

# Community Involvement and Communitarian Theory

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## Introduction:

In trying to understand the emphasis placed upon community involvement in citizenship education it is important to trace how New Labour has used American communitarian concepts of community to promote it. The most recent being the proposal to offer every child between the ages of 11-16 at least one week in a US style residential summer camp to build their confidence and help them lead an active life. This article traces these communitarian ideas as background to the introduction of character education and community service initiatives by government. It serves as an introduction to the field. Much of the following text is a modified and edited summary version of my book: *Schools and Community: The Communitarian Agenda in Education* published by Routledge in 2000. This article offers an extensive bibliography in the field and might be helpful in teaching student teachers about the theoretical basis of community involvement.

## Communitarianism:

The 'Third Way' and communitarianism are ambiguous terms. Communitarianism is a term increasingly used by both radical and conservative thinkers and hence it is not surprising that it means different things to different people and yet since the 1970s a general theory of communitarianism has begun to emerge to challenge existing political theories. Indeed, the central contemporary debate in political philosophy has been that between liberalism and the communitarians. As a consequence, definitions and understandings of communitarianism have generally arisen out of this communitarian/liberal debate. Therefore, the term *communitarianism* can be both ambiguous and used ambivalently. This is further complicated by the fact that some of those typically identified as communitarians have not identified themselves either with the term or with the so-called communitarian movement and so communitarians

appear to be an extremely heterogeneous group of philosophers and social scientists. Some communitarians wish to influence social policy whilst others are content to develop political and social theory. The attempt to seek a working understanding of communitarianism is fraught with difficulty, but a working understanding is necessary, however brief and tentative.

Communitarianism is a philosophical stance originating from academia and developed from a critique of liberal individualism by such people as Michael Sandel, Alasdair MacIntyre, Charles Taylor, Michael Walzer and John Gray.

Communitarianism is therefore a rather loose grouping which holds that the community, rather than the individual or State, should be at the centre of our analysis and our value system. The term has not yet been systematised in political philosophy, but has been popularised by the American Amitai Etzioni whose particular version of communitarianism has had a considerable influence on both the Democrats in the USA and the New Labour Party in Britain. For a number of years, Tony Blair has raised the concepts of community, responsibility and duty, all central to communitarian thinking, to pivotal positions in Labour Party manifestos.

‘Community’ is the key concept in any understanding of communitarianism.

Communitarians generally make several claims about the nature of persons and human identity not least that persons are embedded in communities. They claim that the self is constituted to some extent through a community that provides shared values, interests or practices. A person’s individual values are formed in the social context of these communities and often pursued through communal attachments. The separate individual does not make up the basic moral unit of society in this scheme of things, but rather is attached to other individuals in community to whom he or she is somewhat dependent. The appeal of communitarianism is obvious since there is a growing perception that there has been an erosion of communal life in contemporary society, and that this is associated in some way with a decline in standards of behaviour and relationships together with increasing crime and social exclusion.

One of the basic premises of recent communitarian thinking is that modern, abstract society has lost a sense of social solidarity. It lacks the communal dimensions that might unite people around a conception of what is good or worthwhile to pursue in life. Therefore, communitarians argue that there should be an attempt to forge a new equilibrium between rights and responsibilities. Libertarian individualism, they claim, has been destructive of the community as a result of a shift too far in the direction of individual rights and away from duty and responsibility to the people with whom we live. The philosophy teaches that both state solutions and the market are inadequate if they stand-alone, since their value lies solely in the contributions they can make to the quality of life. So, the communitarian position is bound up with the concepts of fraternity, solidarity, civic pride, social obligation and tradition, and is seen as corrective of the recent 'cult of the individual'. Communitarians argue that there needs to be a renewed emphasis on an ethical base for political action which encourages the intermediate institutions that stand between the individual and the State: family, schools, trade unions, religious groups, the neighbourhood and voluntary organisations.

Within the context of British politics communitarianism who advocate specific solutions to social problems have had a major impact, particularly on the New Labour Party. It is significant that when the Labour Party abandoned its seventy-seven year old Clause Four of its Constitution in 1995 it replaced the clause with a set of values that focused on community rather than economic intention. The aim became social solidarity and community as the chief means by which individuals could flourish and develop. As Tony Blair was reported to say: "We believe in the values of community, that by the strength of our commitment to common endeavour we can achieve the conditions in which individuals can realise their full potential. The basic principle is solidarity, that people can achieve much more by acting together than by acting alone. I think that all this is best represented by the idea of community, in which each person has the rights and duties which go with community... Rights are not enough. You can't build a society that isn't based on duty and responsibility." (*The Guardian* Newspaper, 13 March 1995)

The language is unmistakably communitarian in origin and is very much a US version of it. It aims to reconstruct the idea of the home, the school, and the neighbourhood community within the context of managed capitalism. The New Labour Party does not call it communitarian, preferring instead the even more ambiguous term, *the third way*, which seems to be a route midway between traditional British Welfare State and the more individualistic welfare model of the USA (Giddens, 1998). It is therefore nothing but astonishing that this US inspired public philosophy communitarianism has displaced the much longer political tradition of the left in Britain. It is also difficult to see how this new public philosophy links in with the Scottish and Christian Socialist tradition which Blair claims to be part and which strongly emphasises the ethical basis of community. Indeed, the work of the Scottish moral philosopher, John MacMurray, one of Blair's intellectual mentors, foreshadowed communitarianism in his ethical socialism.

Even before Blair entered Parliament he was emphasising community as his central theme and at the 1991 Labour Party Conference he declared that individuals are not "stranded in helpless isolation, but human beings, part of a community with obligations to one another..." His language increasingly adopted a distinct communitarian tone, but also built on the Christian socialism of the party leader, John Smith, who advocated 'fellowship' and the belief that freedom was only meaningful and achievable within society. As Smith said, "the combination of freedom and fellowship resulted in the obligation of service; service to family, to community and to nation" (quoted in John Rentoul, 1995, p. 295). Smith's ideas were derived not from public philosophy communitarianism, but from Christianity, whilst Blair increasingly turned his Christian socialism towards a more pronounced public philosophy communitarianism. Blair's notion of social-ism was simply the principle that people can achieve more together than alone. This understanding appeared to ignore the content of socialism itself. His idea of community was also simply put as a moral entity in which people supported each other, an understanding of community which was full of sentimentality and nostalgia, but one which nevertheless attracted voters. As Shadow Home Secretary Blair's communitarianism became even more developed in his speeches, especially when he said: "The break up of family and

community bonds is intimately linked to the breakdown of law and order. Both family and community rely on notions of mutual respect and duty. It is the family that we first learn to negotiate the boundaries of acceptable conduct and to recognise that we owe responsibilities to others as well as ourselves. We then build out from the that family base to the community and beyond it to society as a whole. The values of a decent society are in many ways the values of the family unit, which is why helping to re-establish good family and community life should be a central objective of government policy, and that cannot be done without policies, especially in respect of employment and education, that improve society as a whole. We do not show our children respect or act responsibly to them if we fail to provide them with the opportunities they need, with a stake in the society in which they live. Equally, we demand that respect and responsibility from them in return” (quoted in John Rentoul, 1995, p. 373-374).

This speech could have been written and delivered by Etzioni or any one of the American public philosophy communitarians. In the speech Blair was advocating one of the central communitarian principles which is the superiority of common endeavour over individualism for sustaining the responsible community. The problem that New Labour face is how this communitarian idea of community can be translated into practical policies for the family and education service. Beatrix Campbell (1995) believes that ‘communitarianism’ has prospered under New Labour. A number of the Party’s young advisors have spent time in the USA studying communitarian ideas. Campbell comments harshly on New Labour’s adoption of communitarianism: ‘communitarianism is a *contingent* politics; it is associated with a political project that is both *abject* and *authoritarian*; it is dependent not on radicalism, on a culture of challenge fertilised by the conflict and solidarities of a popular culture, but on the traditionalism reinstated by the very same Thatcherism it purports to oppose’. Stephen Driver and Luke Martell (1997) also claim to detect a strong paternalistic current in New Labour and conclude that New Labour: ‘increasingly favour conditional, morally prescriptive, conservative and individual communitarianisms. This is at the expense of less conditional and redistributive socio-economic progressive and corporate communitarianisms’. In other words, New

Labour have moved from socialism and social democracy to a liberal conservatism ‘which celebrates the dynamic market economy and is socially conservative’. It is why New Labour places emphasis on collective action in the community and blames the family and relativist ethos for any social breakdown. Whilst New Labour has embraced communitarianism it is not clear what communitarianism the Party is operating with.

Nevertheless, the rise of communitarianism may be regarded as a positive development in that it marks a wider recognition of the inadequacies of the modern liberal approach to education. Communitarianism has helped push moral values to the centre stage in England and Wales. It is concerned with the self-centred and excessive individualism that undermines the commitment to something beyond the self, let alone the public good and common traditions. However, there appears to be a growing number of positions taken up by people who call themselves communitarians and there is also growing criticism of the position itself. The term is not univocal and many are reluctant to own the expression. Liberal commentators in particular feel that they have not asserted individual autonomy against other people, but rather with other people. They claim that like the communitarian view they also seek to build around principles of co-operation and mutuality.

Communitarianism could be seen as a midway position between socialism and capitalism, but it espouses a rhetoric of moral education based on a secular morality which is not exactly clear. Some believe that communitarianism is a corrective to the excesses of liberalism, whilst others adopt the view that it is a source of reform for liberalism, and yet others still view it as an altogether distinctive approach to political theory. The philosophy is not an immediate blueprint for societies problems and it provides an inadequate analysis of social policy and economic conditions. There is also no explicit communitarian agenda for education in England and Wales other than some principles to guide our search for the moral values which should shape democratic society and communities.

### **Community Service:**

Contradictions and problems are clearly imbedded within communitarian concepts of community. Etzioni's definition of community leaves us asking what constitutes the community? What are its boundaries? Whose interests does it promote? However, in terms of the school community it is precisely a community because its members are together sharing time and experiences. Like the family, it is not of our own choosing. Communitarians place emphasis on the school as a community and view the school as providing a set of experiences to build moral character. Character is developed within a school community and therefore the messages they send to individuals, and the behaviour they encourage or discourage will influence the formation of character. The aim of the ethos of the school would be to build up a moral tenor and a sense of responsibility among the community members which would help children to act civilly and morally. There is clearly a strong concern for values and morality in much communitarian thought and an emphasis on education for citizenship and a desire to identify the shared core values that can be taught.

In the early 1980s David Hargreaves (1982, pp. 34-35) wrote *The Challenge for the Comprehensive School* in which he described how a teacher from an inner-city school observed: 'The school's not like it was. We used to be like a family, the old style working-class community. We didn't have to do anything special: we just drew on what was there in the home background. But it's not like that any more. And there's not much we can do about it. How can you make a community in a school when there's no community out there?' Hargreaves detailed how schools had lost their corporate vocabulary because phrases such as 'team spirit', '*esprit de corps*' and 'loyalty to the school' had declined in favour of a culture of individualism. He berated the modern comprehensive school for not making more of a contribution to the social solidarity of society. In many respects his book presented a communitarian agenda in education and we shall return to some of his ideas for the curriculum. In the meantime, many American communitarians have suggested that a year of community service would foster and reinforce shared experiences and would be an antidote to the ego-centred mentality of youth.

Communitarians in the USA have campaigned openly to make 'national service' mandatory for all school children. They believe that volunteer programmes, whilst extremely useful, attract a small minority and are therefore inadequate in meeting the requirements of society. President Bush established a Commission on National and Community Service in 1990 which published a report, *What You Can Do For Your Country*, strongly endorsing community service programmes (see Rosario and Franklin, 1994). Most communitarian ideas of community or national service are viewed within the context of civic education or citizenship and their aim is intimately linked with children learning the meaning of social interdependence and democratic principles. They believe that civic education must include experiential learning of the kind offered by community service and Etzioni (1995, p. 113) calls it the 'capstone of a student's educational experience' in school and that it is 'character building'.

Benjamin Barber (1991) outlines the aims of this 'national service' by indicating that it is 'an indispensable prerequisite of citizenship and thus a condition for democracy's preservation'. He strongly advocates mandatory programmes and insists that no one should be exempt from it. He provides a long list of benefits of such national service which include: serving the public interest or good; teaching about rights and responsibilities; teaching liberty; eliminating ignorance, intolerance, and prejudice; and empowering students to participate in society. He believes such programmes should be communal as well as community-based, in the sense that the students learn to form a community of service among themselves by working in teams. The programme would be organised around an academic course taught in the classroom and there would be a number of options from which students would be free to choose. He also suggests that there should be incentives to help students continue this type of public service after the mandatory period has ended. There are few such programmes in America and in England it is more likely that students would experience a compulsory 'business experience' in a work placement, than any sustained and integrated period of community service as part of their school curriculum. There are of course many critics of this particular communitarian idea of 'national service'.

In Britain a few politicians have called for national service schemes. Leo McKinstry (1997, p. 146), a former prominent Islington Labour councillor, has advocated the establishment of a nation-wide scheme of compulsory community service, which would, he says, encourage young people to think about their wider social responsibilities. Like some communitarians in the USA he believes that a scheme of national service should be mandatory on all, since he says that voluntary schemes are only suitable for well motivated young people, disaffected youth in inner cities are least likely to participate in voluntary programmes. Significantly, he also advocates that the British Army should play its full part in this project through the establishment of more cadet organisations and the expansion of the Territorial Army and concludes that there could be 'special recruitment drives by the Territorial Army in the inner cities to attract those who would benefit most from a disciplined environment'. It seems that McKinstry has, like many communitarians, given up on families and schools, and advocates State provision of compulsory programmes of service which teach discipline and conformity, especially for the poor and disaffected in our inner cities. It no doubt also has the implicit aim of removing the unemployed from the streets and perhaps even reducing crime. The intention of such national service would be the formation of a civic consciousness, but communitarians need to be aware of the social control function exercised in the name of the community. McKinstry's views are deeply paternalistic and it may simply be that he wishes to impose the identities of some over others. British youth are familiar with a number of Government employment training programmes which have not entirely been optional. Compulsory national service would simply be an extension of these low skilled training programmes and would be of more benefit to big business. Maryland is the only State in the USA to have made community service a requirement of high school graduation and it is interesting how the communitarian, David Anderson (1998, p. 42), makes the link between community service and the world of work. He says: 'In the Communitarian school a new spirit of community would exist, one which would connect children to their teachers and their parents and ', significantly to 'their parents employers'. Anderson emphasises the collective responsibility theme that animates communitarian thinking and suggests that bridges between government, the market and civil society should be strengthened.

The educational goals described by Hargreaves (1982) for comprehensive schools sought to increase greater democratic participation, stimulate greater social solidarity and help resolve conflict between different communities. All three goals sit extremely well with communitarian thinking on education. He believed that if education was to contribute to a sense of greater social solidarity then we had to revisit the questions of what sort of society we wanted and how can education help us realise such a society? Education, for him, had become overly concerned with the cult of the individual and the content of education had increasingly moved in a technical and depersonalised direction. Hargreaves did not think that the culture of individualism in education had been an error *in toto*, only that it had become too dominant and had ignored the social functions of education which he summarises: ‘if an excessive and exclusive attention to social and societal needs jeopardises the education of the individual, then an excessive and exclusive attention to individual needs jeopardises those of society’. The consequence of the modern obsession with individuals is that teachers assume, wrongly, that the good society will be created through the education of good individuals. One possible solution he suggested was a community-centred curriculum of which community studies, including practical community service, were an integral part. He did not want this community-centred curriculum to become a mere appendage to the traditional curriculum, nor limited to the less able in schools. Therefore he proposed that it should be compulsory for all and that it should consist of a core of traditional subjects organised around community studies. He believed that external examinations had far too much influence over the secondary curriculum and that this influence should be reduced in favour of increased internal assessment in schools. He believed that traditional school subjects should be more integrated with each other and that teachers should consequently develop team teaching strategies. The curriculum, in Hargreaves model, would consist of a series of general objectives which would translate into a flexible timetable and core subjects would be re-shaped into new forms and contexts.

All of this was a radical re-thinking of the traditional school curriculum in an attempt to help all children, of whatever ability, to be active members of their communities

for as Hargreaves (1982, p. 135) says: ‘For many the instant connotation of community is a local residential community, that is, a small and bounded territory. This can be reduced in size to a district, an electoral ward, a neighbourhood or a street. It can be expanded to a village, town or city, a county, a region, a nation, a continent, a world. This spatial conception of community is of self-evident significance, but it far from exhausts the conception of community. It ignores the small communities which we most value - family, kinship networks, friendship groups. We are also members of institutional communities - classes, year groups, houses, teams, and so on in schools;...For many people institutional forms such as churches, clubs, parties are expressions in community of their religious, leisure and political interests. Any adequate conception of the community must include all of these, and more, if it is to be the foundation of a compulsory curriculum. Three things are at once apparent: we all belong to multiple communities; our community membership often changes; the communities of which we are members may be in conflict with one another’. For Hargreaves (1982, p. 144) the purpose of the school curriculum is to provide children with the knowledge and skills required for them to participate effectively in all of these different kinds of communities because ‘it is when we belong to many groups and communities, and play an active role within them, that we are most likely to learn about them, and resolve, the tension between solidarity and conflict’. The function of schools is to prepare children for membership of several communities and in anticipation of this, the school needs to offer opportunities within it for children to experience different kinds of community groupings and learn about how to resolve conflict between them. Hargreaves admits that this is a bold vision and a daunting challenge, but believes nevertheless that schools need to actively increase community participation and asks: ‘what other major agency apart from the school has any hope of success?’ His book also promoted the idea of the themes of citizenship and moral education in schools. Hargreaves’s proposed curriculum is in many ways a working out of a communitarian agenda for the school curriculum and education, although he would not have called it that in 1982.

The 1990s saw a more centralised and traditional curriculum in secondary schools which is contrary to the proposals advocated by Hargreaves. In the process of revising the National Curriculum in England and Wales the government have recognised the need for a more explicit rationale for the school curriculum and the place of the National Curriculum within it. The government has sought to include more explicit provision in the areas of citizenship education, personal, social and health education, and the spiritual, moral, social and cultural dimensions of the curriculum. A series of aims and purposes of the school curriculum have been devised to form the preamble to The National Curriculum itself and these aims appear to fit well with a communitarian view of education. The school curriculum is now expected to promote a belief in the democratic principles of fairness and equality; an understanding of the rights and duties and responsibilities of living in a democratic society; the need to combat social exclusion by raising educational expectations and to promote social cohesion, community involvement and a sense of social responsibility. The school curriculum is expected to provide pupils with opportunities to develop a sense of identity, respect, tolerance and empathy through knowledge and appreciation of their own social and cultural heritage and traditions, and of the culture and traditions of people in other communities, countries, societies, ethnic groups, faiths and beliefs. In a direct reference to the work of the National Forum on Values the National Curriculum is recommending that opportunities be made available in schools to develop pupils spiritually and morally and formulate values relating to *self, relationships and society*. Whilst many of these educational goals remain quite general or even fuzzy they appear to enjoy widespread support.

The New Labour government has stamped its ethical mark on schools by incorporating a series of ethical statements into the written aims, purposes and values underpinning the National Curriculum. This is surely a consequence of the influence communitarianism has had on the hierarchy of the Party, but it is a version of communitarianism which is both conservative and morally prescriptive. New Labour expects schools and teachers to train the citizens of the future; inculcate pupils with appropriate social and moral values and dispositions; promote, as a 'good thing', duty and responsibilities to the community; advance the common good and foster the

creation and stability of common values to deal with fragmentation. Inclusion and social cohesion is principally seen by New Labour as a question of shared morals, not material circumstances. Consequently, redistribution of wealth and social equality receive low priority in New Labour's version of communitarianism. Schools are to remain in competition with each other for *the right* applicants; will continue to be subject to rigorous inspection, tests, and published league tables; progressive teaching methods will continue to be disparaged; and the government will remain even more obsessed with its crusade to raise standards. Parents are also to be blamed for their children's non-attendance at school; for their non-completion of homework; and even for allowing their children out on the street beyond a time which could be set by the local council. Private companies will be encouraged to run failing schools for profit and schools will remain highly differentiated in governance.

Citizenship education and the common good in schools are two key concepts in the communitarian agenda in education. From the communitarian perspective citizenship and the common good have an integrative function in society. Citizenship is concerned with the social relationships between people and the relationships between people and the institutional arrangements afforded by the State and society. Citizens therefore need, in many communitarian views, a society with a degree of common goals and a sense of the collective common good. Within this thinking the citizen earns the right of citizenship through their participation in society by attending to their duties and responsibilities which are the defining characteristics of the practices of citizenship. The difficulty with this notion of citizenship is that it is a status which needs to be earned and therefore can be lost. Communitarians say that the State should create opportunities to empower citizens and that the local community should encourage participation through example. Nevertheless, the problem of how to motivate people to become active citizens with a concern for the collective good is daunting, especially for teachers.

Within education there is also the problem that certain people may continue to be excluded and this may further impede their full incorporation into the political community. This raises the question of what activities do we define as the measure of

active or good citizenship in schools? If citizenship is differentiated it no longer provides a shared experience or common status. Apportioning the responsibilities for the task of schooling is clearly a task shared between parents, professionals and the State acting on behalf of the citizen pupil. Communitarians invariably stress the role of the community and Adrian Oldfield (1990, p. 173) says: 'The idea of community has less to do with formal organisation than with a sense of belonging and commitment. The commitment is to others who share interests, or positions, or purposes, and it is also to those who, for whatever reason, are unable to look after their own interests or pursue their own purposes. It is to seek the good of others at the same time as, and sometimes in neglect of, one's own good. It is to approach social relationships in an Aristotelian spirit of 'concord'. It is this that creates the sense of community; and it is this that creates citizens'. In other words the sense of the common good will help prevent the deliberate exclusion of individuals from the community, but there remains the problem of generating sufficient commitment among enough individuals to establish the common good within a community, however the 'common good' is defined.

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However, theorists have shown little agreement regarding the theoretical mechanisms of involvement, interpreting it in terms of concepts such as extent of personal connections (Krugman 1965), linkage to central values (Sherif and Hovland 1961), complexity of decision-making (Houston and Rothschild 1977), peripheral vs. central cognitive processes (Petty and Cacioppo 1981), and Audience Involvement and Actor Involvement. In communitarian theory, philosophers assume that community is part of life; as such, every individual is a member of a community and through this develops identities, relationships, and attachments with others. The members of a community express their values through their institutions and social needs, tempered by kindness.

**COMMUNITARIANISM.** In the 1980s communitarians displaced Marxists as the most prominent critics of liberal political theory. David Karp and Todd Clear have also studied community involvement in criminal justice, focusing on ideas of restorative justice and policies that are concerned more with reintegrating offenders into their communities than merely punishing them.