

Editorial

Mae Shaw

This is the first time we have published a supplementary issue of *Concept* in our almost 30-year history. We were first motivated by a 'call for solidarity' from Luke Campbell (in this issue), drawing on his work with a local community action network since the beginning of the Covid-19 crisis. We hastily set to, seeking contributions from organisations and individuals we thought may be interesting, or interested to respond. It was not intended to be representative of the field of practice; more of a snapshot. We are aware that alongside a general sense of dislocation at this grim and demanding time, there is also alarming evidence of differential circumstances and experiences on the ground. We hoped to capture some of this for our readers, and to offer a modest opportunity to record, reflect, express, share and, maybe even generate some small sense of solidarity, needed now more than ever. The response has been very encouraging, and the number of contributions has grown beyond our original estimate.

The now ubiquitous claim that 'we are all in this together' may be accurate in some general existential sense, but the contributions here demonstrate how existing social and material inequalities are reproduced and heightened in this catastrophe. As many of the articles illustrate, some people are stuck at home, while other people are stuck without homes. Susie Dalton highlights how home can be the most dangerous place for some women, while John Player argues that a decent home has become an almost hopeless aspiration for many homeless people in Scotland today. For some young carers, as Mel Aitken shows, home can be both a prison and a place of protection and affection in a time of lockdown, with exhausting personal consequences. In the South African context, where inequalities of class, race and gender are more endemic and visible, Astrid von Kotze demonstrates how the residual geography of apartheid dictates the parameters of what 'home' means in practice, with poor black people (women in particular) trying to mitigate the greatest threats from the virus in impossible conditions.

A matter of increasing and widespread concern is the extent to which 'vulnerability' is becoming a shorthand for lack of personal agency for some. George Lamb, disability rights activist, is concerned about the ways in which the current 'vulnerability' script may undo the

gains made by the disability movement in their decades-long struggle for rights, not charity, denying the voices of disabled people at this critical time. Some of the same concerns about reconstituting forms of dependency, which have been so strenuously resisted in recent years, are emerging in relation to the implicit 'ageism' reflected in much public health policy. Emphasising the continuing agency of 'vulnerable' people needs to be a primary concern for practitioners in this field. In any case, if this crisis has taught us one very useful human lesson, it is that we are all profoundly vulnerable!

Making donations and volunteering to help others in respectful ways are important forms of agency, but so too is the capacity to question, and to accept that there will be contradictions. In struggling to make sense of the current reality, and using online resources to meet with like-minded others, Anne O'Donnell is rediscovering the 'healing' power of theory: the therapeutic properties of thinking, understanding, grasping, revisiting longstanding analytical frameworks and assessing the value of new ones. What's more, as Lisa Rigby makes clear, this kind of critical awareness can creatively 'bleed' into other interrelated spheres which are not at present included sufficiently in public discourse: '... public/private finance, international affairs, and ideas about health, including around the use of illicit drugs'.

Fear and growing anger about the cumulative effects of long-term austerity on the ability of public services to respond to crisis are matched by growing apprehension about the future of precious public assets. Callum McGregor is concerned that the now commonplace collective displays of 'symbolic solidarity' for 'frontline' workers do not inadvertently undermine a model of genuine 'civic solidarity' which expresses a selective determination to secure more equitable rights and rewards mediated through a democratic state polity. In the midst of such sincere outpouring of public goodwill, it can seem churlish to remind people that the British National Health Service is a tax-funded public service, not a charity - and certainly not a business. There will undoubtedly be attempts in due course to depoliticise this crisis, to reinforce rather than challenge the current ideological orthodoxy. But there will also undoubtedly be attempts to seize the crisis as an urgent educational opportunity; as a warning of even worse things to come unless that ideological orthodoxy is seriously challenged.

The immensely unequal distribution of private goods, gained at the expense of the wider public good, may become even more transparent as vast inequalities of wealth and privilege are laid bare. Tony Taylor believes that neoliberal fetishism of the free market and the sovereign individual has been fatally wounded; found completely inadequate to the demands of the current crisis, as 'society turns to the nurse, not the entrepreneur'. At the same time, and depending on its severity, the crisis may force a fundamental rethink of what is a reasonable way to inhabit the planet, and the economic and social relations which sustain or destroy it.

Many of the contributions here draw attention to the power of community (in all its ambivalence), and to the creativity, empathy, reciprocity and mutuality inherent in human beings which can be either fostered or squandered. The question is how this critical and fearful rupture can generate a genuine and vibrant curriculum for educational work and action with communities of place, identity and interest. As Arundhati Roy rightly observes 'Nothing could be worse than a return to normality'!

We all look forward to looking back on this benighted time sooner rather than later. In the meantime, if you want to contribute to this discussion, please contact mae.shaw@ed.ac.uk