

BOOK REVIEWS

SCOTTISH EDUCATION SECOND EDITION: POST-DEVOLUTION

Tom Bryce and Walter Humes (eds), (2003). Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.
ISBN: 0-7486-1625X. (1055, £24.99, pb.)

Review by: SALLY BROWN

Let me start by saying that if one is looking for a reference book about Scottish education that has something useful to say about almost all of the traditional facets of the system, and has some good pointers to the formal (especially official) documentation, then this is the tome for you. There are 13 Sections, 115 chapters, 125 authors, 1055 pages (excluding glossary and index) and Heaven alone knows how many words. Each chapter provides six key references in addition to the narrative account of its focus of attention.

The authors of chapters range widely over individuals from schools, further and higher education, local government, journalism, and a range of educational agencies and services. The largest group, as one might expect given the home ground of the editors, are teacher educators from the University of Strathclyde. Such a broad set of sources provides an extremely rich resource of material, but that material takes a lot of managing to bring it together into a coherent collection. An edited text of this size is an enormous achievement and it is hard to imagine the extent of the impact it must have had on the lives of Tom Bryce and Walter Humes over the last few years. They make it clear that they offered pretty tight guidance to chapter authors about the content and structure of the contributions and only one (unidentified) individual had the temerity “to rewrite the entire specification to achieve a better specification of the area in question”.

The editors built on the first edition of the book and give a somewhat complacent account of the achievements of that 1999 version with no mention of any weaknesses it might have had. One innovation that I would have welcomed would have been the addition of an introductory piece at the start of each section by the Section Editors. For some sections, particularly Section IV *The Historical, Cultural and Economic Context of Education*, it is difficult to understand the framework, or the cement, that holds the collection of chapters together. In the introduction to the whole book some effort is made to do this, but Section IV is presented there as a list of important topics for Scottish education and not as a coherent conceptual structure.

The stated aim of the book is to provide concise description with critical perspective that will “increase the knowledge base which informs understanding of the Scottish educational system” (p1044). It was designed to be,

“of particular use to students and scholars... as well as to those professionals who were keen to look beyond their own sector or particular specialism, to see how education ‘works’ in Scotland.” (p4)

and to enable student teachers and experienced teachers to come to terms with complex ideas and practices. A great deal of this it does very well. However, as the editors admit, it is inevitably uneven in quality. The descriptive material is mostly excellent and admirably succinct. What is patchier is the “critical perspective”. One of the features of the first edition (1999) was that many of the authors used their

contributions as *research* publications to submit to the higher education Research Assessment Exercise (RAE) in 2001. Unfortunately, most of these had virtually nothing to add to research, even though in their own ways they may have contributed something of value to education. Much the same could be said of a significant number of the chapters included in the second edition.

However, the kinds of comments I will scatter around this review about the paucity of critical analysis is by no means directed to every contribution, and it is certainly not applicable to the generality of Sections IX and XI. The former section focuses on further and higher education. It includes the intriguing matters of the place of further and higher education in systems of the future, offers discursive comment on the behaviours of these institutions in the past, and makes excellent reading in the milieu of our current lifelong learning concept of the educational community. Section XI is concerned with the challenges that face us in matters of disability, inclusion, inter-agency co-operation, gender, race equality, sectarianism and disaffection with school. Several of the chapters in this section provide the reader with an excellent introduction to the debates and concepts in areas that are fraught with difficulty.

Early on in the book, in Section II on policy and provision, the structure and history of the ideas upon which Scottish education is believed, at least by some, to be based are clearly explicated for the reader. The influence of documents from the Scottish Education Department, with the imprint of Her Majesty's Inspectorate, has clearly been considerable. The Primary Memorandum of 1965 had the stature of a biblical text based on the works of the "prophets" like Piaget and Rousseau, as well as co-existing with student and political unrest. The innate conservatism of Scottish teachers is well brought out and the constructions of myths about education that Scots tell themselves and others are given a good dusting at various points in the book.

The story of Scottish comprehensive schooling, significantly different from that in England, and the impact of legislation during long periods of government by a political party that had no majority support north of the border, is effectively told. For further education, the changes in governance and funding experienced over the last decade are described, but the big reforms of the 1980s in the "subject" focus (eg. a move from a heavy industry emphasis to new technology) get much less attention. For higher education, the reader is also given a competent description of how things are arranged, governed and funded, but one is left with a sense of one-damn-detail-after-another rather than a fundamental understanding of what the crucial issues facing these sectors are. We have to wait for that until Section IX.

The commentary on policy making, however, takes us into the period of education business in which the new Scottish Parliament has become extensively involved. This provides an interesting foray into speculation about the future and to questions on how distinctive Scottish education is and how it differs from that elsewhere. At the end of the second section of the book, the editors eloquently address this issue but, as might be expected, the reader is left in some doubt about the answers to the questions apart from the fiercely held Scottish view that its education is *not* as education is in England.

Section III targets the need, four years after the publication of the first edition, to consider education post-devolution and track the effects of new parliamentary thinking in Edinburgh. This section offers good factual information about the structures and operations of the Parliament, the Scottish Executive Departments for Education, Enterprise and Lifelong Learning, funding for higher education, Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Education in Scotland (HMIIES), local authority governance of education, educational development services and the involvement of parents in Scottish education. There is considerable variation in the extent to which the chapters grip the reader's attention. Interest swells with the introduction of some critical analysis of the political decision to have two government departments for education rather than one, or with comment on the rifts between the teaching force and HMIIES,

or in response to an account of spontaneous actions on the part of parents.

Section IV contributes to the book's heavy historical emphasis. It considers the historical, cultural and economic context of Scottish education and includes chapters on the Gaelic and Scots languages, Catholic education, values and access matters. Throughout the book, there are tantalising differences among the historical accounts and interpretations by academics, nationalists and journalists, and there may well be a research topic on the tensions or compatibilities of the different stories that are told between the covers. In the languages chapters, the much more structured Gaelic share of education contrasts with Scots material that hovers between the continuing rich strand of the literature and the unease about the place of the language in the classroom. Both, of course, have to use rationales other than today's commonplace economic arguments for education in order to persuade the a somewhat sceptical general population of their case. It is regrettable that the chapter on Catholic education makes no attempt to address the debate about whether the maintained system *should* include denominational schools. This lack of analytical critique sits oddly with the following chapter which is entirely an analysis of issues such as the quasi market for education, vocationalisation and learner centredness.

Sections V and VI address matters of organisation, management and curriculum for pre-school and primary provision. They provide a good description of how things are in these sectors and refer to current "issues", under some of which lurk various disputes. Perhaps because of lack of space, there is a reluctance to address these matters in depth and references to relevant critical research literature are sparse. What is accentuated by the structure of Section V on curriculum, where pre-school gets only a passing mention, is the neo-subject based approach that Scotland has found it necessary to sustain in the primary school.

The same pattern of organisation, management and curriculum is used for Sections VII and VIII (the latter at 150 pages being the longest section in the book), which focus on secondary education. Two of the chapters in Section VII, on discipline and classroom management, have a greater research orientation, but the purpose of the secondary subject chapters of Section VIII is primarily to give us the facts about the curriculum for the final six years of compulsory education in Scotland. It is not clear to me why Section X did not immediately follow V to VIII. It is concerned with assessment, certification and achievements and its focus is almost entirely within schools. It follows a continuing pattern of providing an informative set of descriptions that are helpful, but it is short on great debates.

Scottish teachers, teacher education and professionalism make up the penultimate Section XII. It has some worthy but rather dull description of the institutions and agencies associated with Scottish teaching. What it lacks is a sense of new thinking about teaching and teacher education. However, there is one mention in the chapter on research and practice of Donald McIntyre, now Professor of Education at Cambridge. I have been somewhat amazed that his name has appeared nowhere else in this book. His ideas and research had, I thought, been enormously influential on Scottish thinking, especially about teaching and teacher education but also about education more generally. In my experience, this influence was evident not only during the 20 or so years he worked in Scottish higher education, but also in the decade and a half since we allowed him to leave and take his talent to Oxford and then Cambridge.

And what of the future? In Section XIII an *International Perspective* runs through a summary of the literature on general issues such as democracy, managerialism and globalisation that provides a refreshingly broader environment in which to think about our own system. It leaves us, however, with a set of very difficult questions for "the new Scotland" to address with urgency. Some of these are important, forward looking and practical; others look back at what has already been done and are more appropriate for the political analyst's academic articles or essay topics for the advanced student than they are for the busy student or practitioner's immediate attention.

In the final chapter Humes and Bryce pick up some new vibrations in the Scottish education debate. They draw attention to the reference by the Parliamentary Committee for Education, Culture and Sport to the themes of the importance of learners “coping with uncertainty” and “engaging with ideas”. They also explore various scenarios for tomorrow’s schools that have been put forward by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD). Not surprisingly perhaps, they conclude that Scotland is likely to stick with its robust bureaucratic system, given the confident power of bodies such as the General Teaching Council for Scotland, Learning and Teaching Scotland, the Scottish Qualifications Authority and, one might add, the HMIES (despite the recent rein-in of its link with policy making). A call is made for a new and strengthened climate of ideas to move the system on from its traditional ethos of pragmatism and distrust of theory that unimaginatively looks at teaching as a set of competences. The final comments that are made about the importance of the visibility of educational issues that is now characteristic of Scottish politics provide us with hope that ideas with depth will fall on more productive ground than they have done in the past.

As a reference text, this can only add to the efficiency of those who seek to become familiar with, and create new ideas about, Scottish education. We are indebted to the hard working editors and authors. I am now much better informed, if a tad exhausted, by my reading of this important book.

SPECIAL EDUCATIONAL NEEDS IN THE PRIMARY SCHOOL: A PRACTICAL GUIDE

Jean Gross (2002) (third edition) Buckingham: Open University Press.
ISBN 0-335-21217-4 (pp. 265, £18.99, paperback)

Review by MELANIE NIND

This is the third edition of this practical guide. The first two editions have been praised for the richness of ideas written about in an accessible and interesting way. I have no argument with this summary. Indeed, this third edition is a practical guide of the very best kind: the guidance is offered in a coherent way, tips for teachers are not divorced from discussion of fundamental principles of good practice, and advice is based on a judicious mixture of research and experience.

The overall impression Jean Gross gives as the book unfolds is that she is on the side of both the teacher and the pupil – and that she wants and expects the very best for and from them. While some of her outlines of good practice illustrate very clearly the bad options that are frequently taken by teachers, she succeeds in communicating a non-judgemental stance. Gross gives considerable attention to the messages we give to children through our language and our practices. She is explicit that there is nothing to gain and everything to lose from putting children down or not finding the best in them. She stresses noticing and applauding successes and efforts and she cleverly does this for her teacher audience too. Hence this is very much a confidence-boosting book. Teachers reading it are likely to think, “I do that,” – or at least, “I *can* do that.” Moreover, they are given examples and advice about resources and sufficiently detailed information to enable them to be the kind of teacher who responds to diversity in the classroom with confidence and proficiency.

Disappointingly, no distinction is made between cooperative and collaborative learning, more stress is placed on objectives than strategies to meet them, issues of

setting and streaming go un-debated and the benefits of breaking tasks into small steps are accepted uncritically. Heartening, however, is that quiet children get a mention within a central concern with building relationships with pupils and their families.

Two exceptions to my overall praise for this book are worth further discussion. The first relates to language and concepts. While Gross opens with a very strong message that special needs are not inherent deficits in specific children but responses to inappropriate or undifferentiated curricula in any child, her language is not always consistent with this view. Ability is often conveyed as inherent or fixed with care to refer to high or low *attaining* children giving way to references to bright, able or less able children. Having recently engaged with the Learning without Limits project (Hart, 2003), in which creative alternatives to teaching based on ideas of fixed ability are explored, I found this jarred on me, as did the unquestioning faith in the power of differentiation as the way forward. My second exception to the good feel I got from this book concerned the final chapter. Having discussed perspectives, policies, curriculum, assessment and action planning, the chapters turn to supporting children with special needs in behaviour, relationships, speaking and listening, reading, writing and maths. These chapters are rich with stories of how good we can make things for children and how skilled we can be in assessing and supporting them; all the detailed guidance is embedded in narrative about the policies and ethos that support good practice. And then we end with a chapter about supporting children with complex or low incidence needs and these qualities in earlier chapters give way somewhat to lists of tips. Gross's brief summary of why the children should be in ordinary primary schools is punchy and compelling and she attempts to keep up the message that 'you can do this', but the detail is missing, as are the positive vignettes that have worked so well previously. Various deficits – and they do come across as deficits here - are rushed through in what feels a bit like tokenistic inclusion in the book.

Nonetheless, this book is incredibly useful. It has a positive, inclusive stance and the author is clearly empathetic. The approach is influenced by a basic version of the social model of disability so that teachers are encouraged to look at what actions they can take to address barriers to learning in the classroom and curriculum, including a thorough re-evaluation of policy. The discussions draw readers into thinking beyond just short-term solutions and the stress on working round the difficulty to enable curriculum access, whilst also addressing the difficulty and what it means for the whole child is a major strength. This edition is up-to-date with matters of curriculum, code of practice and literacy and numeracy strategies in England (and Wales), though Gross pays little attention to differences across the UK. Examples of good practice tend to be set within current English contexts but this does not make them inappropriate for use in Scotland and elsewhere. The emphasis on including the child as an active partner in any project to enhance their learning is universally relevant; that Jean Gross makes this meaningful and do-able is indicative of the quality of the book as a whole.

REFERENCE

Hart, S. (2003) 'Learning without limits' in M. Nind, K. Sheehy & K. Simmons, (eds) *Inclusive Education: Learners and Learning Contexts*. London: David Fulton Publishers in association with The Open University.

SCOTS AT SCHOOL: AN ANTHOLOGY

Written and edited by David Northcroft (2003). Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press. ISBN 0 7486 1782 5 (pp. 256, £13.99, paperback).

Review by MOLLY CUMMING.

That this text has found its way quickly to the popular Scottish history shelves of booksellers is a testament to its ability to entertain as well as inform. Northcroft's narrative offers little that has not been explored previously, in factual or critical discussion of the Scottish education system. It is the compilation that comprises its anthology, and the way he handles its incorporation within the narrative that gives 'Scots at School' its unique stamp.

Northcroft highlights themes of distinctiveness in the Scottish system. He presents his case in three parts, looking first at the system up to the mid-nineteenth century, moving through the period from the Argyll Commission to the introduction of *ad hoc* local authorities, to the post-1918 developments in the primary and secondary sectors and post-war changes in the system up to 2000. A relatively short narrative is offered for each of the sections within these, with reference to the accompanying anthologized material that follows that section. For those well-versed in the history of Scottish education it is the latter that brings this 'story' to life. For others the combination of tale and illustration is bound to stir memories of personal, if not professional experience, as well as a gaining more insight into the development and working of the system, its policies, practices and the experiences of those who have touched, or been touched by it.

The anthology is wide-ranging, but far from the routine expected in substantiation of an academic text. Contemporary authors are well represented, from Scotland to McPherson, Anderson to Devine, in discussion of traditional themes of identity and democracy, but the charm of this book is its hidden gems. Northcroft has tapped a century and more of official papers, the educational and popular press, school magazines and educational journals. He draws on influences over the years, from Craik to R.F. MacKenzie, to build a representative picture of notions of excellence and stubborn spirit associated with the policy community. Expect to meet Molly Weir, Jack McLean and Evelyn Glennie, as they reflect experiences of school in their own ways. Reminisce with the illustrations that precede the narrative in each section.

The facets of Northcroft's compilation come together comfortably to explain away how some myths and rhetoric might have evolved. The slant on distinctiveness and national pride is novel and entertaining. While the extracts and contributions do not necessarily explain or justify, in themselves, points raised, they do provide relevant illustration for these. If there is one weakness in the anthology it might be its lack of balance in its nationwide representation. There is a strong dependence on material from the east and north of the country, albeit the area probably known best to the author. It may be just coincidence that the most humorous of the anthology's extracts represent a central belt/West of Scotland experience.

Whatever the temptation to leave this book on the shelf it is worth at least perusal. It is a little out of the ordinary in approach, and just enough to allow it to be as much at home in a social setting as on the desk of an academic interested in Scottish education.

EDUCATIONAL RESEARCH IN PRACTICE

Joanna Swann & John Pratt (eds), (2003) London: Continuum.
ISBN 0-8246-5342-2 (pp. 232, £60, hb.)

Review by DAVID HAMILTON

I have an enduring sympathy for book review editors. They struggle with publishers to acquire books for review; and then they must hassle colleagues to find reviewers. But that is not all. They must take up the chase after tardy reviewers so that the review might appear within the active shelf life of the book; and finally, they are vulnerable to the hand-picked, yet overdue, reviewer who feels that the book is unworthy of review.

This is an easy option for the reviewer, especially those who still keep the volume they have been sent. When the review editor of this journal circulated a list of the new books awaiting review, I chose this volume. I am always interested in finding new books and fresh angles for masters and doctoral students whose first language, incidentally, may not be English. In this case, I was attracted to the word 'practice' in the main title, along with the subtitle 'making sense of methodology'.

Theoreticism and methodolatry are endemic in educational research, so I am always on the lookout for counter-arguments. Theoreticism assumes that there is a unitary truth (viz. the right way to look at things), and methodolatry elevates technique to a similarly exalted status (viz. the right way to examine things). Both, I suggest, are relics of the modernist project, having died with Einstein's theory of relativity - that what is right depends on where you are standing. The counter view is that educational research starts somewhere else: with problems in search of a practical solution, rather than with methods or theories in search of a problem.

To turn to my task as a reviewer: what is this book about, why was it written, and what do I think of the editors' efforts? I would like to follow these questions in order but, unfortunately, I have to start with an overall judgement; namely, that the editors are not clear about their intentions. Superficially, this is a book about research in general - an account of 'different approaches to educational research...[and] the assumptions on which they are based'. Yet there is also a different sub-text. The editors own 'assumptions about the growth of knowledge draw on the philosophy of Karl Popper' (p. 3). This latter position, for instance, is advanced in the main chapter by Joanna Swann: 'A Popperian approach to research on learning and method'. It is full of Popperian perspectives on reality, truth, knowledge, and science. Regrettably, this fact limits the scope of the text and, in the process, may discomfort many educational readers. For example, I found it difficult to wrestle with Popper's conception of knowledge which, Swann suggests, survives as 'a generic term for all kinds of expectations (conscious or unconscious, inborn or acquired through development and/or learning), assumptions (explicit or implicit), and theoretical constructs (valid or invalid, true or false)' (p. 15). In turn, and not surprisingly, Swann accepts that this view of knowledge is 'not commonplace within education'.

Swann continues in this vein, redefining the commonplaces of educational practice. The net result is that there is an arbitrariness about her chapter which too easily disqualifies it from being a 'good read'. The paradox in this work, then, is that the 27-page glossary indicates that terms like 'paradigm' and 'post-positivism', have 'a variety of meanings' and no 'single agreed meaning'. It is hardly surprising that the editors - as 'Popperian fallibilist realists' (p. 6) - become caught up in their own attempts not only to define what they mean, but also to exclude other denotations and connotations.

The remainder of the book is taken up with a variety of articles written by authors

in the UK, Canada and New Zealand. These articles comprise the second section of the book – ‘different approaches to Educational Research’. The third section, ‘Dialogues from a Research Community’, reports dialogues, conducted via email, between the editors and the authors of the articles in the second section. The editors challenge the authors to defend what they have written, by judging their work against Popperian standards. Swann, for instance, confronts Elizabeth Atkinson with the suggestion that ‘the post-modern programme doesn’t go far enough’ (p. 129). She asks Michael Collins ‘How in your opinion, will the adoption of critical theory as an approach to the development of understanding lead to practical improvement?’ (p. 142). And John Pratt confronts Michael Bassey with ‘I am looking for a more specific and, pardon the presumption, more logically robust justification of case studies than the one you offer’ (p. 164).

After reading these equally robust interview questions, I began to wonder how many potential contributors had pulled their contributions from the book; just as I began to speculate whether there is there also a falsification theory of interviewing?

Another problem flowed from these interviews, one that relates to the purposes of science. As far as I could see, all the contributors to the second part of the book had something defensible to say about educational research. I might not agree with their arguments but I could understand why other editors had chosen to publish them. The main reason for publishing something is not so much that it is unassailably ‘true’ but, rather, that it is provocative and, therefore, likely to attract readers because of its imperfections.

One of the discomforts I experienced while reading this volume is that its tone has more than a whiff of righteousness. For instance, the final section, ‘Educational Research in Practice’, includes the editors’ conclusions on ‘Doing Good Research’. They leave little to the reader’s judgement and pay insufficient heed to their own fallibilist principle that ‘there is no certain or secure knowledge’ (p. 6).

Here are two contrary standpoints, based on the assumption that there is no secure knowledge, that I could raise with my own students. Swann and Pratt are careful to point out that falsification is ‘Popper’s criterion of demarcation between scientific and non-scientific theories’ (p. 200). This is a problematic position to adopt — logical positivists took an equivalent stance in the 1920s — because it concedes only a narrow view of scientific practice. Many of my students have engaged in research — for their masters’ or doctorate degrees — by questioning their own knowledge. They have chosen to look beyond what they are doing and, in the process, have deepened their professional reach, grasp and understanding. Such learning has been constructivist. They have achieved levels of meta-cognition encapsulated in the statement: ‘once you know what you are doing, you are no longer doing it’. For them, and for me, their learning has been developmental; and courses and supervision have fostered their intellectual growth. The papers in the second section of this book take a similar view of knowledge. Further, such knowledge conforms to the Popperian definition given above. But I am left with a feeling that, somewhere, there is a disjunction between a Popperian view of knowledge and a Popperian view of (scientific or real) learning. It seems that the editors associate learning with the ‘growth of knowledge’ (p. 19). But I wish they had given more space to this issue and, especially its relation to the practice of educational research.

My final comment relates to the intractability of this last problem. The Popperian position in the history of science has been important. Whenever any one asks me ‘what is your hypothesis’, Popper’s ideas come to mind. Accordingly, I think it is important for students of educational research to come to terms with Popper’s ghost. Despite their best intentions, the editors of this volume view educational research through a semantic kaleidoscope. At every turn we are led to see Popper in a different light. They wrestle with this problem but do not rise above it, constructively. If they are bothered by Popper’s ghost, students should read this book. But they should also

be made aware that there is an extensive critical literature on his ideas, a fact that is neglected in this volume. I would suggest they also take a look at the chapter on ‘the limitations of falsifiability’ in A.F. Chalmers’ *What is this thing called science?* (1999), David Edmond and John Eidenow’s *Wittgenstein’s Poker* (2002), an account of a ten-minute argument between Wittgenstein and Popper that, incidentally, is a hilarious commentary on English twentieth-century academic values and, not least, Colin McGinn’s ‘Looking for a black swan’ (New York Review of Books, November 21st, 2002), which suggests that Popper was unable to live up to the strictures of his own philosophy of science. By such means, I feel that students in the twenty-first century might, in their own practice, do more justice to the life and legacy of Karl Popper.

SUPPORTING SPECIAL NEEDS: UNDERSTANDING INCLUSION IN THE EARLY YEARS

Penny Tassoni (2003). Oxford: Heinemann.
ISBN: 0435401629. (pp. 240, £14.99, paperback)

Review by GEORGE HEAD

The clear purpose of this book is to offer practical advice for early years practitioners and, consequently, certain things are presented as understood. For example, the extent of ‘early years’ is never delineated and precisely who Tassoni means by ‘practitioner’ is never discussed and the reader is left to mine this information from the text and activities within the book. The advantage of this approach is that the focus is clearly on what we should be doing with young learners with no assumptions made about who should be doing it. Tassoni, thereby, neatly avoids compartmentalising tasks as belonging to categories of individuals and instead argues for and develops an approach that can be adopted comfortably and confidently by teachers, auxiliaries and nursery nurses alike. The particular audience for this book is early years practitioners in England and Wales and this is reflected in the terminology and terms of reference employed in the book, especially in the early chapters. However, there is ample material that lends a more global relevance to the book and the approach adopted can be seen as a case study on which practitioners in other countries can draw.

The book consists of three distinct sections. The first of these takes the reader through essential areas of definition, language, legislation and policy related to special education in England and Wales. The latter part of this section focuses on the work of the Special Educational Needs Co-ordinator in relation to children and their parents. The second section focuses on working with children in terms of their communication, physical, social, emotional, and learning skills. The theme of child development provides a thread of continuity throughout the chapters in this section. The third and final section is a summary of some of the specific conditions likely to be encountered, with practical suggestions on how to support children exhibiting symptoms of them. Each section (and the chapters within) has the ability to ‘stand alone’ so that it is possible to use the book as a reference manual. However, it is well worth reading in its entirety as there is also a sense of progression and accumulation as one works through the chapters.

The book is attractively set out and contains an appropriate balance among straightforward text, graphics and the tasks and exercises expected in a book based on practice. The commentary is well supported by diagrams, highlighted key issues,

case studies, strategies and invitations for personal reflection. The language is largely non-technical, and important information and facts are highlighted throughout by bullet point.

Undoubtedly, the major strength of Tassoni's book lies in the middle section where the emphasis is on working with children in order to support their learning. The five chapters in this section deal variously with valuing and empowering children, supporting communication and interaction, cognition and learning, behaviour, and sensory and physical development. Although the chapters are discrete, Tassoni takes care throughout to make the links among them and to make clear that development in each of them is dependent on progress across them.

Throughout this section, Tassoni emphasises the importance of the relationship between practitioner and child and urges that the practitioner's focus should be on the development of that relationship rather than any 'impairment' or 'condition' that the child may be deemed to have. Concentrating on this relationship enables the practitioner to nurture the child's self esteem through language (both words and body language), thoughtful use of resources, and, of course, the activities suggested in the book. In this way, the relationship between practitioner and child becomes one of partnership: they become language partners, social partners and learning partners. They grow together. Tassoni argues for a 'language rich environment' in which the practitioner guides the children to become self-directed learners and supports sensory and physical development through the provision of a range of experiences and the development of gross and fine motor skills. Taking this holistic approach, with an emphasis on ability rather than disability, lies at the heart of Tassoni's model of practice that supports the inclusion of young people with additional support needs.

Having argued for the development of the child as a self-directed, problem-solving learner, it is a little disappointing that in the section in which she addresses children's behaviour, she appears to draw back slightly from this position. She offers three theories of behaviour based on conditioning, watching others and self-schemas, with little or no critical comment. However, the weight of her text tends towards the first of these theories, with all its implications for behaviourism and control rather than understanding and empowerment. In addition, there is often the hint of a deficit model behind her thinking when she writes about 'atypical development' and children having low or high levels of alertness. However, her practical advice indicates that by adopting a pro-active approach, the practitioner can support the child in developing a better understanding of their behaviour, learning and social development.

Some readers may also find the lack of references and bibliography frustrating. Tassoni has much to say that is interesting and intriguing and her arguments are convincing. However, there is no opportunity for readers to explore these ideas for themselves. Even a selected bibliography would have been helpful.

Having said that, Tassoni's purpose is to provide practical advice, accompanied by some argument justifying the advice, for all staff working in nurseries and the early years of Primary schools. This she does with undeniable success.