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The discourse of community in educational policy

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Comments on Walter Humes' article - issue 12, 2004-5

This article, written in the context of New Labour discourse around the significance of 'community', examines the diversity and ambiguity of meaning underpinning social policy, and the implications for professionals, in particular teachers and community educators, who seek to engage with and support the communities in which they work and to build 'communities of practice' in the inter-professional context. Re-reading this article today, in the context of austerity and diminishing resources, challenges the reader to consider the continuing significance of the term 'community' and the nature of expectations for today's professional educators to engage with factors both 'in school' and 'out of school' and the interface between them.

Sarah Kearns
June 2016

The discourse of community in educational policy

Walter Humes

Synopsis

The concept of 'community' is frequently invoked in support of policy initiatives in education. Schools are regarded as important agencies which can help to build social capital and promote citizenship. Likewise, community development projects are seen as vehicles for the kind of social activism which helps to encourage individual and collective confidence, particularly in disadvantaged localities. This paper offers an analysis of various senses of community and suggests that they occupy complex and contested territory which needs to be understood in relation to the changing political landscape. It questions whether the appeal to community in policy documents adequately reflects the scale of the challenge represented by post-modern assaults on traditional conceptions of community. The paper concludes by considering some of the implications for teachers and community educators.

Introduction

Many current educational policies invoke the concept of community as part of their rationale. This can be seen most clearly in relation to Integrated Community Schools (formerly New Community Schools) where the idea is to link educational provision to other public services (particularly health and social work) in ways that are intended to provide more effective support to children, families and localities, whether urban or rural. In the document which launched this initiative, the then Secretary of State for Scotland, the late Donald Dewar, referred to the policy as representing 'the leading edge of this Government's radical strategy to promote social inclusion and to raise educational standards . . . We expect good outcomes for children's education, but also for their social welfare, their health and the well-being of the community where they live' (Scottish Office, 1998, pp. 2-3). The interest in community is also evident in the National Priorities in Education, especially the one which emphasises values and citizenship and recommends working with parents 'to teach pupils respect for themselves and their interdependence with other members of their neighbourhood and society' (Scottish Executive, 2003, p.22). Again, in *Educating for Citizenship in Scotland* (LTS, 2002, p. 6) it is stated 'Education for citizenship should empower young people to participate thoughtfully and responsibly in community and civic life'. In the preface to the same document, an even more ambitious assertion is made by the (then) Minister for Education and Young People: 'Educating young people in ways that prepare them for living effectively and responsibly as members of local, national and global communities is vital to the well being of humanity, now and in the future' (LTS, 2002, p.2).

This focus is not confined to the formal education system of primary and secondary schools. A recent document produced jointly by the Scottish Executive and Communities Scotland is entitled *Working and Learning Together to Build Stronger Communities* (Scottish Executive, 2004). In the Ministerial Foreword it is stated 'The Scottish Executive believes that Community Learning & Development (CLD) has an essential role in achieving our priorities of improving public services and promoting community regeneration, social inclusion, life long learning and active citizenship' (p. iii). The document goes on to explain the thinking behind its recommendations:

> Community learning and development describes a way of working with and supporting communities. We see community learning and development as central to 'social capital' – a way of working with communities to increase the skills, confidence, networks and resources they need to tackle problems and grasp opportunities. (Scottish Executive, 2004, p.1)

It is not hard to think of 'common sense' explanations of the current interest in community as a driver of social policy. At one level it is an ideological reaction against what is now seen as the selfish individualism of the 1980s, encapsulated in Margaret Thatcher's infamous remark 'There is no such thing as society'. At another level it is a recognition of the pace and extent of social change represented by such things as increased job mobility, cultural diversity, the decline of religion and changing attitudes to marriage and the family. These trends, it is argued, mean that traditional social bonds are weaker than they used to be and so a more coordinated approach to community development is needed. There is sometimes a nostalgic element to this argument, appealing to a past, real or imagined, in which people knew their neighbours, helped each other in times of hardship and acted on the basis of some conception of the public good rather than simply out of self-interest.

A sense of growing social fragmentation, and the need to do something about it, informs many political statements. In Scotland, the First Minister has spoken about the 'poverty of aspiration' which blights some communities and has introduced measures designed to reduce anti-social behaviour. Concern about the impact of crime and drugs on the quality of life in some parts of the country – not by any means confined to towns and cities in the central belt – has also been a factor in the desire to promote community development. However, it is recognised by many of the individuals and agencies involved in this process that the problems are complex and resistant to 'quick fix' initiatives. The political rhetoric of community thus requires a deeper level of analysis.

One way of proceeding is to employ some of the techniques of discourse analysis. This involves asking a series of questions about the language in which policy proposals are framed. In the case of community, for example, it might be asked:

- Why has this term assumed such importance? Why now? Where has it come from?
- Why has it been chosen in preference to other terms? In Peter Cookson's phrase, why has it gained ascendancy in the marketplace of educational ideas'? (Cookson, 1994)
- Whose interest does it serve – teachers, pupils, parents, policy makers?
- What is the knowledge-base from which it derives?
- How does it shape our professional thinking?
- How has political and professional power been used to promote the concept, and to what ends?

In addressing these questions, the first task is to attempt to offer a conceptual map of some of the principal meanings of community. Thereafter, two different policy contexts will be examined: first, the formal school system; and secondly, the field of community learning and development. Finally, some reflections on the implications for teachers and community educators will be offered.

Meanings of community

In sociology and cultural studies there is a very substantial literature on community, exemplified in the writings of people like Robert Putnam, Francis Fukuyama and Anthony Cohen. To do justice to the complexity of the field would be a massive undertaking, well beyond the scope of this paper. What is proposed, therefore, is to sketch some of principal senses of community by using a classification proposed by Gerard Delanty (2003) as a basis for raising some key issues. Delanty identifies what he calls 'four broad positions' in debates about community.

(1) The first is an approach which associates community with disadvantaged, mainly urban localities requiring government-sponsored responses and civic voluntarism to promote community regeneration, community health, community employment and so on (see Gittell & Vidal, 1998; Pierson & Smith, 2001). Here 'community' is highly spatialized and those areas identified as requiring intervention have to be helped by so-called 'mainstream' society. The implication is that the regeneration of community will bring benefits and that the social capital of the area will increase. But this also implies a deficit. Something is lacking in these localities which need help. What is this lack? An economic analysis emphasises resources, services, jobs. A cultural analysis emphasises respect, order, and a sense of responsibility. These are not mutually exclusive explanations. Material assets and social values are both important. This interpretation is highly influential at policy level. The Office of the Deputy Prime Minister, for example, aims to deliver 'thriving, inclusive and sustainable communities in all regions'. There is a Sustainable Communities Action Plan and a National Strategy for Neighbourhood Renewal. In support of this the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC), jointly with the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister, launched a Sustainable Communities Research Programme in 2003.

(2) A second approach is essentially sociological in character: here community is seen as a sense of belonging or a search for belonging, and the emphasis is on the issue of identity. It has strong value associations – solidarity, commitment, mutuality and trust. Identification in terms of ethnicity, religion, class, sexuality also falls into this category. Such identification may or may not have a spatial dimension. For Cohen, the non-spatial dimension is what really matters. He talks about communities of *meaning* rather than *place*. 'People construct community symbolically, making it a resource and repository of meaning, and a referent of their identity.' (Cohen, 1985, p.118) An important question to arise from this is 'What marks the boundary of a community in this symbolic sense?' It's not something you can mark on a map and say one community ends and another begins. Feeling that you are a member of a cultural community gives you a sense of belonging but it also implies that others do not belong. It implies both similarity and difference – thus it is a relational idea and can act as an exclusionary device. Many disputes within religious sects can be explained in these terms.

(3) A third approach might be described as the politically activist interpretation of community – 'inspired by post-modern politics and radical democracy' (Delanty, 2003, p.4). Here the emphasis is on raising political consciousness and encouraging collective action. A key text, which has influenced many community development projects (in the 'developed' as well as the 'developing' world), is Paulo Freire's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1972). In contrast to the previous category, the focus is not so much on the subjective 'I' seeking identity as on the collective 'We' opposing injustice. There are lots of examples of groups engaging in collective action to combat injustice and assert rights – the black community, the disabled community, the feminist community, senior citizens, and so on. Sometimes these movements will be quite localised in character. At other times they will be depend on social networks which are not spatially constrained. This leads to some ironies. For example, anti-globalization protestors organise themselves using the very information technology which has been a major driver in the trends against which they are campaigning. This provides a link to the fourth approach.

(4) Developments in technology have reshaped social relations beyond the traditional categories of place. Global communications via the internet have allowed the development of all sorts of virtual communities whose 'members' may never meet other than via message boards or chat rooms. These are hugely diverse in character and can link people whose 'real' communities of place are many thousands of miles away and who may have little in common socially, politically, economically. Technology thus provides new opportunities for the construction of community.

These four positions are not entirely separate – there is some overlap between them – but they lead in different directions and it would be hard to reach agreement on what might constitute an agreed bottom line for all of them. This leads Delanty to some quite interesting but also disturbing conclusions:

> Organised more like a network, community today is abstract and lacks visibility and unity, and as a result is more an imagined condition than a symbolically shaped reality based on fixed reference points. Its boundaries are also more contested and consequently community is also the site of a great deal of conflict. (Delanty, 2003, p.188)

Again:

> This imaginary dimension of community indicates the impossibility of community. Community offers people what neither society nor the state can offer, namely a sense of belonging in an insecure world. But community also destroys this by demonstrating the impossibility of finality. The new kinds of community are themselves, like the wider society, too fragmented and pluralized to offer enduring forms of belonging. Very often the communal spirit is empty of meaning, which must always be individually created. Thus community ends up destroyed by the very individualism that creates the desire for it. Community thus cannot be a basis of social integration, as much of the classical tradition in sociology believed. (Delanty, 2003, p.192)

These contradictions can be expressed in another way. Everybody is faced with the challenge of constructing meaning from their own experiences. By making sense of our experiences we validate our identity and our place in the world. We do this partly through our understanding of where we have come from, what is important to us, the people who matter to us, and so on. This process can take many forms and may involve religion, class, gender, political allegiance, education and professional values. But cutting across this personal search for meaning and identity are huge social, cultural and economic forces which make the task very hard. In the Western world the decline of religious belief and the break-up of the family have weakened traditional support structures. Social mobility encouraged through education, work and international migration loosens the sense of community associated with place. At the same time, new forms of communication open up the possibility of establishing different kinds of group association. Professional networking is one example. But these seem quite fragile in comparison with traditional forms of community. So there is still a nostalgic urge to recapture something of the past, often evident in working-class regret for the loss the value system which provided support in times of hardship. Individualism, it seems, has become a more potent force than community. However, if we go along with Delanty's analysis, this nostalgic impulse is doomed to failure because the big global forces are just too powerful to be resisted.

This point is captured powerfully in one of J.G. Ballard's recent novels which have been set in chilling societies of the near future (emerging social trends are sometimes better represented by writers of fiction than by sociologists). In *Super-Cannes* (2000) one of the characters says:

> Today we scarcely know our neighbours,

> shun most forms of civic involvement and happily leave the running of society to a caste of professional politicians. People find all the togetherness they need in the airport boarding lounge and the department-store lift. They pay lip service to community values but prefer to be alone. (Ballard, 2000, p.263)

Again:

> The twentieth century ended with its dreams in ruins. The notion of the community as a voluntary association of enlightened individuals has died for ever. We realize how suffocatingly humane we've become, dedicated to moderation and the middle way. The suburbanization of the soul has overrun our planet like the plague. (Ballard, 2000, p.263)

The interesting question, arising from this, is where does this leave social policy in relation to the sorts of professional concerns that people working in education, community development and social inclusion are trying to address? Are we doomed to failure as our puny efforts at amelioration are swept aside by the post-modern advance? In education, are Integrated Community Schools a vain attempt to shore up the fragmenting social order? In community development projects, are we fooling ourselves that consciousness raising and political activism can make a difference? The next two sections will explore some of these issues.

Schools and communities

It has become common to describe schools as 'learning communities' (see Clark, 1996). They are seen as vital agencies in the promotion of the learning society which, it is argued, is needed if the social and economic challenges of the 21st century are to be met successfully. All institutions must be responsive to change and this requires the people working within them to have opportunities to acquire new knowledge and learn new skills. The core 'business' of education is learning and it would be strange, therefore, if schools did not provide good examples of what learning communities should be. This helps to explain the current emphasis on continuing professional development for teachers, given a strong impetus by the McCrone Report (Scottish Executive, 2001). Teachers and others professionally involved in education are encouraged to form 'communities of enquiry' and 'communities of practice' where experiences are shared, knowledge is disseminated and a climate of mutual support is created.

This sounds attractive and, insofar it can be achieved, it is to be welcomed. But the positive intention needs to be balanced by a recognition that communities, even learning communities, are not invariably or inevitably positive in their effects. In any school, the experience of some children and some teachers will not create conditions where positive learning can take place – for example, children who are bullied or who experience repeated failure, teachers who are suffering from stress and overwork. In such circumstances, the learning that occurs may take negative forms – how to suppress fears and emotions, how to conceal feelings of worthlessness. Here the hidden curriculum serves to subvert the ideal of a learning community. Where this happens, the positive concept of community becomes at best a myth, at worst a sham. Even Clark, who holds up the concept largely for approval, acknowledges that the appeal of community can be 'corrupting' and that a 'vague and unctuous version of community [can be] used to cover a multitude of sins (and conflicts)' (Clark, 1996, p.164).

All this relates to the internal dynamics of schools. What about their relation to the wider community? In this respect it is worth noting one of the interim findings of the evaluation of the New Community Schools pilot programme, reported in 2002. The hope, as expressed in the launch document, was that 'The development of a New Community School will provide an important opportunity and mechanism to build the capacity of a local community' (Scottish Office, 1998, p.8). What the evaluation found, however, was that, in terms of the promotion of community engagement, very little progress had been made during the first year of the pilot (Sammons *et al.*, 2002, p.9). More than 80% of the respondents chose the 'none/minimal' or 'limited' categories in response to a question about the extent of community involvement.

In some ways this is not surprising since schools have been caught in the middle of policy initiatives that might well be regarded as contradictory. Alongside the emphasis on community there has been, for more than a decade, a set of policy imperatives which focus on 'in school' factors which, it is suggested, can raise pupil achievement. These have been supported by school effectiveness 'gurus' who claim that with the right mix of strong leadership, high expectations, clear targets, positive ethos and firm discipline, schools can transform the world. Politicians have seized on this to argue that schools on their own can make a significant difference, notwithstanding the disadvantaged social context in which some of them operate. Schools have, therefore, been set challenging performance targets as measured by national tests, public examinations and league tables. Understandably, teachers have felt obliged to

respond to these pressures and have focused on conventional indicators of success, such as the proportion of pupils gaining five or more Standard Grades or three or more Highers. Against this background, the encouragement to expand community involvement beyond the school gates has perhaps received less attention than the advocates of New Community Schools might wish.

The ambivalence felt by teachers and headteachers is reflected at Ministerial level. The Education Minister, Peter Peacock, recently expressed interest in a research report which he learned about on a visit to Australia, New Zealand and Singapore. In New Zealand a study of Maori children concluded that, from the perspective of the children themselves, the most critical factor in classroom effectiveness was the quality of the relationship between teachers and pupils. This contrasted with the much greater weight given by teachers to external social, economic and cultural forces. The conclusion that has been drawn is that some teachers are too quick to form a 'deficit' view of their pupils because of their background and this may easily become a self-fulfilling prophecy. The New Zealand report suggests that unless teachers address their attitudes and beliefs about educability and potential, many pupils will continue to be short-changed by schools. Mr Peacock intends to commission similar research in Scotland to see if the same findings emerge here. If they do, the effect once again would be to place the major responsibility for underachievement on schools (rather than on the wider social environment), perhaps in the process transferring the 'deficit' from pupils to teachers, as has already happened in England.

What is really required is a more subtle explanation of the relationship between 'in-school' and 'out-of-school' factors in accounting for educational success and failure. We need to move beyond simplistic accounts which, at one extreme, take a social determinist line, implying that everything is dependent on the cultural capital that children bring to school and, at the other extreme, dismiss the relevance of social disadvantage and expect teachers to work miracles with youngsters whose lives in the home and the community may make it very hard for them to see the value and relevance of what schools have to offer. This is likely to require a more nuanced characterisation of the many different 'communities' that people, including children, now inhabit. It is not simply a matter of acknowledging the differences between urban and rural communities, important though those are: 'no social order can be understood without reference to its scale' (Mulgan, 1998, p.96). It is also a matter of acknowledging that we all now inhabit a variety of 'worlds', with competing pressures and allegiances, which serve to constrain or liberate our actions, and shape the 'identities' which we present to others. An undifferentiated invocation of 'community' does not begin to address the scale of the problem.

Community learning and development

Similar complexities can be seen in relation to community learning and development (CLD). The official version of this policy intention describes it as being 'central to increasing the supply of "social capital" – a way of working with communities to increase the skills, confidence, networks and resources they need to tackle problems and grasp opportunities' (Scottish Executive, 2004, p.7). The principles underlying CLD are said to be empowerment, participation, inclusion, self-determination and partnership. Once again the discourse is appealing. There are, moreover, many good examples of community educators working in challenging circumstances to promote adult learning and civic involvement, and engage the interest of young people facing a variety of problems in their personal and social lives. McCulloch (2000), for instance, reports on the South Edinburgh Streetwork Project where project workers met young people on the streets of housing schemes in South Edinburgh (the Edinburgh of *Trainspotting*, not the International Festival). The original remit of the programme was to do with crime prevention and community safety, a focus that had been defined by professionals and the partnership agencies which funded the project. As the work developed, however, the focus began to shift. The young people began to talk about their personal experiences and concerns – covering such things as sex and drugs, physical and emotional health, families and relationships, hopes and worries for the future. They began to identify ways in which their lives could be improved by the provision of new services and community resources. This led to engagement in the political process – writing to councillors, officials, MSPs and gaining support from other young people in neighbouring communities. They learned about proposals for the regeneration of their area, about which they had not been previously consulted, attended meetings and made representations about what they wanted to be included in the development plan. Not surprisingly, they experienced the usual frustrations and delays familiar to campaigners, and encountered resistance from some local authority professionals. Nevertheless, the process was clearly a learning experience for many of those involved and their engagement with matters affecting the quality of the environment in which they lived must be seen as a positive development. The extent to which it has made a real difference – whether at individual or community levels – would, however, require longer-term evaluation.

More fundamentally, there are underlying problems about the extent to which even good examples of localised community projects can address the systemic aspects of the perceived crisis of social fragmentation. There are several dimensions to this. At an individual level, people who learn from the kind of project McCulloch describes generally want to go on learning and often seek formal qualifications that open up opportunities for them. Is it reasonable for professionals to expect people to make a long-term commitment to the collective development of a run-down community if, in the process of their own personal growth, they have a chance to move on? In a television interview following the release of the Higher results in 2003, a mother, speaking of her daughter's success said, 'It will be her passport out of X' (naming a disadvantaged community in Ayrshire). For this mother, 'getting on' meant 'getting out'. To the extent that this happens in such communities, the scope for building social capital will be limited. As Field observes:

> In so far as people imagine life in terms of a common good, their preference is increasingly for communities based on achieved characteristics over those based on ascribed characteristics. In less sociological terms, they are ever less likely to think of the communities into which they are thrown by accident or habit, and ever more likely to think in terms of the communities to which they choose to belong . . . (Field, 2003, p.144)

Another difficulty is that community development which brought about real change would represent a serious challenge to existing political processes and institutions (Humes, 2002). It would involve asking hard questions about how and why past policies had allowed certain areas to reach the point where they had become seriously dysfunctional. This might lead to at least some of the responsibility being shifted from the residents to those who allowed particular social conditions to develop. This, in turn, could stimulate demands for a more directly participative kind of democracy than the traditional representative democracy which has been the norm in Britain for the last two centuries. However, those who have been used to exercising authority are unlikely to give it up lightly and their capacity to defend their power bases should not be underestimated. While they might be willing to give their blessing to small-scale, localised community projects, they would be much less comfortable about the prospect of a major upsurge of grassroots radicalism which would challenge conventional party politics in a way that might be profoundly unsettling for the established political and professional classes.

It is partly for these reasons that some writers (e.g., Bauman, 2002; Giddens, 2000) question the wisdom of placing too much conceptual weight on the idea of community. What needs to be brought more centrally into the picture is the larger economic context, within which disadvantaged communities have to function. This would involve reintroducing into the political lexicon terms such as 'inequality' and 'poverty' which the New Labour discourse of 'inclusion' has sought to replace. Fairclough (2000) has offered an interesting analysis of the way in which this rhetorical shift has been managed. He argues that, when 'community' is now invoked, it is not in terms of the Old Labour sense of class solidarity: rather it is in terms of individual responsibility and social obligation. Thus, he suggests, there is a moral and authoritarian thread running through New Labour appeals to community, emphasising the duties which people owe more than the rights to which they are entitled – and this stands in contrast to the traditional collectivism of the party.

Referring to another favoured term in current policy discourse – the concept of citizenship – Faulks (2000) cautions against invoking it in 'pseudo-religious terms' and attributing to it some special ethical authority. The same point could be made about community. What is required is a more sophisticated appreciation of the many layers of meaning that are represented by the concept of community. It is not simply about the relationship that individuals have to the institutional 'communities' (such as schools) to which they belong. Nor is it just about the political networks that operate at local, national and global levels. What Little (2002) refers to as the radical approach to community 'examines not only the relationship between the individual and the state, but also the social and economic implications of rethinking community' (Little, 2000, p.20). Part of the 'rethinking' involves a recognition that in advanced democracies people are increasingly trying to find, or create, 'spaces' in civil society (beyond the immediate control of government) in which to establish alternative forms of association to those which derive from traditional, highly spatialized, types of community. Information technology makes this easier. Little observes that these various dimensions cannot be easily disentangled from one another. That is why the easy invocation of a generalised sense of community in policy documents invites careful scrutiny. Professionals need to give serious consideration to precisely what it is they are being asked to implement.

Implications for teachers and community educators

What are the implications of all this for teachers and community educators? There are several important points. First, we need to recognise the ambivalent character of terms such as community, citizenship and social capital, the fact that their initial appeal should not disguise their darker underside. This, in turn, should make us more alert to the processes of policy construction, the strategies that are used in the promotion of dominant discourses. It may be, as Little suggests, that it is 'the lack of conceptual clarity around community that has made it such an attractive tool for politicians, theorists and policy-makers' (Little, 2002, p.1). That is why critical interrogation of the discourse is so important. Discourse analysis is essentially about the relation between language, knowledge and power. At present, community discourse enjoys considerable power in policy formulations and is assumed as part of the professional knowledge of many occupational groups. Greater recognition needs to be given to the contested nature of what is at stake.

A second set of implications relates to the ways in which people are trained to work in the public sector. The historical trend has been for people to be trained separately (in education, community education, social work, health, and so on) on the grounds that these are separate specialisms with their own distinctive expertise. Now, however, these various groups are expected to work together in the interests of providing a better service to the community. Separate training has arguably produced a narrowness of perspective and a tendency to be inward-looking, a tendency that has been reinforced by an increasing focus on practice and a distrust of theorising. There is a strong case for at least part of the professional training of public service staff to be generalist, bringing teachers, social workers, community educators, and health workers together to explore common areas of interest – such as what they understand by professionalism and how they conceive of the 'communities' which they serve. This would have two major benefits. It would promote inter-professional understanding, thereby making it more likely that integrated service provision would succeed. And it would serve to counter the anti-intellectualism which has been a feature of many recent courses and which some have suggested has led to de-professionalisation. These courses have been constrained by the reductionist competency models of training which have gained ascendancy. Interdisciplinarity would involve tackling fundamental theoretical issues of the kind that would equip trainees to question and challenge prevailing discourses. In the process, their understanding of the policy processes which will affect their professional lives would be enhanced.

Thirdly, there are implications for the way in which policy is constructed at institutional, local, national and international levels. The argument of the preceding sections has suggested that the prevailing conceptions of community in school education and community education are inadequate to meet the scale of the challenge coming from a range of pressures – the ideology of individualism, shifts in the global economy, the impact of technology, the loss (at least in the West) of the certainties associated with family and religion. The old world cannot be recaptured. In this sense we are in uncharted territory. New community schools and community development projects may have some temporary and localised benefits but it is questionable whether they will provide longer-term solutions. Thus there is a need for 'big ideas' which well explain our new condition and provide some guidance about the way forward. Interestingly this search is carried on most creatively outside normal government and other official channels. One thinks, for example, of an independent 'think tank' such as Demos. In post-devolution Scotland we have a proliferation of such organisations – the Scottish Civic Forum, the Scottish Council Foundation, the Institute of Contemporary Scotland. This is surely a healthy sign and offers scope for teachers, community educators and others to become involved and help to inform thinking on alternative policy proposals. This could be considered as one example of what was referred to earlier as moving beyond traditional representative democracy.

Finally, the rather sceptical view advanced here of the way in which the concept of community is deployed by politicians, and taken up by some professionals, should not be interpreted as a disparagement of the good work that individual teachers and community educators do, often in very difficult circumstances. What has been suggested is that the deep systemic roots of disadvantage, disaffection and marginalisation will not be reached by the kind of short-term, high-profile 'initiatives' that currently pass for social policy. We need to reinstate poverty and class into our public discourse and look at them in relation to the economic advantages and narrative privilege enjoyed by those who occupy leadership roles and exercise various forms of power. As part of this analysis, we also need to include our own position as professionals whose altruistic impulse to provide a valuable public service can so easily be compromised by our ready acceptance of the dominant policy discourse.

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