CONCEPT
THE JOURNAL OF CONTEMPORARY COMMUNITY EDUCATION PRACTICE THEORY

Vol.2 No.2 summer 2011

# Editorial

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This edition of Concept is full of 'big ideas' – which turn out on closer inspection to be not so big at all. Indeed, whether the Big Society, 'Happiness' or Community Engagement, the articles in this issue demonstrate how these warm, comforting-sounding policy ideas have a function of concealing the harsh reality of economic inequality and the impact, or even the implementation, of more significant policies which exacerbate this. Nonetheless, there are always opportunities in any policy climate to respond with critical educational action.

The Big Society has been relaunched by David Cameron an almost comical number of times, as community workers face redundancy, voluntary organisations collapse and private companies take over social welfare. As Mae Shaw argues, the Big Society serves to political, economic and ideological functions for the Cameron government, serving to obscure the real struggles over the role and value of the state, especially to those marginalised by the economic and political direction which has been taken by successive governments since the 1970s. What the Big Society means reflects who stands to benefit or lose from the dismantling of the state. Exposing these ideological functions provides an opportunity to defend the state – not uncritically but robustly - to "reclaim the politics of the state".

Community Engagement has a longer pedigree although its ideological function in masking the political and economic marginalisation of the poorest communities echoes that of the Big Society. Gary Craig, in his presentation to Linked Work and Training Trust's Conference on "Better Community Engagement", locates this debate historically, in struggles over who defines phrases such as community development and community capacity building. Raymond Williams famously described 'Community' as a "warmly persuasive" key word which "seems never to be used unfavourably"[i]. In sixty years of projects and initiatives prefixed with the word community, Craig demonstrates how this "warm rhetoric" is used to conceal top-down social engineering, to undermine the experiences of those experiencing poverty and the workers who are expected to 'engage' with them. "In fact, looking back more generally at the few occasions that government has directly funded major community development programmes, it rapidly moved to close them down, as soon as the challenges posed by community empowerment became apparent, or distorted them to meet its own objectives." By contrast, and as a means to reclaim some of the space opened by community projects however, Craig draws attention to the Budapest Declaration of the International Association for Community Development which emphasises "core values/social principles covering human rights, social inclusion, equality and respect for diversity".

The discourse on happiness and wellbeing is relatively more recent but has generated an industry with significant political influence. After all, just like 'community', who can be opposed to happiness? Yet when the happiness agenda is translated, it turns into yet another example of misidentification. Problems of poverty and inequality, and their impacts on mental and physical health and wellbeing, are reinterpreted as an 'attitude problem' to be solved through mass therapy. These ideas might be dismissed as cranky if it were not for the influence they are having on political leadership who

are presumably seeing another opportunity to mask an economic agenda which exacerbates inequality. Ironically, community education might equally well lead to *reduced* happiness – at least in the short term - if it facilitates people to be angry about the causes of poverty, and act collectively to challenge them.

Wilkinson and Pickett's *The Sprit Level*[ii], has provided a great deal of evidence that individual and social wellbeing, as measured in a diverse variety of ways, is improved when there is greater equality. Whilst not an explicitly political book, in the intervening years their argument has been the focus of intense political debate. Some academics, especially apologists for neoliberalism, have sought to undermine their argument, foremost amongst these being Peter Saunders. Nigel Hewlett joins this debate by analysing Saunders' critique of *The Spirit Level* and finding its arguments owe more to politically motivated selectivity than rigour. Despite being a sociologist, Saunders appears to ignore the stuff of sociological research: the complex interactions between class, gender, race and other forms of stratification in the context of historical and economic forces. Arguably, politics is a more reliable medium in which to have the debate – whether greater equality is preferable morally and politically, rather than statistically. However that Saunders' politics are exposed behind his quantitative sociology illustrates the value of the debate generated by *The Spirit Level*.

This issue of Concept sees the welcome return of the occasional inspirations column. Stan Reeves recently retired after more than 30 years with Edinburgh's Adult Learning Project, being an inspiration to several generations of community education workers, cultural and political activists and adult learners, not only in Scotland but across many countries. Here he reflects on some of his work at ALP and how this unique interaction between education, culture, identity, community and politics has inspired him and his work. As educator, musician, dancer, storyteller and activist who has been at the forefront of the revival of the Ceilidh as well as other folk traditions, Stan's focus on community dancing is an appropriate tribute to his influence on the culture and politics of Scotland.

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[i] Williams, R 1983 *Keywords* 2nd edition London: Fontana p. 76

[ii] Wilkinson, R. and Pickett, K. 2010 *The Spirit Level* London: Penguin