

The Essential Guide to

Understanding Special Educational Needs

By Jenny Thompson

Feeling out-of-date on special education I approached this book hoping to be gently, but seriously, brought up-to-date. I believe I was. Of course, as I write, government could be planning some wholesale changes that will, inevitably, bring with them new terminology, new sets of initials and new legal requirements so I also asked myself to guess the shelf-life of the book. The detail and overall professional usefulness of this book will not fade quickly. Finally, I could not help remembering my own special need when I was at school: I needed to have more teachers who could really help me to learn so I asked myself if this book could enhance the professionalism of teachers in general. It will, irrespective of any specialism.

There continue to be countries in which many learning disabilities are not recognised; and indeed during my professional lifetime dyslexia has been dismissed as a myth in the UK. One reason for this is distrust of experts, especially if they employ an inaccessible language. They should try hard not to. Another reason is that for so long shameful labels were used such as 'cretin', 'mentally deficient', 'feeble minded' and 'thick', which Michael Gove recently used in a speech. Acknowledging a learning need often felt like admitting to a degrading social sin. A third reason is that teachers sometimes saw themselves as imparters of subject knowledge rather than as facilitators of learning. If, as a child, you did not always 'get' what the teacher was saying or instructing you to do then it was assumed that it was you who had a problem rather than the teacher who needed to find a more effective way of helping you to learn. This book should help to disperse the fog of ignorance and prejudice and I wish that some of my school teachers had read something like it.

Given the current emphasis on so-called traditional teaching and the clear but unwise policy signal that professional educators need less academic theory we are increasingly moving toward do-it-yourself professional formation and learning. For me the importance of books like this cannot be exaggerated. We are lucky to have a generation of people in universities like Jenny Thompson who have experience of schools, F.E., and universities. They 'do' theory and they also 'do' practice. Their professional lives have encompassed both yard duty and the critical sense-making that higher education does and should demand.

Jenny Thompson has given us a book that we can trust. Even if government does make wholesale change tomorrow; and even if teachers are suddenly

required to chase after different targets it is highly desirable that professionals do more than react to policy. They must also self-generate, ask questions and renew their knowledge and understanding. In a few years' time we may lose the perspective that higher education contributes to school teaching. Accessible books like this that offer and combine both practical advice and theory are essential for the maintenance of serious professionalism.

It costs £16.99 and is published by Longman. To find out more go to www.theessentialguides.net