

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

Ruth Sutton writes clearly about critical issues in the learning and teaching process. Her no nonsense approach seeks to talk to practitioners about the day to day job of teaching and learning rather than bamboozle with academic phraseology. She uses some notable examples of current practice in schools and gently prises them open to reveal the damage to learners that may underlie certain methodologies and traditions. This book is not just an unpicking of flaws but a text which provides teachers with points to consider and suggests possible solutions.

In her discussion of primary and secondary transition, Ruth Sutton discusses the structural settings of both schools. She urges the development of opportunities for teachers across the divide to collaborate on joint CPD, sharing of standards, moderation, parental involvement and the dialogue around learning. Drawing upon assessment for learning work (AFL in New Zealand) she highlights the need to have learners fully engaged in reflection on their own learning and for staff to plan opportunities for dialogue with students around their learning and next steps.

Ruth Sutton examines some of the obstacles placed in the way of learners as part of the school system, particularly at the transition stage: long holiday periods, inflexible content driven timetables, primary-secondary staff expectations, change of learning and teaching styles, incorrectly used assessment, underperformance of students in new situations, and lack of recognition of prior learning (to name but a few!) Add to this the challenges of adolescence, peer pressure and increasing pressures upon family life and it is no surprise that the 'middle' may at times seem such a muddle, leading some students to mentally give up rather than catch up.

From this deficit position, Sutton builds bridges of progression. These bridges are a means of enhancing learning for students during the transition from one school to the next. These bridges will involve planned discussions between school staff around pastoral preparation (with staff, pupils and parents), shared understanding and participation in curriculum planning, shared standards and expectations, and development of trust and team working between schools. Ruth Sutton gives particular attention to the most problematic of the bridges – the Pedagogical and the Management of Learning.

The Pedagogical Bridge involves teachers learning from each other. Dialogue is centred around learning and pedagogy and challenges the impact that present school structures have on learning. The role of the student in their own learning and the need for quality CPD for staff are central to the building of this bridge. As a Primary Headteacher, I found this chapter to be of particular interest, given the current development of a 3-18 Curriculum for Excellence in Scotland. What was heartening in the Scottish context is the way in which many schools have already embraced many of these changes since this book was published in 2000.

In the chapter on the Management of Learning Bridge, Sutton examines the basis for effective assessment, citing *The Black Box* and Assessment Reform Group publications as seminal documents. Sutton's observations mirror the work of the Assessment is for Learning project in Scotland. This final chapter of 'The Muddle in the Middle' puts pupils at the centre of their learning alongside staff who will assist them to review and reflect on all assessments, with the intention of

promoting learning. Sutton reminds teachers that their core business is 'improving students' learning'.

In this short book, Ruth Sutton offers practical solutions which will benefit all students. The changes she suggests are not just structural but philosophical. The hearts and minds work (for staff and students) of building trust, communication, sound assessment and differentiation must be developed simultaneously for real and lasting improvement to take place.