Citizenship, 1935). More than half a century later, such sentiments would not have been out of place in the deliberations of the Speaker's Commission on Citizenship; in debates regarding cross-curricular themes within the National Curriculum (Fogelman, 1990); or in calls by the Prince of Wales for 100 000 young people a year to devote three months to voluntary work (Johnson, 1989).

The governmental interest in citizenship that emerged in the late 1980s was essentially individualistic and concerned with responsibilities. Discourse was generally constructed in such a way as to overlook questions concerned with rights. For example, the main focus of the Commission on Citizenship was to consider ways of acknowledging voluntary work and decide how to encourage a form of accreditation within schools. There has also been a particular focus on young people and a change in the official language

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106 *Education and Community* used to describe work with them. For example, whereas the Thompson Report (HMSO, 1982) spoke of social and political education, the HMI report *Effective Youth Work* (DES, 1987) stressed personal and social education. Other government officials emphasized discipline, training and entrepreneurship (Department of Education, 1987). Where *Youth and Community Work in the '70s* (DES, 1969) talked of the 'active society', ministers became more concerned with the 'Active Citizen'. Interest in the unequal nature of power relationships in society, in communal or collective attempts to change or manage things, and in people's rights was not what was required from educators. Instead, the focus was upon enabling individuals to contribute to the economy and to an ordered society, to be compliant workers and good consumers. As citizens they were to respect authority, and give their time to voluntary work and to the care of those in the family. For a privileged number, whose characters were sufficiently formed, there was to be the chance of leadership. For the rest, their role was to be consumers of political decisions rather than the creators of them.

Such an emphasis on service, individual advancement and the capitalist order parallel's the redefinition of citizenship in terms of patriotism during the Reagan years in the United States. As Giroux argues in that context, those concerned with social justice need to work to remove the idea of citizenship from forms designed to subordinate citizens to the narrow imperatives of the state. They should work to make citizenship:

a process of dialogue and commitment rooted in a fundamental belief in the possibility of public life and the development of forms of solidarity that allow people to reflect and organize in order to criticize and

constrain the power of the state and to overthrow relations which inhibit and prevent the realization of humanity.

(Giroux, 1989)

In this chapter, we will look at the contribution that educators could make to this task in their work with young people and adults. More specifically, we will be concerned with the activities of educators within autonomous youth groups, enthusiast groups and community organizations. The educational potential of such organizations and the way in which educators may function within them has been an interest of mine for some years (see, for example Smith, 1987a,b) and is currently a central element of an action research project in which I am involved (Smith, 1989). This chapter draws from that work.

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For schools a commitment to a more socially just discourse around citizenship would involve attempting to define them as public spheres where popular engagement and democratic politics can be cultivated (Giroux, 1989). It would mean helping people to 'develop the skills and attitudes of democrats dynamically through the experience of life in a democratic educational institution' (White, 1989). In autonomous community groups many of the structures for 'democratic experience' are already in place. Moreover, the voluntary nature of the contract between learners and educators in such settings and the relative freedom concerning content allow for the possibility of dialogue and commitment. However, what is often lacking is attention to the political and educational tasks involved (Smith, 1987b). Examining the experience of educators

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within these institutions may help us to think about the sort of changes that are needed within schools.

First, we need to appreciate an important conceptual point. Talking about 'educating in the community' does not mean making a crude distinction between the school or college on one hand and the community on the other. Schools and colleges link into the very social systems that many see as constituting communities (Bell and Newby, 1971). In this sense, educators can be as much 'in the community' when teaching second-year German, as when they are engaged in a heated discussion about local government finance in the tenants' association. Educating in the community is not simply work which takes place beyond the school or college fence. It involves a particular way of making sense of practice and location. In other words, it means looking at the paradigms and processes that practitioners appeal to when thinking about their work. Central to this is reflection on their frame of reference or 'locus of identity' (Wallman, 1984). When approaching the matter in this way, to call someone an educator in the community is to say that his or her professional identity is sustained in significant ways by the structures and forms they associate with a community (Smith, 1988).
These structures may be provided by local organizations such as temples and tenants' associations, neighbourly networks and a variety of other everyday situations.

There is an active appreciation of, and engagement with, the social systems through which people operate, and the cultural forms they utilize (Smith, 1988). In many of these structures and processes education will not be a central concern for the people involved. Frequently the role of educators in such situations is to cultivate dialogue; to enable groups or individuals to identify, plan, resource, carry out and assess their own learning projects. The educator's expertise is located in the process of enabling learning rather than in the topic (Jeffs and Smith, 1990).

Several overlapping features of community groups make them sites for convivial practice. First, institutions such as churches, tenants' groups, village hall committees and enthusiast groups usually have an associational structure. That is to say, they have officers, committees and a way of running things which allows members a say and a vote. Within many groups, young people have direct access to this structure: in others they are either ignored or have to fight for recognition. Such local organizations are also part of larger political processes. Initially many were formed to represent people's interests: for example, tenants' action groups and residents' associations. However, they also have to relate to

their own regional, national or international bodies. In these ways, local organizations provide the means through which most people engage with the traditional political arena (Entwistle, 1981). By encouraging people to become involved in the running of such groups, we help them to enter organized politics, to engage in public life. That is to say, people are able to join together to learn about and act upon the institutions and processes that significantly affect society or a substantial part of it (Smith, 1987a).

Second, community groups and organizations usually carry within them some valuing of co-operation, a commitment to those in membership, and some understanding of the need for engaging in educational activity. We only have to think about the activities of most religious groups or tenants' groups to confirm this. Much energy is expended in trying to get people to work together and to take their share. The numerous rotas, the discussions about what to do, and the way in which everyday jobs are given a social as well as practical meaning (e.g. gardening or painting parties) are expressions of this.

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Further, there is usually an emphasis on giving help to members in trouble or those who need care. We should not fall into the trap of romanticizing the situation: the actual experience of people in such groups may be somewhat different.

Yet the gap between hope and experience is usually recognized in some way. Members may appreciate that there is something more to the group than being organized: that people must be committed to the ideas lying behind the actions and have the capacity to act. For community groups and organizations to remain healthy, attention has to be paid to the education of their members. This may be woven into the fabric of activity through things like the study of sacred writings, listening to sermons, or the reports and briefings at the beginnings of meetings. At other times it may take the form of special events like conferences, study groups or group training.

Third, many community groups may be thought of as mutual aid organizations in themselves. This is because they involve people joining together to produce goods and services for their own enjoyment. The basis is reciprocity and relationships are informed by ideas of 'give and take'. In this they offer an alternative to dominant forms of market and

organizational relationships. Bishop and Hoggett (1986) provide numerous examples of this type of group in their study of organizing around enthusiasms. These range from swimming clubs to beekeeping societies and train-spotting circles; from allotment associations to antiques groups and basketball teams. The scope and scale of such groups is huge, yet relatively little attention has been given to them. Further, while the enthusiasm may provide a focus for activity, such groups are far from being wholly concerned with 'doing things'. Much of the reason for their success and endurance is that they fulfil social needs.

This last point directs the way to a fourth and vital consideration. These groups help provide a sense of belonging and identity as well as a setting to meet and make friends with people. Members develop a shared social categorization of themselves in relation to others, a shared perception of 'us' in contrast to 'them' (Turner, 1987). The fact that the group is theirs - or rather ours - and hence owned, quite unlike institutions such as schools, is indicative of the potential and importance of the relationships involved. They play a part in creating social understanding and commitment. The solidarities they foster may well be of a practical, common-sense kind. Sometimes these may be directed towards excluding or subordinating other groupings. Yet these solidarities do still carry within them alternatives to dominating ideologies and practices (Gramsci, 1971). Furthermore, the sense of identity and belonging encouraged (and the practical relationships involved) frequently have a spatial significance. That is to say, many groups are placed 'in the community' or 'in the locality' by their members. At one level this is a rather obvious point, but it can be easily overlooked.

Here we have something of the possibility of public life. Today, that life has largely become a matter of formal obligation.

Most citizens approach their dealings with the state in a spirit of resigned acquiescence, but this public enervation is in its scope much broader than political affairs. Manners and ritual interchanges with strangers are looked on as at best formal and dry, at worst as phoney. The stranger himself is a threatening figure, and few people can take great pleasure in that world of strangers, the cosmopolitan city.

(Sennett, 1986)

The failure to pay a proper concern to creating and maintaining *respublica* not only makes for the dominance of one group over others, it also deforms private life.

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'The world of intimate feelings loses any boundaries, it is no longer restrained by a public world in which people make alternative and countervailing investment of themselves' (Sennett, 1986).

Autonomous community groups and those that 'organize around enthusiasms' provide a powerful possibility, where people are not alienated from the product of their labours, where they can come to an understanding of themselves as active agents, as being able to make a difference, however small. Furthermore, 'such groups can contribute to the process of achieving an active and critical connectedness or nexus both within and beyond ourselves' (Smith, 1988). I heir conviviality and potential provide a stark contrast to the deformed relations of production which characterize dominant understandings of the school. However, they are not islands of purity, insulated from evil. Such groups are created and sustained within the 'asymmetrical relations of power that characterize the interplay of dominant and subordinate cultures' (Giroux, 1989). But thev are practical responses to the situations that people find themselves in. In this act of creation, this taking of a place in public life, lies hope and possibility.

Beyond participation

It is easy to move from calls for the cultivation of popular engagement and the rejuvenation of public life to earnest discussion regarding the need for more 'participation', implying that somehow the problems of schooling would be solved by the introduction of more participatory ways of working. That path is slippery. Considerable confusion surrounds the word's meaning and use. At one level it simply refers to taking part. However, participation is often used in another, more specific, way. Here, it means being involved in the process of decision making or policy making. Thus, for example, in youth work the Thompson Report argues that participation at club or unit level implies that young people should have a high degree of control over the

programme and facilities (HMSO, 1982). This is a common argument, but it is based on a misunderstanding. We need to move beyond the rhetoric.

Being involved in the processes that surround decision making is not the same as the activity of taking decisions. People are often said to have 'participated' when they have been drawn into discussions with policy makers. A group of residents, for example, may be invited to talk with members of a local authority education committee about the needs of their area. What they say may influence the councillors, but the residents are not the people who make the immediate decision. They have no vote in the committee. A lot of the confusion arises from a failure to grasp this simple point. Many different activities are included in the processes which surround decision making, and 'participation' can take place in any one, or all, of them (Richardson, 1983).

The arguments advanced for such 'participation' are varied. First, it is said that such processes are fairer than non-participatory ones. This is because they allow those who will be affected by decisions to have some influence over the outcome. Second, it is often suggested that it aids individual development. It is claimed to help provide those involved with a sense of dignity and self-respect, develop self-confidence, enhance people's knowledge and skills, and to allow people to be more aware of their needs. Third, it is argued that getting people involved in the decision-making process makes for managerial efficiency. Not only are managers provided with more information, but

110 *Education and Community* because people feel they have been consulted, they are more likely to agree with the outcome. More than this, it is also sometimes claimed that the exercise of participation shifts power in favour of, for example, the consumers of services.

Each of these blanket assertions is open to question. Where participation is simply considered to be a process of consultation, all that is implied is that others' views are listened to, and not necessarily acted upon. The fairness of many so-called 'participatory' approaches is, therefore, open to question. Similarly, consultation which leads to little or no change is unlikely to enhance self-respect and dignity. Further, much of the learning from taking part in such exercises can be lost if no real effort is made to reflect on what has happened. Here the important factor is less

the participation, more the quality of reflection. Lastly, most people who have worked in participative organizations would not want to claim they were efficient. Indeed, they may see efficiency as less important than some other concerns. Listening to people and engaging with their thinking might make a group or organization more effective in certain directions, but not necessarily more efficient (see Stanton, 1989).

Such confusion helps to explain some of the debates about practice. Much of the work labelled participative is often little more than a marketing exercise. We wander round with a clip board asking for suggestions for activities, call meetings to talk about programmes, and so on. Where educators are involved in this process it is often they who make the decisions in the end and do much of the work in putting on activities. This hardly shakes the dominant discourse of schooling, nor alters the relations of production and reproduction.

Leadership, partnership and mutual aid

Moving beyond such changes in style and into the realm of approaches which provide people with an opportunity to take an active part in organizing things does not leave behind confusion and rhetoric. When we examine the practice of those educating in the community three main approaches to this form of working can be seen. These are:

- encouraging leadership

- enabling partnership

- developing mutual aid (based on Smith, 1987a)

We will look at each of these in turn.

Encouraging leadership This approach can be portrayed as having two main aims. The first is to develop the 'leadership' abilities of those involved. This means improving individuals' decision making and communication, and working on their attitudes or character. A second aim is generally to create an identity with, and understanding of, key institutions and values. For example, in some of the uniformed youth organizations there is a conscious attempt to increase their members'

commitment to 'Queen and Country'. However, it is an approach which can also be found in youth clubs, and in community groups and projects.

Leadership approaches generally place an emphasis on organization. They involve creating a hierarchy of jobs and roles. People move through these if workers think they have 'leadership potential'. The obvious examples here are Scouting and Guiding with

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their structured rules and badges. However, community education workers may similarly use the experience of roles within an organization. For example, tasks like running the bar, taking fees, organizing teams, chairing the users' committee and sitting on the management committee can be employed to develop leadership abilities. We look out for those with potential and encourage them to take up a role. If they do well, people are then promoted to a more important or responsible job. In more 'democratic' organizations workers may even arrange things so that their favoured candidates get elected.

While the focus is on giving people experience of particular roles or tasks there may also be more formal learning activities. Exercises, activities and private study may well be undertaken. A favourite approach with young people is to put them in challenging situations, such as those involved in some, but not all, Outward Bound-type activities, so that they have to take responsibility for themselves and for others. A further important feature of the approach is that a lot of emphasis is put upon the leader or worker as a role model.

There are two immediate problems with these approaches. First, while people do take on more responsibility, they do so in a way which still leaves the educator or organizer at the centre of things. After all, it is they who promote the individuals. Second, having leaders means there must be followers. Encouraging leadership qualities in some individuals can create resignation and acceptance in others. In other words, the approach can be divisive and may actually work against critical thinking. Where government ministers have talked about active citizenship it is usually this model that they are operating within. There is a desire to facilitate the development of a cadre of potential leaders, to nurture structures which allow the building of character. But this character must

be of a particular kind: disciplined, responsible, and achievement orientated (Macleod, 1983).

In many instances when we talk of participation, what we in effect mean is developing leadership. As has already been seen, consultative processes can be thought of as entailing participation. When we examine the leadership approach, such consultation as does occur or, indeed, the extent of involvement in direct decision making, is often limited. In particular, the limitations surround *who* is involved. What often happens is that a small group has some say, with the remainder having little.

Enabling partnership If leadership approaches are common within uniformed youth organizations, then partnership is the active approach that is met most often in discussions of 'open' youth work and in many of the initiatives undertaken by community educators based in schools. Again, many of us tend to describe this approach as participatory. For example, a recent report of the National Advisory Council for the Youth Service has this to say (1988):

Participation in the youth service is sharing responsibility with as many young members or users as possible at all levels. The aim should be to encourage them to initiate and carry through activities and projects and to give them an effective voice in decisions about aims, expenditure and programmes.

What is interesting in this definition, and many like it in youth work and community education, is the emphasis on power sharing. It is the central feature of the approach. Hence, rather than describing the approach as participatory, it is better to view it as [112 *Education and Community*] enabling partnership. Two aims stand out. The first is to create opportunities for people to take a share with practitioners in the running of the club, group or activity. This involves having a direct role in making decisions and managing activities. The second aim concerns helping people to gain the necessary knowledge, feelings and skills to work with others and to run things. Examples of this approach in action could include:

1. Centre and project meetings between users and workers where decisions are made.

2. The setting up of user groups or *ad hoc* groups in order to organize things and to represent the users to the workers or managers.

3. "training events and workshops to help people gain the relevant skills and knowledge of things like procedures.

4. Work with individuals or with groups on a day-to-day basis as they set about their tasks within the organization.

The tensions in this process are many. For example, there will be clashes between the workers' ideas about a programme and what people want. There is also often a lot of confusion: where educators and users come together in a club or project meeting to talk and makes decisions, who sets the agenda? Who takes the chair? Who has the final say? What usually happens is that the relationship is unequal. There are senior and junior partners. Usually it is the practitioners who are in the driving seat - and at this point partnerships can tip over into a leader-follower relationship.

Effective partnerships are based on agreement. Both sides must freely assent to an action before it can take place. A 'contract' is made between the parties whereby all have a share in the benefits and all take responsibility for any difficulties. For this to happen, considerable effort has to be put into deciding on the terms of the contract, procedures and responsibilities. To do this we have to think about our work in a different way.

Workers who are used to judging the success of a programme by the number or type of events can sometimes find the 'mess' of having to work alongside people really frustrating. Often they are keen to get ahead and get things done. Staying with a group of people who are making mistakes and arguing about who was supposed to have done what can be taxing. Frequently, this feeling arises because we are judging things by the wrong criteria. We focus on the immediate activity or programme rather than what young people are gaining from the process. In other words, it is the learning which is important, rather than the direct outcome of the activity. This is something that school inspectors have also commented upon in the context of youth work:

Judgments about the quality of youth work essentially are judgments about the quality of the learning experience offered to young people, and not about their relative success or failure in undertaking particular activities.(DES, 1987)

From this it can be seen that the key concern is less whether a group organizes well, more what they have learnt from the experience.

Developing mutual aid This third approach places an emphasis upon people organizing things themselves rather than in partnership with workers. The aim is to enable people to gain the knowledge, attitudes and skills necessary to work co-operatively, and to organize in a way which brings collective benefit and enjoyment. The enthusiast clubs analysed by Bishop and Hoggett (1986) provide an obvious example of this approach.

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While many of these groups are initiated from within their potential membership, community educators also have a very significant role - particularly in those activities where there has not been a strong tradition of organizing in a particular community. Some of the most spectacular work in this respect (in terms of scale) has been associated with the development of participation in sports and in initiatives such as Actionsport. Within the community development arena, the establishing and maintaining of such groups, whether they be community associations, savings clubs or playgroups, has been a predominant concern of workers. Such interests also have a long history in youth work. It is often forgotten that, for example, the Albemarle Report on the Youth Service laid particular stress upon this approach (HMSO, 1960):

We value very highly the active participation of the young and their own leadership of groups which they bring into existence themselves . . . This means in practice that we . . . should accept, as a proper part of the Service, spontaneous but ephemeral units which may spring up and passionately absorb the energies of their members for two or three years and then fade away as the members grow out of them.

The report described this approach as self-determination. Here I have preferred to emphasize the social and mutual nature of the relationships in such groups. Thus within this approach workers are likely to:

1. Work with groups of people who either want to organize campaigns or provision for themselves or are already doing so.

2. Run workshops and training events to help people gain particular skills.

3. Provide certain material resources such as access to office equipment or a room to meet.

Working in this way demands that community educators think of themselves as facilitators rather than organizers. It also involves making clear the boundaries between the duties of educators and those they work with. One of the sternest tests of this approach is in work with young people, where there is often an almost automatic assumption of responsibility by the 'adult' workers. For example, let us consider what happens when we have responsibility for the building in which a group of young people meet. In the mutual aid approach, those young people would have to hire the building or room from us. They would then organize the use they made of the facility and take responsibility for what happens during their sessions. This situation is akin to what happens in community associations. There groups have to abide by certain rules when they use a room or hall. Provided those rules are adhered to, and the objects of the group are in keeping with the values of the association, then the officers or workers will have little to say about the day-to-day running of the group - unless, that is, the group wants help.

We can see in community associations a pattern of organization which could be used by others. For example, local religious groups could look to such structures to cast light on their relationship with groups of young people wanting to run something themselves. Within associations there are usually directly organized 'sections' and groups who affiliate. There might be an old-time dancing section: to join it you become a member of the association and the dancing is an association activity. Both forms contribute to the whole and have to abide by the rules of the association. Similarly, both are likely to take part in the management and running of the association and in its wider work, perhaps, say, to improve local services. However, while sections are, in the end, managed by the association, affiliates run themselves.

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Rather than thinking of educational provision in terms of directly organized activities (or 'sections'), perhaps we need to focus more strongly on the idea of affiliated groups.

Community associations have also provided some workers with a model for the way in which young people's organizations and other community education initiatives can develop (see, for example, Richards, 1987; Cann, 1989). We can see why when we look at the purposes of a community association. These may be summarized as follows (National Federation of Community Associations, 1974):

1. To bring individuals together.

2. To bring together the other organizations in the locality.

3. To provide opportunities for leisure-time activities in response to local needs.

4. To provide a basis for an education in democratic practice.

5. To see that gaps in community service are filled.

6. To manage the community centre.

7. To provide a corporate voice for the local community.

What, in effect, some workers have done is to encourage the formation of a youth or community education association, rather than a community association. This body then undertakes the above tasks. Often there is also an emphasis upon developing selfprogramming groups who affiliate to the association. It is then they who provide the bulk of the activities.

The advantage of a mutual aid approach is that it can provide people with a sense of ownership unlike that found in partnership. People are literally doing things for themselves. Nevertheless, it is not without problems. Sometimes the tasks involved can appear to be complicated and onerous - so much so that many people may be put off doing things. Here we may be tempted to fall back on the idea of partnership. However, the alternative is to work with people to break down the tasks into smaller

components that are manageable: also we may encourage groups to be more modest in their initial aims. We might contract to deliver services to a group: these might include such facilities as a coffee bar or the provision of instructors. But care has to be taken when doing this that practitioners do not drop back into the role of provider. They have to remind themselves that the difference between this approach and partnership is that the group remains responsible, i.e. they are simply buying-in services, rather than running them jointly.

A further concern is that groups become dependent on the energy and expertise of a small number of people. It could be argued that what happens in youth work is that you simply replace the practitioners with more youthful organizers. However, there is a crucial difference in the way that group members view those who organize. As Bishop and Hoggett (1986) put it: in one case the organizing is done 'by some of us for all of us'; in the other it is performed 'by them for us'.

There will always be some tension with regard to this. Some will feel they are 'doing it all' or that 'people just sit on their backsides', while others will resent this person or that person always taking the limelight. One of the things that practitioners need to do is to enable those involved to reflect upon such difficulties. In other words, they will have to stress that mutual aid involves cooperation, reciprocity and working for collective benefit and enjoyment.

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Lastly, there is the perennial problem associated with special-interest groups - that they become absorbed in their own activities. This concern is often heard in community associations in respect of sections and affiliated groups. People are thought only to be interested in their own corner rather than the whole. Care has be taken not to strengthen narrow ideas of self-interest. We have to work to develop people's appreciation of, and commitment to, wider ideas of public life.

Towards mutual aid

When we put these three approaches side-by-side a number of important things become ciear (see Figure 11.1). First, as we move from left to

right, there is a shift in practitioner^' responsibilities. In the leadership approach they have overall control; in partnership it is shared; and in the mutual aid approach they have no hand in the direct management of the group. Second, there is a movement away from an emphasis upon individual achievement (and often competition). Instead there is a valuing of collective and cooperative efforts within those community groups that adopt this way of thinking and acting. This does not mean that there is not a concern with the group or the team in the leadership approach, nor an interest in the individual in the mutual aid approach. Rather, it implies that there is a difference in focus. Third, the mutual aid approach places an emphasis upon smaller, self-determining groups. As a result, it can mean that members have a greater opportunity to be directly involved in running the groups. This is part of movement from an organization- to a person-centred orientation.
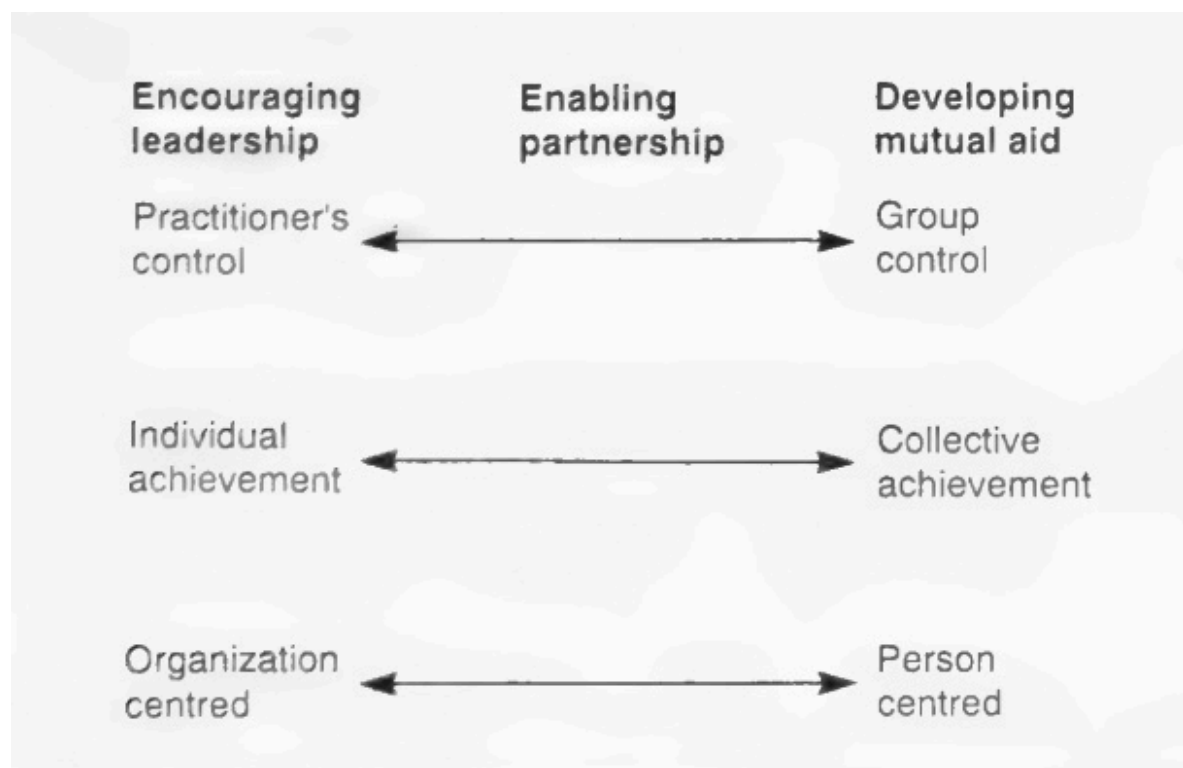
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Figure 11.1 Approaches to working with people who want to take an active part in **organizing.**

It would seem that the mutual aid approach provides community educators and participants with considerable scope. Two things are especially worth noting here. First, it is important to recognize people's

feelings and experiences. Many people want to do more than consume ready-made leisure packages. Rather, they want to make something for themselves. This is partly connected to a wish to be, and to act, with other people. For young people, there is also the wish to be seen as adult. Taking responsibility for something yourself is seen to be more adult than someone taking it for you, or even sharing it with you.

Second, the concern with mutual aid has to be put into the wider political context. If we wish to have a society in which there is a vibrant public life characterized by dialogue, mutuality and commitment, we need institutions which aid such processes. We also need places where we can learn to think and act politically. As Freire (1974) has said of Brazil:

People could learn social and political responsibility only by experiencing that responsibility, through intervention in the destiny of their children's schools, in the destinies of their trade unions and places of employment through associations, clubs and councils, and in the life of their neighbourhoods, churches and rural communities by actively participating in associations, clubs and charitable societies.

It is through these smaller-scale bodies that most of us engage with politics. For a democratic discourse to flourish it is critical to have 'citizens' groups which participate vigorously in the political process' (Twelvetrees, 1985). What is being suggested is that we must work to reconstruct our understanding of schools to take account of this. We need to move beyond a view of them as somehow being separate from the communities in which they are located. This is not some simplistic call for teachers to make alliances with groups and movements 'outside' schools: rather it is to interrogate our whole way of thinking. Our practice needs to be more firmly grounded in the lived experiences of those we w'ork with. We need to nurture within schools such autonomous organizational forms as we have been discussing here - however fraught with difficulties this might be (Smith, 1987a; Tapper and Salter, 1978). The discourse of schooling needs radical attention if we are truly to cultivate dialogical communities in which justice, wisdom and connectedness are concretely embodied in everyday practices. It is not only that schools need to be defined as 'public spheres where the dynamics of popular engagement and democratic politics can be

cultivated' (Giroux, 1989); our daily practice as educators must also be reframed in terms of the dialogical possibilities of public life.

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