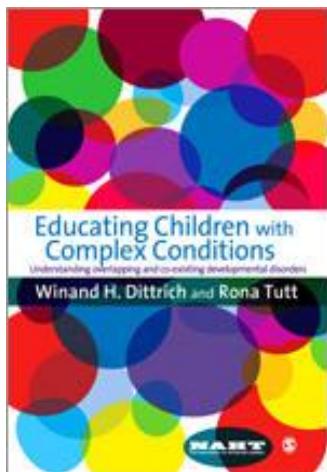


Book Review



Educating Children with Complex Conditions: Understanding Overlapping and Co-Existing Developmental Disorders

by Winand H. Dittrich and Rona Tutt
London: Sage Publications (2008).

Paperback £21.99 (ISBN: 9781847873187)

Review by **Elizabeth Wady**

In a speech to the Royal Society of Arts in 2009 Michael Gove, then the Shadow Secretary of State for Children, Schools and Families stated that:

Every child should have the chance to be introduced to the best that has been thought and written. To deny children the opportunity to extend their knowledge so they can appreciate, enjoy and become familiar with the best of our civilisation is to perpetuate a very specific and tragic source of deprivation.

A great achievement of this book is that, throughout its 114 pages, the above statement is not merely political 'pie in the sky'. After reading the book those educating students with Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD), Autistic Spectrum Disorder (ASD), dyslexia, dyscalculia, dyspraxia and dysgraphia can have the 'pie' firmly on the classroom table.

Initially, complex conditions are explained together with relevant terminology within the text and in a glossary. Therefore the reader is aware of what is meant by ADHD, ASD and a number of other conditions from both neuropsychological and educational viewpoints. Attention is devoted to the fact that the same difficulty can overlap, or occur in several conditions. For example, problems in sequencing words, sentences, paragraphs and ideas can occur in Specific Language Impairments, dyspraxia, and dysgraphia. Presentation of the conditions means the reader tends to look for specific difficulties in their own students. In one sense therefore, the book is child centred.

The formatting used makes the book user-friendly and accessible to student teachers, teachers, other professionals and parents. Each chapter commences with a content outline and also includes key points and questions for reader reflection cleverly placed in lightly shaded boxes. Attention is not drawn automatically to these boxes unless this is desired so the text flow is uninterrupted. A summary of key points is provided at the end of each chapter together with an up-to-date list of further reading.

A complete chapter is devoted to brain function in a technical, well-illustrated fashion. So much information is provided that more than one reading is required for full understanding. Nevertheless, the different working of the brain in students with complex conditions is discussed with highlighting of the clear implications for teaching and learning. Thinking is then briefly described before the authors look at intelligences and learning styles. A definition of learning styles is not given beyond the somewhat simplistic visual, auditory, kinaesthetic and tactile. To their credit however, Winand and Tutt do state that 'different types of learning call for different styles' (p 54) which presumably indicates they know there are more than four

learning styles. Another interpretation of the previous quote is that individuals possess more than one learning style. This idea is reinforced by the many teaching strategies outlined in the subsequent chapters as well as educational research covering several decades.

Those dealing with learning research in an educational context might be irritated by the lack of distinction between learning style and learning approach, but this is unimportant considering the intended audience of the book. Both learning styles and learning approaches are covered in a manner suitable for home and classroom practitioners, even if they are not clearly defined. The most useful section is probably chapter four, 'Dealing with Different Disorders in the Classroom', which takes nine areas of difficulty common in those with complex conditions and outlines methods of addressing them. Numerous strategies are presented for dealing with the nine areas, all of which can also be downloaded from the associated website (<http://www.sagepub.co.uk/dittrich> - see the 'Downloadable Material' link under the 'Sample Materials' tab). Students without complex conditions, or any Special Educational Need, would also benefit from the strategies listed and discussed which enhances the value of the book. To illustrate this idea, Strategies for Helping Memory (p 62) contains, among others, these two points: First '*keep sentences short to reduce unnecessary complexity, particularly when content is unfamiliar to pupils*'. Secondly '*avoid overloading the memory by expecting pupils to both hold and manipulate information at the same time*'. Teachers in particular, will realise that the student who does not have some difficulty or is partially deficient in these skills is somewhat rare. Therefore these strategies are suitable for all students. Similarly, Strategies for Communication; (p 66), presents fourteen ideas for lessons. Two of these ideas are: '*develop pupils' ability to listen by gradually increasing the length of time they are expected to do so*'. Also, '*encourage pupils to listen carefully to each other and a range of other people talking to different sized groups*'. The same argument presented for Strategies to Help Memory also apply to those for Communication Skills. Whilst obviously, students with complex conditions have greater difficulty with these skills than students without; this does not mean that the latter group need no assistance. Of the 128 strategies the authors present, none cannot be applied to students without complex conditions which therefore means the book is useful to all teachers as well as parents and carers.

One section that could have been profitably omitted is chapter five, which concerns the environment and therapeutic issues. Environment, medication and other therapies are discussed too briefly to be of practical use or for even a brief balanced argument to be presented. Additionally, concerning diet, the authors seem to have strayed from their areas of expertise. This is most evident when they refer to gluten and casein free diets for those with ASD and ADHD with individual opinions the only evidence provided to support their arguments. Other supporting evidence is not supplied. However, research to date has found no evidence indicating benefits in restricting gluten or casein in the conditions discussed and these dietary changes are specifically not recommended by the relevant charitable and professional societies. More complete arguments about environment, medication, diet and other therapies would require greater coverage and contributions from professionals such as medical, educational and nutritional researchers. The book could perhaps have been improved by omitting chapter five and extending chapter four, in which most readers will presumably have their main interest.

To conclude, this is an informative book which will improve readers' ability to educate all children, not just those with complex conditions as well as to reflect upon their own practice. It is a useful tool for teachers and parents.