

Review: Sutton, Ruth (2000), Primary to Secondary: Overcoming the Muddle in the Middle, Ruth Sutton Publications, Salford – John MacKay, Feb 2009

This book highlights many of the problems faced by all secondary teachers in the transition of young people from primary to secondary. The beauty is that this book also suggests solutions and rationale to overcome these problems.

As a faculty head of a science department in an inner city school I am faced with pupils from at least ten different primary schools joining together in S1. It might appear easier to start afresh and ignore the excellent work carried out in the primary schools. Is this the answer? Of course it is not and it is important to build on the learning and teaching of the previous years. Evidence is available to show young people often regress during the first two years of secondary and Ruth explores the reasons for this and how to combat this regression.

In our school a number of excellent primary/secondary transition programmes are organised to allow young people to make the seamless transfer to the 'big school' but these tend to be more of a pastoral nature. Curriculum information is supplied by our primary colleagues but with such a widespread of pupils from many different schools this is often lost in transition to a subject teacher and a fresh start approach is taken.

Ruth Sutton explains the transition across five bridges. Each of these bridges describes a category of strategies designed to enhance the learning progression of young people from one school to the next.

Adopting a crossing the bridges approach with pupils and staff of the schools will reduce 'the muddle in the middle'. These are

- The managerial/bureaucratic bridge
- The social and personal bridge
- The curriculum content bridge
- The pedagogical bridge
- The management-of-learning bridge

Improved communication and links between the schools in recent years have built excellent bridges in many schools. Imaginative programmes have been used to build the social and personal bridge, e.g. bringing parents to school. With the pressure to cover curriculum content especially in the primary sector the essentials of good learning have suffered. The move to Curriculum for Excellence should be seen as an opportunity to improve on this.

Ruth suggests that the first three bridges which often already exist in our schools are the easier to cross because they are the foundations of trust between teachers and schools. They do not require major changes in the way they are structured.

The pedagogical bridge and the management-of-learning bridges are the more challenging. However as the approaches to learning and teaching are marked between both sectors, to close this gap Ruth suggests we need to address the things that create the different 'teaching cultures in primary and secondary schools'.

The key to crossing the final bridge is our use of assessment. It has been said it is the daily behaviour of teachers which has the most influence on the achievements of their students. This is endorsed by research and it suggests formative assessment and its use in our schools is the way ahead. In this book Ruth challenges the reader to think about their assessment practises in their own classrooms and schools.

'Overcoming the Muddle in the Middle' raises more questions than answers but it is essential that we consider these questions. Improvements can be made for our young people if we take the messages from the author.