

## BOOK REVIEW:

# *“Educating Children and Young People With Foetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorders”: Constructing personalised pathways to learning*

Carolyn Blackburn, Barry Carpenter and Jo Edgerton

Reviewed by Judith Nel

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Carolyn Blackburn, Barry Carpenter and Jo Edgerton’s book: *“Educating Children and Young People With Foetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorders”* addresses an area that, for too long, has been in the “too hard basket”. It is an important and timely text. The book provides families and professionals with relevant, well researched information about the effects of alcohol on un-born children and the resultant life-long impact. Significantly the book addresses possible paths that educators and other professionals may take to reduce the effects of FASD.

All three people have huge credibility in the field of special education. Carolyn has broken new ground by combining teaching experience with foetal alcohol research. Carolyn has first-hand understanding of the impact that alcohol can have on children’s learning, and is in the fore-front of pedagogical change. Jo has been closely involved with researching appropriate tools and strategies to address the learning needs of young people with severe and complex learning difficulties through planned engagement.

Barry Carpenter was one of the first educational leaders to address the issue of FASD. Barry has delivered thought provoking presentations on this subject throughout the world – including New Zealand and Australian educational conferences. At Barry’s instigation several New Zealand schools have been involved in a UK funded research project concerning Complex Learning Disorder and Disability. As a result, an innovative and highly effective process for engaging learners with profound and complex learning needs has been developed, trialled and implemented. On-going research in New Zealand has shown this approach can bring about significant positive shift in pedagogical efficacy.

This book provides the practitioner with up to date, well researched information, and importantly suggests programming changes to address the very challenging needs of young people affected by FASD (Foetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorders). From the introductory passages the authors work from a strengths-based perspective. FASD’s comprise a completely preventable spectrum of intellectual and developmental deficits that persist throughout life. However early diagnosis combined with personalised programming, curriculum adaptation and a positive learning /teaching relationship with the child can ameliorate the effects.

The historical and factual information within Chapter Two puts the overall problem into context. Actually it highlights a perspective that reaches back through history to the observations of Plato. The evidence of the effects of alcohol on a developing foetus

described in this chapter should be sobering for everyone! There is no such thing as a safe level of alcohol during the critical stages of development – for example early in pregnancy there could be an impact on the number of brain cells that develop within the brain structure, and later in pregnancy it could affect the actual number of connections between brain cells.

Chapters Three and Four further investigate the impact on learning of FASDs. Highly relevant descriptions of damage to areas of the brain and the resultant cognitive effects lead into detailed discussions about medical difficulties, learning difficulties, behavioural difficulties, social difficulties, vulnerability at transition points, sensory processing disorders, mental health and other affected areas. Case studies describe how such young folk have been supported in the UK. The authors temper the obvious challenges with a description of a range of practical strengths that most learners with an FASD possess.

Children with FASDs have profiles of uneven and inconsistent learning patterns. Chapter Five recommends a novel pedagogical approach. Educators are encouraged to re-frame their pedagogical thinking in order to plan effective learning experiences. This chapter discusses the importance of engaging these students in learning. An approach discussed and recommended is “the engagement profile and scale”. Research undertaken in New Zealand schools that have trialled and implemented this tool has proven the validity of this approach.

An area that Barry Carpenter has long championed is the maintenance of positive relationships between family and educators. Chapter Six highlights the importance of early attachment and the role of the family. Readers are provided with a context for understanding the nature of difficulties faced by the families of young people with FASD. By placing families at the centre through a commitment of support, Chapter Seven suggests that educators will be enabled to make informed, long-term and meaningful change to the learning programme.

Young people themselves should have the most important say about what FASD can mean for them – and this book allows that voice to be heard. As the authors say, “a diagnosis/identification is important for young people. Without it they can be constantly ambushed by their difficulties... Diagnosis gives identity ... it enables them, their family, and professionals to be realistic”. Andrew has FASD and now that he knows, he says: “I’m not the problem; I have a problem”. Like Andrew, this book plainly and simply states fact and provides solutions for learning communities to act upon.

