BOOK REVIEWS

HOW TO WRITE A THESIS (2nd edn.)

Rowena Murray (2006) Maidenhead: Open University Press
ISBN: 13 978 0 335 21968 1 (pp. 301, £18.99, pb.)

Review by LIZ CLARK

Having recently completed a thesis myself, I was drawn to this book, to ascertain whether it offered any insight into how to undertake – and more importantly complete – this task, at both Doctoral and Masters level.

My initial thought in reviewing this book was to determine whether this updated version offered any new advice amongst the plethora of self-help manuals which already exist. Indeed the author acknowledges that she herself has read many of these but suggests that this fills the gap by covering the whole writing process.

The structure of the book is user-friendly and the information presented in such a way as to be easily accessible. It gives the reader prompts, hints and tips for writing at each stage and the author advises that using these strategies will help maintain stimulation and excitement – which, as all who have embarked on this journey will know, can be difficult at times. The overview is useful to frame one's route both through the book and the research process from beginning to end. The book however is not intended to be read in this way but is designed to solve a problem as and when it arises.

Each chapter is sub-divided into small chunks of information focusing on a range of issues. The author highlights the importance of good time management and advises that deadlines are set, shared and agreed with supervisors. It is intended that this book will also be helpful for supervisors and will improve the experience of thesis writing for them and the thesis writers.

Other issues covered include the pressure, frustration and fear and loathing which can accompany the revision process, a time when any writer can wonder why they bothered to start writing – and why the end result is less than expected. The author likens this experience to Sisyphus rolling his rock up the hill for no purpose. Being well able to empathise with these feelings, I believe that many readers will welcome the advice on how to overcome this hurdle and not lose your way.

Indeed, the over-arching feeling when reading this book is of embarking on a journey with someone who has gone through the process and understands the feelings and pitfalls associated with it. Each milestone is discussed and practical advice offered to ensure that progress is maintained throughout until the marathon is completed.

In conclusion, this revised edition does fill the gaps and will assist and encourage the intended audience, described by the author as "anyone who's thinking about writing a thesis out of irrepressible enthusiasm for a subject". It is a welcome addition to the "toolbox" for writers and should enable successful completion of a thesis.

EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION AND CARE: POLICY AND PRACTICE

Margaret M. Clark & Tim Waller (2007) London: Sage Publications.
ISBN: 978 1 4129 3572 2 (pp. 192, £19.99, pb.)

Review by ERIKA CUNNINGHAM

Early Childhood Education and Care: Policy and Practice explores the similarities and differences between the developments in early childhood education across the four constituent parts of the United Kingdom and Ireland. It is a valuable resource, targeted at practitioners and students working in the context of early years education within these countries and beyond. It offers a unique and informative perspective on policies and practice throughout the United Kingdom (even if the United Kingdom is often incorrectly referred to as one country). It allows the reader the opportunity to study, interrogate and compare the different principles and developments in each of the countries. This encourages the reader to reflect on the particular characteristics of each system.

The book is well set out, accessible and practical. It has a clear structure, including an introduction addressing the general issues in policy and practice, along with a concluding chapter summarising and comparing the reported developments. The main chapters focus on each country in turn, (in alphabetical order so as not to portray England in a superior light!) following a similar structure throughout.

The authors set out clear aims to help the reader to appreciate the differences across the countries. They effectively use case studies to illustrate how policy and practice impact on the lives of children in each country. Each chapter is written by early years specialists from their respective country and each follows the same format, allowing easy comparisons to be made throughout the book. The content of each chapter is contextualised and brought to life with case studies of two children born in 2000 and from that country. The chapter examines how these children are influenced by their own family circumstances and the services and provision available to them. Each case study has a number of issues highlighting the differing needs of the family and how they could or should be supported.

For example, in the Scottish chapter, one of the case studies looks at the childhood experiences of Fraser. Fraser is a boy born and brought up in Edinburgh who, while he is still young, moves with his family to a rural area of Scotland. There are many challenges and issues facing this family, including changes in family circumstances, nursery provision for working parents in the city, and latterly Gaelic education and a lack of job opportunities. Each case study has a mix of family-based problems and explores how factors relating to childhood education and care impact upon their lives.

The chapter then goes on to discuss the general background of each country, looking at the geographical features and statistics relating to population and demographics. There is a discussion on the political climate and the legislative issues influencing the country as well as an exploration of the diversity and cultural issues relevant to the family context. These topics are then related back to the case studies contextualising the issues in relation to the individual children – for example, the difficulties Fraser and his family experience when moving from Edinburgh to a Gaelic-speaking community.

The chapter then looks at a recent time line of policy and practice in early childhood education and care, focussing on the relevant documentation and strategies impacting on children and families. The curriculum forms a large part of this discussion. The guidance given to practitioners to support the education and development of each child is noted. In addition, the issue of transitions and the

impact of this on the child and family are explored. Again, there are opportunities to reflect on the individual experiences of the children in the case studies and questions are posed to encourage the reader to undertake further reflection. This is related to relevant documentation and research in this field, making clear the importance of continuity and progression in the education of the young child. It is noted that this is an issue highlighted in the Curriculum for Excellence and it 'continues to spark discussion and debate in Scotland'.

The factual information regarding the schooling and primary education of the child leads on from this discussion, highlighting the statistics of class sizes and staffing and how the curricula (3-5 and 5-14) fit into this structure. The impact and developments of Curriculum for Excellence in this picture are highlighted. The issues relating to Special Educational Needs and inclusion are briefly discussed as well as issues pertaining to safeguarding children. The current documentation and acts in place to care for and protect children in a variety of different circumstances are outlined. Quality assurance in terms of HMIe and the self evaluation materials are described and there is discussion on how these have helped to raise standards and ensure consistency across the education sector. This leads on to the importance of professional development and training across the workforce and the influence of new requirements and standards are highlighted.

Each chapter is brought to a close by exploring possible developments and imminent changes in education. The reader is encouraged to reflect back on the case studies of the children born in 2000 and consider the child born in 2006; what are the future prospects for this child? Will he or she indeed be successful, confident, responsible and effective learner in the case of Scottish education? This is one of the many questions this chapter – and in fact this book – challenges the reader to consider.

The other chapters on each country follow a similar format although issues and other relevant topics relating to the individual countries are addressed dependent upon local cultural and historical perspectives.

This book is a good resource to access basic information relating to early childhood education and care. It is a good starting point for anyone wishing to find out more about the policy and practice in their country and compare the perspectives and provision in others. As a newly published book, this is current, well informed and relevant today. My only concern is that as education develops rapidly and policies are continually changing, it may become dated very quickly. Occasionally the text of the book is somewhat limited by descriptions rather than critical reflection. Having said this, the content is sound and the case studies make this an enjoyable read, linking the practice in education and care clearly with the developments taking place.

BETTER LEARNING, BETTER BEHAVIOUR

George Head (2007) Edinburgh: Dunedin Academic Press
ISBN: 1-903765-86-8 (pp.96, £13.50, pb.)

Review by SHEILA HENDERSON

On first picking up this book there was the expectation that here was yet another self-help book for teachers about managing pupils' behaviour. Instead I found a thorough and thought-provoking work which should make the reader reflect at length on his or her own stance in relation to managing pupils with social, emotional and behaviour difficulties (SEBD) in schools. It is not only of interest to those working with children in the educational setting, however, as a great deal of the material will be of interest to those with a concern about how children are socialised into society through education, and how society responds to those children whose behaviour is deemed by that society as unacceptable.

The title transposes the wording of the Scottish Executive's policy document, *Better Behaviour, Better Learning* (SEED, 2001), by placing the emphasis on learning. George Head's premise is that if teaching and learning were better, improved behaviour would follow, as opposed to the Scottish Executive's premise that improved behaviour would result in improved learning.

The material is organised in five chapters and is written in a clear and accessible style. It begins by tracing what is meant by social, emotional and behavioural difficulties from Classical times through to the present day. It then charts the history of provision for this group of children with SEBD, from the needs model and integration that began in the 1970s to the rights model and inclusion agenda of the 1990s and 2000s. Interestingly, Head discusses the dichotomy, familiar to many classroom teachers, where the special sector of education sees inclusion as the answer for the SEBD group, but the mainstream often sees it as the reason for rising levels of indiscipline.

Head moves on in the second chapter to look at theories of behaviour and their impact, with an interesting discussion on the assertion that positive approaches to behaviour management, so popular in schools at the moment, are actually behaviourist in nature and unlikely to work as children have little intrinsic motivation to abide by any set of rules or pre-determined behaviours. It is recognised that humanistic approaches on the other hand, which put the child at the centre rather than the system, are time consuming and costly in terms of the teacher's time. Chapter three goes on to discuss legislation and policies that have shaped the provision and practice adopted with SEBD children, looking particularly at the rights versus needs agenda. Current legislation no longer regards pupils who need additional support as somehow in deficit and recognises that any pupil may need support at any time during their time in school. Despite this, the question arises: how can the needs of the majority of children in a class be met if the rights of a few, the SEBD group, mean they are included regardless of the behaviour they display? Whose rights are paramount?

In chapter four, research on the educational experiences of SEBD children and their teachers is examined, raising the question about why teachers exclude pupils from their classes when they report that in-class approaches are more effective. The author goes on to examine some current initiatives in schools and some of the contradictions raised by research. The final chapter of the book discusses teacher and pupil identity and pedagogy, beginning with a look at realist and relativist ontologies and the types of schools, teachers and behaviours that would prevail in systems that adopt one or other of these. A model of teaching that hopes to offer

a way forward for dealing with SEBD children is then offered. Interestingly this model, called a mediational style of teaching, is one which many teachers would suggest is simply good practice. George Head does recognise this, suggesting that this is a benefit for choosing this approach as "it takes what teachers are already good at and builds on it."

This book challenges the marginalisation and demonisation of the SEBD group of children and instead suggests that they be treated the same way as children with more easily recognised learning difficulties. An example given is that when deciding how best visually impaired children will learn we do not first seek to "fix" their learning difficulty. Yet with SEBD children we believe that before effective learning can take place their social, emotional or behavioural difficulty must first be corrected. Although many teachers would have a great deal of sympathy for this stance while these children are in school, the question that must be asked is how society would cope as these children move though the educational system and out into employment. Of course the hope is that many of their difficulties would have been resolved or that they would have learned how to cope with them. If not, would employers be willing to provide for this group in the same way that the education system had? Would their demonisation and marginalisation then simply be postponed until later in life?

The transposition of Learning and Behaviour in the title seems to be summed up with the behaviourist-realist and humanist-relativist split, and the suggestion that the first somehow makes matters worse for SEBD children and the second offers many of the answers for dealing with this group. The truth of course, and the reality in our education system, is that schools and their teachers usually offer a mix of approaches and practices that cannot be summed up by these polar extremes. Despite this, the important thing in terms of this work is that it raises awareness about a group of children who we all must ensure are not marginalised – either in school or society.

OVERCOMING THE BARRIERS TO HIGHER EDUCATION

Stephen Gorard with Nick Adnett, Helen May, Kim Slack, Emma Smith and Liz Thomas (2007) Stoke on Trent: Trentham Books.
ISBN: 978-1-85856-414-2 (pp. 164, £18.99, pb)

Review by MUIR HOUSTON

This book is a summary of an independent review of the evidence on widening participation (WP) in higher education (HE). It has a particular focus on the barriers faced by potential and actual students and the substantive conclusions which can reasonably be drawn from the evidence. The review was commissioned by the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) in 2004.

The WP agenda has been a feature of policy in UK higher education for a number of years (HEFCE, 1998). However, as this book and the associated report (available from the HEFCE website*) suggest, little robust analysis of the impact of the WP agenda has been undertaken. Indeed, the main message seems to be that, on the basis of the poor quality of research and evaluation in this area, little of substance can be said about the success or failure of existing WP initiatives.

The book is structured in five sections, each with two chapters which look at specific aspects of research into WP. The first section contains an introduction

which sets the scene and provides some underlying context to the remainder of the book. As such, much of this material, and many of the arguments and observations made, will be familiar to those engaged in WP research.

The second chapter sets the tone for the book. In an examination of the datasets available to WP researchers, attention is drawn to the inadequacies of existing data, and trenchant critiques of those using these flawed datasets are provided. According to Gorard *et al*., we can say nothing about defining social categories as we cannot properly define the relevant population of interest; we cannot adequately measure the characteristics of this population or define participation in HE; and thus, cannot measure the characteristics of those participating.

The second section is an examination of who may be missing out on participation in HE and reviews the existing evidence base. In Chapter 3, the authors provide figures on participation overall, participation by age, by social class, by ethnicity, by disability, by mode of study and by area of residence. The authors conclude that much of the analysis sponsored by the Department for Education and Skills (DfES) in these areas is based on mistaken assumptions and is 'simply wrong' (Gorard *et al*., 2007: p25).

Gorard *et al*. then take a lifelong view of the decision to participate in higher education. Early life factors such as family, peer group and initial education are seen as crucial determinants of individual trajectories that may or may not lead to considering the possibility of higher education; this is an area which is revisited at greater length in Chapter 6. The authors again raise concerns about the quality of research. Specifically, they draw attention to issues of missing or inappropriate comparators (for example between groups or over time) which means that it is difficult to argue for causal connections between interventions and changes in the numbers participating in higher education.

The third section concerns potential obstacles to participation in HE or even considering this option. Chapter 5 examines: cost and the impact of changes to the student funding model; time and travel; motivation; and institutional barriers. Interestingly, the authors cite data from the Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA) as confirming finance is not an important cause of non-completion (p.59). However given the quality of the HESA data, this seems a long bow to draw. If the categories 'Other personal reasons', 'Other' and 'Unknown' are aggregated we discover that nothing specific is known about the decisions to leave made by 74 per cent of those who failed to complete in 2002/3. As Yorke (1999) indicates, withdrawal or non-completion are complex and are often the result of cumulative pressures, resulting from the interaction of a number of factors, including finance, but often in combination with health and family/work-life balance.

Chapter 6 brings the reader back to an examination of the impact of early life on determining participation in higher education. In part this recognises that persistent issues with WP are not only to be found in HE. For Gorard *et al*, the determinants of participation start at birth and continue throughout the formative years. In other words, children of graduates tend to participate, and children with parents who are lifelong learners are more likely to be lifelong learners themselves. There follows a review of interventions which have targeted school pupils. It is of no surprise that the authors conclude that these have only produced limited evidence of success in raising participation and that causal relationships between interventions and subsequent participation cannot be established.

The fourth section 'Experiencing HE', contains chapters (7 and 8) on the transition to HE and the experience of HE once enrolled. As the reader will expect by now, more evidence of poor quality research and unsupported conclusions is provided. In Chapter 7 research on issues such as choice of institution and subject, applications and admissions procedures, and the period of transition to university life is reviewed. In summary, choice is seen to be influenced by geographical

constraints, cultural constraints, level and type of qualifications and the vocational relevance of the course or programme – all of which can impact differentially in terms of class, age, gender and ethnicity.

Chapter 8 primarily views the student experience through an examination of patterns of retention and progression, with a focus on possible causes of non-completion. Various strategies to ameliorate student attrition are reviewed, including targeted academic and pastoral support for non-traditional learners, targeted induction activities, and the provision of specific 'study skills' modules. Overall, Gorard *et al.* suggest that the evidence-base provided by these studies is poor. However, the authors appear to fall foul of their own criteria of research quality in supporting, for example, the work of Ozga and Sukhnandan (1998) which gets two positive mentions in relation to institutional change and the impact of life pressures on the attrition of mature students. Given the small sample (41 students) it is difficult to see how this study differs from others that have been criticised precisely on this shortcoming.

This brings us to the concluding section, which looks at life after HE for non-traditional students and makes some suggestions about how the barriers outlined in the preceding text can perhaps be tackled. Gorard *et al.* note that alongside the increase in absolute undergraduate numbers, there has been a dramatic increase in those continuing to post-graduate level (particularly Masters). However, they cite research which suggests that class inequalities in undergraduate patterns of participation are mirrored at the post-graduate level. In relation to labour market outcomes, it would appear that graduates from non-traditional backgrounds do less well in the labour market, even after other variables such as entry qualifications, institution attended and degree classification are controlled.

The final chapter attempts to specify areas where more research is required. Given the tone and content of earlier chapters, it would appear there are 'lots'. Once more the authors criticise existing datasets and the lack of data, particularly on non-traditional students, and they call for greater consultation on the form and nature of datasets to better serve stakeholders' interests. In order to facilitate analysis, they call for extension of the unique pupil identifier, which currently is used to track students through compulsory education (and in Scotland into FE), to allow the tracking of individuals throughout their learning experiences.

Finally, Gorard *et al.* comment on the nature and scale of widening participation. The authors' view is that we can accurately predict the qualifications an individual will gain at age 16, and that their chances of staying in education can be gleaned from what is known about them at birth. It then appears that tinkering with university admissions policies is not going to have much impact. Important questions are raised, for example: Who should be targeted? Whose responsibility should this be? Should national policies, institutions and/or individuals change? If university places are not expanded, who is to be excluded to make way for WP entrants?

In summary, while an impressive volume of literature is reviewed, at times discussions feel rushed. For example, the discussion of progression and retention may be better covered elsewhere (Yorke & Longden, 2004). As mentioned, the tone is negative and may be off-putting for some readers, diluting the important messages contained in the book. These include the assertion that a child's background is a major determinant of life chances, including participation in HE and future employment; that on the current evidence, WP activities are unlikely to transform existing patterns of participation; and that research into WP might be designed to ensure appropriate sampling and use of comparators. For those who prefer less polemic, the free HEFCE version* is to be recommended.

*http://hefce.ac.uk/pubs/RDreports/2006/rd13_06/barriers.pdf

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