

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

A review from a New Zealand perspective

When I read this book for the first time in 2001 I had been a First Deputy Principal for six years at a large intermediate school in New Zealand (NZ). Intermediate schools in NZ are two year 'middle' schools that cater for Year 7 & Year 8 pupils which are equivalent to P7 & S1 in Scotland. After two years at an intermediate school pupils move on to a secondary school for years 9-13.

Much of this book came out of Ruth's special project with 11 NZ schools on learning progressions in the middle years so there was an immediate relevance to my situation. In addition, throughout the book there is a strong link from the project in NZ to international research and in particular it highlights the links between Terry Crook's seminal research in 1988 on learning, assessment and motivation and the work done ten years later by Black & William on assessment for learning.

It was one of the first education books I had read that looked at the complexity of the transition from primary to secondary schooling through a combination of practical examples, anecdotes and research. It provided some suggestions to make transition less threatening and more effective for pupils through a focus on primary and secondary teachers talking to each other and sharing their understanding of learning progressions. There was one aspect that I found most useful – that of the 'bridges' between primary/intermediate schools and secondary schools.

At our school we had implemented a range of strategies with the secondary school to make pupils' transition between schools smoother. There were sound links between our Year 8 teachers and the Guidance teachers in the secondary schools which was focused primarily on special education needs. At the end of each Year 8 session, we had always given the secondary teachers 'profiles' of individual pupils but our teachers did not value these as they thought the purpose of these was primarily to inform class groupings in the secondary school rather than provide information about the pupil as a learner. We also had made some attempts to discuss curriculum connections (what was the difference between level 4 & 5 and how were we each gathering evidence of it; what units we needed to avoid because the secondary teachers wanted to 'cover' that), and we tentatively started to include visits between the Year 8 (intermediate) and Year 9 (secondary) teachers.

Ruth outlines the research done through the Homerton study, that examined how schools dealt with transfer issues and the idea of five 'bridges' that could build across the gulf of the divide. I reflected on how strong our 'bridges' were at our school. I could see that we were addressing some of the bridges: the 'managerial/bureaucratic' bridge, the 'social and personal' bridge and the 'curriculum content' bridge but the missing ones, the ones that were hardest to address yet could make the most difference, were not being addressed.

These vital bridges were the 'pedagogical bridge' and the 'management of learning' bridge. Changes in these areas would entail challenging some very fundamental assumptions about beliefs about teaching at the two different school levels and would require regular opportunities for primary and secondary teachers to share their approaches to teaching, and this would have to include assessment methods. In order to forge closer links between the two schools there would need

to be agreement on what meaningful information about pupils needed to be communicated and then used to assist their learning in the new environment.

As I moved on in my career to become an Advisor in Assessment and worked across primary, intermediate and secondary schools supporting teachers in their understanding and practices of assessment I made frequent use of Ruth's book and in particular, the focus on ways that would enable the building of the last two bridges. I could see that the mistrust and 'blame' culture that had developed between schools could be ameliorated through a commitment to teaching, learning and assessment approaches conducive to the improvement of pupils' motivation and self efficacy and thus their engagement in their learning.