

## THE RESIDENTIAL CENTER AS POLITICAL COMMUNITY: A NEGLECTED PATH TO COMPETENCY PROMOTION

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**ABSTRACT:** A case is made for applying the metaphor of “political community” to the children’s residential center. Dimensions of a classical conception of political community are explained and contrasted with the typical residential setting. Suggested benefits of political community highlight the promotion of competency, empowerment and sense of efficacy among residents. Several practical suggestions for the advancement of political community are provided.

“Man is by nature a political animal.” Aristotle, *The Politics*

References to political dimensions of group life appear occasionally in the American literature of residential care, typically in suggestions of something akin to the “family conference,” where children and youth can experience a measure of decision involvement (see e.g., Phillips, Phillips, Fixsen & Wolf, 1972, pp. 33f). Rarely, however, are politics or political participation accorded a prominent place in the residential environment. (An exception is Durkin (1988), who argues for a thoroughgoing “democratization” of residential care.) Yet a political perspective can create rich opportunities to address a range of critical needs of today’s youth. “Political” thinking, rightly understood, should be vastly extended, indeed to the point where the residential center itself is conceptualized as a kind of political community.

This paper first sketches key attributes of a political community as understood by the classic political tradition. Next, it explores some theoretical and practical benefits of applying the political community metaphor to group care of children and youth, with emphasis on the promotion of competency. Finally, some programmatic implications of the idea of the residential center as political community are suggested.

### THE IDEA OF A POLITICAL COMMUNITY

The Western political tradition was born in the Greek city-state. We derive the term “politics” itself from polis, the Greek word for the community as a whole. Politics, said Aristotle, is the “master science of the good,” meaning the good, noble, true, purposeful and meaningful life taken as a whole. The following sketch of political community relies heavily on the experience of the classical city-state, a major inspiration of the American democratic experiment.

1. *Common meanings, order in history.* The political community has both extrinsic and intrinsic existence. It operates in physical space and time. It is this particular people, in this particular place, organized "for action in history" (Voegelin, 1952). But a political community is not just an organization designed to achieve utilitarian ends. Much more, it is a world of meanings intersubjectively shared by community members. It is this world of meaning which makes them the particular people they are.

At the center of this world is a set of "ultimate" assumptions and beliefs about the proper relations of God, man, world and society. Efforts of the community to attune itself to these core ideas are reflected in symbols, rituals and myths. So, for example, the Greeks mythologized a cosmology of gods and men bearing parallel burdens of passion and fate. In the ritual of the ruler's coronation by church officialdom, medieval Christians expressed the perceived interpenetration of the spiritual and temporal realms. Today, despite thorough secularization, America's core symbols maintain deep roots in earlier understandings of the relations of transcendent and immanent reality. Notions such as "the people" and "equality" originate in the JudeoChristian symbols of "one body of Christ" and "sonship under God."

2. *Political self-interpretation.* Fundamental community meanings, in turn, inform the community's shared set of specifically political meanings and self-understandings. The "civil religion" (Bellah, 1975) of a people includes concrete *Symbols* (for example, in the American context, the flag, the Constitution, the Declaration of Independence); *ceremonies and rituals* (elections, inaugurations, parades, memorials); archetypal *myths* (the classless society, equality of opportunity, the "self-made man"); *heroes* (the "Founding Fathers," Lincoln, Roosevelt, King); and the emotionally charged terms of *political discourse* ("freedom," "rights," "justice," "democracy," etc.).

The components of civil religion encapsulate the principles of action and speech within the community. They shape "ideology" and provide directive "moral anchorage" (Wolins, 1974a, p. 289) to political behavior. An effective set of political self-interpretations inspires a kind of reverence among citizens. They are at the core of the patriotic response, creating and sustaining a reference point for the sense of shared commitment even to the point of extreme sacrifice, as in war or certain acts of civil disobedience (Walzer, 1970).

3. *Public and private, freedom and necessity.* Further, political community implies an articulation of the social order into distinct private and public spheres of experience. Politics is that range of activity pertinent to the public realm, the life held in common. In the classical understanding, humans are truly free only in this public space, what the Greeks call the "agora." The private, on the other hand, is the sphere of hiddenness and "necessity." It is where market relations and routine domesticity reign, a

realm of repetitive production and reproduction. In the private realm we are typically defined by what we are, our "roles" and fairly predictable "behaviors." In the public realm, by contrast, we are actors, speakers, creators. We are not a "what," but the "who" that we freely reveal ourselves to be (Arendt, 1958).

4. *Citizenship and civic virtue.* The "citizen" is the free person, a member of a privileged community which regularly traverses the divide between private and public life. As citizen, the individual acts and speaks not as a member of privatized "civil society" (i.e., with only personal or partisan interests to promote), but who exercises "civic virtue" in pursuit of what is good for the entire community.

This understanding is quite different from the contemporary notion of, for example, the taxpaying, lawabiding worker or business person, "economic man" occasionally exercising the duty/privilege of voting. The classical citizen is a member of a community of peers, political (even if not social) equals, who intentionally acts from the perspective of the common life. In the political space, the citizen, unlike either the family member or the worker/businessperson, moves his/her fellow citizens not by force (of either position or tradition) but by *persuasion*, by the power of words, reputation and example.

Citizenship remains a duty, the exercise of which requires virtue and sacrifice. But it is a cherished duty worth sacrificing for. In sharp contrast to current thinking, the classic political tradition looks on the "private citizen" who only wants to be left to the private pursuit of "one's own" as an "idiot" not worthy of the "glory" of public (Canovan, 1974, p. 62).

5. *Institutional life: the context of action and speech.* The political space must be *institutionally* as well as ideologically defined, and here appears the stuff of "ordinary politics," namely, the *lawmaking apparatus* (legislatures and courts); structures of *representation* (elections, appointments); methods of *mediation and leadership* (parties, interest groups, publicity and "the media"); codifications of *rights and obligations* (the Bill of Rights, due process, taxation, conscription); governmental *bureaucracies* (for execution of the law); and systems of coercion and defense (criminal justice, police and the military).

The institutional structures and processes of "ordinary politics" define the public space and establish more or less definite parameters of citizen speech and action. Though *not*, on the classical understanding, equivalent to political community (Arendt, 1958, p. 57), the political institutions of the community are essential to its protection and expression as a viable way of life.

6. *Political education and generational continuity.* The community cannot take citizenship and civic virtue for granted. From Plato to John Dewey, the democratic tradition has recognized that institutional arrangements both reflect and help to shape the human personality. The "character formation" of citizens through the operations of institutional life,

and especially the formation of children, the youngest of citizens, should be a central focus of the political community. The young must be educated to the essentials of the political order, inducted at an early age into the ways of the communal life. At a minimum they must share in the narrative and symbolic life of the community. They must know its language and stories and be involved in its rituals and celebrations. They should enter the public space in ways commensurate with their capacities. Early and sustained engagement in public business is the key to political education and the best guarantee of the endurance of the community itself through generational continuity.

### COMPARISON WITH THE RESIDENTIAL CENTER

The typical center displays some key features of political community. The center has a substantial extrinsic existence: it is land, buildings, a large number of people not merely working, but living within specific boundaries. It might very well look like a kind of city-state in miniature. It is, further, no mere collection of diverse people occupying the same space, but a real community of people whose action and speech is grounded in a more or less explicit set of fundamental ordering beliefs. Not uncommonly the residential center's mission of humanitarian service derives from a formative religious experience and its associated symbols. Membership in the community, moreover, is highly prized, at least in the psychological sense of "the feeling of belonging" in the group. Finally, the residential center usually does offer children and youth a measure of decision involvement, if only at the unit, or "cottage" level. More striking, however, are the dissimilarities between the residential center and the political community. The center rarely incorporates explicitly political meanings into its culture. People do not talk much in political terms. Ritual life does not frame a "public" dimension of daily living. There are no explicit political symbols, no documents, no stories of great deeds or events, no heroes. No "members" of this community, neither staff nor children, can be considered "citizens" in the classical sense. Rarely is either group asked to think, speak or act beyond the context of the individual living unit, and even within units, the scope of decision involvement tends to be severely constricted. Political education is virtually nonexistent.

The situation is not surprising. The dominant metaphors through which the residential center has, historically, interpreted itself, the "family" and the "therapeutic milieu" are distinctly nonpolitical in thrust. The family is a prepolitical social form. It belongs to the private realm that the free person must "leave" to act as a citizen. If the entire community is a family, there is no place "political" to go. For its part the "therapeutic milieu," at least in the early influential formulations of Bettelheim and Sylvester (1948) and Redl (1959), is stridently antipolitical in its implications

for communal life. Its singular focus on "treatment" places the child in the role of "patient," invites the subjection of the child to one or another therapy "system" (Brendtro and Ness, 1983, p. 5), and downplays, if not expressly avoids, competency training in the skills needed for independence. Bettelheim made this latter point emphatically when he characterized "training in skills and achievement" as of "peripheral importance only" to the therapeutic milieu (Bettelheim and Sylvester, 1948, p. 192; quoted in Small and Clark, 1979, p. 157). Political action and education have no place in the milieu oriented to the repair of "ego disturbances."

In recent years pressure on the residential milieu to play only a short-term role in the "continuum" of treatment services (Whittaker, 1979, chapter 1) for children has further worked against the political community potential of the group care environment. When "permanency planning" succeeds, children do not stay long enough to become fully part of the meaning world of the community; they cannot fully become members, cannot participate over a long term, can neither be educated into the "way of life," nor contribute to the shaping of the common life.

## BENEFITS OF THE POLITICAL METAPHOR

### Competency Promotion

The residential center's apolitical character represents a significant missed opportunity. The concept of political community has a particular affinity with the "competency promotion" orientation of some group care literature (see for example, Brendtro and Ness, 1983; Durkin, Forster & Linton, 1989; Forster, Linton & Durkin, 1987; Hobbs, 1982; Whittaker, 1979; Wolins & Wozner, 1982). The competency focus on normality, development and ecology has made steady headway against a flawed "medical model" tending to feature dysfunction and pathology, stigmatizing labeling, emphasis on intrapsychic causality of disturbance, and hyperspecialization of professional staff removed from the child's lifespaces. The metaphor of political community can embody the growth and health-oriented competency perspective in a particularly fruitful form, providing fertile ground for the promotion of a wide variety of specific competencies among the community's citizenmembers.

Political community offers a "competency payoff" in at least three distinguishable dimensions of the young person's experience: 1) specific skills and abilities; 2) general "empowerment"; and 3) feelings of efficacy and achievement.

1. *Skills*. Skills-for-living typologies differ, but typically include some version of the following list: decision making; negotiation and compromise; problem solving; frustration tolerance; relationship building; communication and cognitive processing through words, symbols and images; empathy and regard for others; handling of interpersonal conflict; working for delayed gratification; leadership and assertiveness; celebrating good things; moral reasoning; and developing an adaptive sense of

direction and purpose (see e.g., Dorwick, 1986; Goldstein, Sprafkin, Gershaw & Klein, 1980, 1989; Pope, McHale, & Craighead, 1988; Stephens, 1978; Strayhorn, 1988; Wolins & Wozner, 1982).

Such competencies can be learned in a wide variety of contexts. Their acquisition does not require a political community. But what *better* format is there for the teaching of the vital competencies than the political arena (the "agora") as classically construed? Decision making, negotiation and compromise, conflict resolution, celebration of achievement within context of ordering community, moral reasoning and so on, these are the very lifeblood of the political process, the indispensable tools of the citizen-political actor. Political activity is a highly "economical" teaching format, inherently engaging a broad range of essential skills.

Indeed, for the competency-oriented practitioner, political community might be considered the *therapeutic milieu par excellence*, where the milieu is construed as a living environment that is "both a means and a context for growth and change, informed by a culture that stresses learning through living" (Whittaker, 1979, p. 36). A problem with much skill training is precisely that, it is not "living," but is of an exclusively *preparatory* character without inherent motivational charge. Young people are taught, in a classroom setting, skills that they are expected to extend or "generalize" to the "real world." Such methods are of limited impact and often fail to produce the desired generalization (Dorwick, 1986, pp. 56-57; cf., Wolins, 1974b, p. 27).

2. **Empowerment.** The citizen is not simply a student of skills, however. The citizen has a real voice in decision making. By sharing in the deliberations that shape the common life, he or she participates in real power. Fewer experiences may be more important to the long-term development of the typical child or youth in care today than overcoming the experience of powerlessness. Young people stripped of control over their lives, who have often been literally used and brutalized by adults, are prime candidates for the "dynamic of self-blame" described by Lerner (1986). Feelings of powerlessness, futility, frustration and self-doubt, originally engendered by the objective circumstances of abuse and neglect, become internalized and take on a causal weight of their own. Alternatively, powerless children may adopt an "attributional style" that externalizes their "locus of control" so that they experience the world fatalistically and beyond their capacity to influence (Pope, McHale, & Craighead, 1988, p. 70). In either case, without real involvement in decisions about things that matter, "empowerment" is at best an empty buzz word, at worst itself a tool of oppression (Gil, 1985, p. 27).

3. **Feelings of effectance.** A predictable accompaniment of competency acquisition and genuine empowerment is a sense of self as significant, efficacious, meaningful and valuable. This experience of self follows (rather than precedes, as erroneously presumed by some "self-esteem" advocates) the satisfaction of what White (1959) called the human

"effectance" motivation. This fundamental motivation, "is directed, selective, and persistent, and it is continued not because it serves primary drives ... but because it satisfies an intrinsic need to deal with the environment" (White, 1959, p. 318). Allport (1961) argued similarly that the drive for competence comes closer than any need (including the sexual) to summing up the whole human "story" of development, accounting for both survival and "self-actualization." An essential purpose of the political community is to permit the flowering of the human self-creating nature in proper context. Valued participation in the political life of the group, the working out of the common business, can be for young people a prime route self-actualization through competence and the concomitant establishment of a realistic appreciation of one's own effectance (cf. Coopersmith, 1967, p. 203f).

### Related Benefits

Political community can be seen, then, as a kind of "super" format for competency acquisition. Applying the metaphor of political community to the residential center has other advantages as well.

1. *Political community implies a positive perception of the human condition.* The political perspective holds that humans are at their very best when they act, that is, when they create, grow, strive, etc. Every human being—each citizen—represents a new beginning in the world, and has the inherent capacity for freedom, to "make a difference," to start new things, to do and say things that cannot be foreseen, expected and safely predicted. By contrast, sociological and psychological paradigms would have us spend the greater part of our lives "behaving" and "role playing" rather than acting, caught up in the limited realm of "necessity."

Political community's "optimistic" perception of the human condition is consistent with the best of the child and youth care work tradition, including such creative "pioneers" as Pestolozzi, Konopka, Korczak and Starr (Brendtro, 1988), as well as various contemporary group intervention strategies, including reeducational (Hobbs, 1982) and positive peer (Vorrath and Brendtro, 1974) approaches.

2. *Political community taps the power of language, symbols and metaphor to shape expectations and influence behavior.* Social reality is less "objective" than intersubjective in character, and human beings help to create and sustain their own reality through the concepts, metaphors and symbols they employ in the conduct of everyday life (Taylor, 1971). A "constructivist" view that language and metaphor are important keys to psychotherapeutic change seems to be gaining wide currency, especially among practitioners frustrated with traditional psychodynamic and behaviorist approaches (See, e.g., Barker, 1985; O'Hanlon and Weiner-Davis, 1989; O'Hanlon and Wilks, 1987. For an application of the use of story-telling metaphor in child care work, see Burns, 1990).

The metaphor of political community is inherently empowering in part because it uses political language, which is the language of power, of action, change and choice. It is inherently communal for the same reason, because its principal speech is of the public and the common.

3. *Political community affirms "values" and resists the decline of community.* Humans cannot be understood outside of community. The split between the "individual" and the "social environment" represents a false dichotomy. Every human individual must be conceptualized as a "member" of supraindividual community (Falck, 1988). Thus the free citizen is not the detached, "abstract" individual of market liberalism. The citizen lives and breathes the air of community and its foundational order of value and meaning. He or she appropriates its symbols, looks to its heroes as models, talks in the terms of its lexicon. Political community calls for the deepening/strengthening of community ties and the cultivation of intersubjectivity, shared commitments, loyalties, obligations and restraints.

The metaphor of political community speaks to the unmet community needs of youth for whom family and natural community ties have been thinned out to the vanishing point. Urbanization, anarchic economic development and high rates of mobility have rendered the term "stable community" practically obsolete in America (Forster & Linton, 1989). Sadly, new "markets" for child and youth care work are emerging from the progressive decimation of family and community life (Costello, 1990). The homeless, the unsupervised and under-supervised, dropouts, the drug and alcohol exposed, the aggressive, violent and "out of control," the numbers of children and youth in these and related "at risk" categories are large and growing.

4. *Political community educates the young in the exercise of freedom.* Freedom is not a given. Humans are not "born free" as JeanJacques Rousseau once suggested, but must rather "team" their freedom through instruction, modeling, experience, practice. Even less are we born responsible, feeling obliged and understanding restraint. A great irony of the times is that Europeans who have spent a half-century under Soviet despotism seem to understand and appreciate our political traditions better than we do (Euben, 1990). Our own youth consistently demonstrate a massive alienation from politics and, indeed, from adult life in general (Simon, 1990).

Our young people are disconnected from both the political system specifically and from the needs of the community in general. "Freedom" is prized, but widely misunderstood as contrary to community. Our youngsters do not see the connection between liberty and "virtue," freedom and responsibility. This condition poses a grave threat, not merely to this set of political leaders, but to the legitimacy of the political order as such (Connolly, 1977). If we do not teach our children and youth to be "good citizens" in their home communities, where will they be taught? Who will teach them?



5. *Political community is pragmatic.* Political community does not constitute a "system" and does not attempt to jam living experience into a conceptual Procrustean bed. It is eminently empirical, and like all good pragmatism focuses squarely on what "works," and on the impact of the human actor (the "doer), on the world (the "done"). Emphasizing broad-based participation in the common life, it is consistent with approaches featuring learning through experience and through peer and adult modeling (see e.g., Bronfenbrenner, 1974, pp. 397). Political community is congruent with the best of the American spirit and character, and with the outstanding characteristics of our best child and youth care workers, which include pragmatic idealism, empathic commitment, and courage to grapple with unpredictable events on a routine basis (Linton and Forster, 1988).

6. *Political community implies the value and dignity of group care.* Americans have not warmly received residential group care as a positive alternative for the rearing of children. For "reasons of faith, history, and political propriety," as Wolins put it (1974a, p. 289), Americans have strongly resisted group care as an apparent intrusion into family prerogatives, and preferred to reserve residential placement only for those for whom nothing else could be done. This abiding antipathy to group care is reflected in the philosophy of permanency planning, which puts residential care at the bottom of the hierarchy of placement options for children (Maluccio, Fein & Olmstead, 1986, pp. 5). Despite a recent improvement in the popular image of "orphanages" (e.g., Creighton, 1990), the prevailing tone of writings on institutional settings for children continues to be strongly negative (e.g., Drucker, 1990; Petr and Spano, 1990). The concept of political community stands this bias on its head, affirming the ability of group care to meet primary needs for competency and community in ways that the family cannot.

## IMPLICATIONS FOR PROGRAM

What steps might be taken to advance the theoretical notion of political community in practice? The following points are intended to suggest guidelines without claiming to be exhaustive.

1. *Expand participatory decision making and "influence" opportunities.* More participation means greater opportunity for competency development, as well as for strengthening the web of community ties and relationships. A typical center can sustain an extensive range of discussion/decisional forums and related leadership opportunities, for example, individual unit councils, agency wide residents' representative councils, children's courts, joint staff resident planning committees, conflict resolution councils, program advisory committees to management and boards, peerhelping systems, and special interest organizations. The possibility for creating "public space" exists wherever the "tensions" of community life call for collective focus, mediation and resolve (Pranger, 1968).

Daily life in the residential center offers such opportunities in abundance. They do not need to be created, but only recognized for their political potential.

2. *Enrich the symbolic order.* The environment of the political community should be replete with visible communitarian symbols, with rituals, and with stories of "remembrance." These are the elements that bind the individual to the community, that create the coveted sense of belonging, and teach commitment, loyalty and restraint. Symbols might include flags, badges, uniforms and mottoes, speeches and other documents, such as histories and anthologies, as well as the community's monuments, anthems, trophies and other awards. Rituals and ceremonies could encompass elections, leadership appointments, ceremonies of recognition and honor, welcoming and departure, anniversary celebrations of significant events in the life of the community as well as of events and heroes belonging to the culture at large. Stories may be created (and published, disseminated, read and told) of achievement and exceptional leadership, former citizens and their contributions, inspirational "deeds," and of rituals and ceremonies themselves.

3. *Promote an explicit ideology of competency promotion and empowerment.* A well-constructed ideology articulates the community's unifying principles and most heartfelt beliefs. A competency ideology explicitly prizes particular skills, learnings and behaviors, and devalues forms of activity that run counter to achievement and success. It will tolerate (even cherish) "good faith" failures in pursuit of competency acquisition, and it will encourage reasonable risk taking toward this end (Forster, Linton & Durkin, 1987, p. 100). A specifically political competency orientation will especially value participation, "civic virtue," and the range of skills of action and speech associated most saliently with the various political processes of the community.

4. *Use political language and metaphor.* The language and metaphors of the political community should be those of growth, health, achievement and competency in general, and specifically those of the political tradition: freedom; rights; justice and fairness; power and authority; community; equality; decision; public interest; responsibility and obligation; citizenship; civic virtue; statesmanship; debate; "glory." Recalling that language helps to construct the reality of those who use it, the empowering speech and images of political community can help correct the questionable hegemony of clinical jargon over professional speech. It thereby provides a positive basis for engagement of adults with children and youth, minimizing resistance to treatment agents and reducing the danger of negative labeling and the induction of iatrogenic illness.

5. *Deemphasize control.* Professionals with an overweening concern for control of residents constitute a major problem for the competency-oriented milieu. Wolins (1974b, p. 23) alerts us to the vulnerability of professionals to a seductive control logic: "The sick need doctors, the ignorant

need teachers, the lawless need judges and policemen. We, the healthy, the mature, the competent, care for ourselves, teach ourselves, police and evaluate our own behavior." Too many professionals, perhaps in a sincere effort to maintain their own psychic balance in the roiling sea of residential life, fall prey to a destructive "power shadow," the unconscious reverse image of the urge to help and serve (Guggenbuhl-Craig, 1982, pp. 10f). They become "preoccupied with an overriding concern for control" (Brendtro, 1988, p. 18), and the milieu they manipulate for the supposed benefit of residents are characterized by the "oppressiveness of rules" (Brendtro and Ness, 1983, p. 55).

Domination by control-oriented professionals is a particular problem for the political community of free citizens who must deliberate and act together to manage their life in common. While full equality between professionals and youth in treatment would be unrealistic and countertherapeutic, a perception of fundamental equality, the equality of citizens is essential to the cultivation of a community of competent political actors. The consummate youthwork "professional" in this community is one skilled in exploiting opportunities for competency promotion, and inviting, prompting and encouraging the exercise of freedom by youth at the earliest feasible junctures.

6. *Restrict behavior Systems and behaviorist assumptions in favor of free action.* Behaviorism is an offshoot of the "sociological" understanding of human beings as occupants of social roles and/or members of social groups who behave in regular and predictable ways. Behavioral technology—points, charts, privilege levels and the like—has developed into a powerful tool of the group care practitioner. The danger here is that our systems of establishing control and teaching acceptable behaviors may in a sense work too well, crowding out free action, squelching the capacity for initiative and unpredictable creation, and undercutting our children's belief in their own freedom. Ironically, methods of behavior management may be less successful in inculcating socially acceptable behaviors than in promoting an "authoritarian personality" type (Greenstein, 1975, pp. 110).

This is not a case for eliminating a valuable educational tool from the group care armamentarium. It is a case against all-inclusive behavioral systems, for substituting social for material reinforcement strategies wherever possible, and for "weaning" youth from dependence on behavioral technology at the earliest possible point in the treatment process.

7. *Design public and private Space: plan "big."* In any setting the design of physical space helps to determine activity, behavior and thinking. Buildings, furnishings and grounds encourage or discourage particular forms of social intercourse, provide many or few opportunities for choice and initiative, allow more or less privacy, permit greater or lesser amounts of integrative, communal activity (Maier, 1987, pp. 153 ff.).

In the political community, priority architectural concerns are 1) the distinction of public and private spaces; and 2) the multiplicity of "common,"

public spaces for action and speech where the political competencies can be exercised. There should be ample space for small and large meetings, full communal assemblies, extensive displays of symbols, and easy, causal communications (as in hallways and corridors). A multiplicity of public space is essential both on individual units and for the entire community.

A major trend in group care has been the replacement of large congregate care facilities by small, community-based group homes (Young, Dore and Pappenfort, 1989, pp. 18f). From the standpoint of political community, however, small is not necessarily better, as a too-small organization will inevitably lapse into the prepolitical form of "private" family life.

8. *Reevaluate the permanency planning hierarchy.* Proficiency in competencies takes time to develop. Similarly, acculturation, that is, the internalization of values and the formation of identity and character, takes time. It is impossible to build and sustain community in face of high rates of mobility and populational turnover. Since 1980, with the passage of P.L. 96272, and the arrival of "permanency planning," group care has been on the defensive (Fitzharris, 1989). Longterm residential care has been justifiable only when no family-based option is workable.

It is time to reevaluate this policy bias and to begin vigorously promoting the extensive benefits of extended group care, both for the "normal" and the "disturbed" child. One need not take a stand against the family to affirm the power of group care to raise up good citizens with the capacity for free thought, speech and action, young citizens who are politically skilled, of good character and "virtuous," and appreciative of the requirements of community life.

## CONCLUSION

Conceptualizing the residential center as a kind of political community offers numerous benefits to children and youth in care. These benefits include promoting competency, empowerment and a sense of efficacy; satisfying needs for communities utilizing the power of language and expectations in the context of an affirmative view of human nature.

The term "metaphor" has been used frequently to describe the concept of political community as applied to the residential center. As such, "political community" should not be taken literally but rather as a symbol suggestive of heretofore unseen opportunities for promoting positive change (cf., Barker, 1975, pp. 5f).

At its best, the political community metaphor can serve two important purposes. First, it can provide undogmatic guidance in maximizing the opportunities for participation and meaningful membership in the residential milieu. Second, it can remind professional caregivers that they are charged not only with the treatment and reeducation of the "troubled and troubling child" (Hobbs, 1982), but with the raising of democratic citizens.

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