

Book review: John Frew – *Neuroscience and teaching very difficult kids*

Frew, John (2021), *Neuroscience and teaching very difficult kids*, London: Austin Macauley Publishers.

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Every now and then you come across a book and ask: Where was something like that 40 years ago? I say 40 years because I haven't taught a class for a full year since 1983. Yes, I came across very difficult kids, and adults for that matter, in subsequent lives – but I didn't have to front up to them each and every day.

Retired principals especially will remember John Frew. In the SPC he made his mark in student welfare, providing wonderful support for colleagues. In retirement he has written three books, one more than me, but I'll catch up next February. But while I need a 7-10 year break between books, John adds to his pile every couple of years.

At one level browsing through John's books is a challenge. It moves me to reflect on the students I taught, or at least they were in my classrooms – "taught" suggests a level of success. Sometimes it just makes me want to go back and re-run my career. Maybe that's why, this time around I headed for John's Chapter 4: Interventions. After explaining how kids' experiences reshape their 'genetic nature', John gently outlines how we can change their character. It's not that we don't try, we've all been there: calling in the counsellor, trying out this or that behaviour modification. Sometimes students respond by 'code-switching' their behaviour to fit changing contexts. Who doesn't do that? But for adolescents it is harder. Then if they can't sufficiently fit the school template it's somehow their fault. That's where teachers can intervene, but as John says, intervention isn't so much about changing the child as empowering them and letting them understand they can change if they want to.

This is where John and I have taken different pathways, because empowering students can be done in quite divergent ways, including changing the hoops through which we want them to jump. After retirement I worked with Viv White and the Big Picture personalised learning design. Viv is another who has made me want to do my career all over again, and I spent a decade learning how empowering kids in a personalised learning school structure creates ownership and ambition. It helps them overcome a host of roadblocks without compromising the rigour of what we expect of them. Many of our schools agree and have adopted the design in part or (preferably) in whole. It works.

But in most students that isn't on the agenda; the reality is that most students are in conventional classrooms and that is unlikely to change soon – especially when policy is driven by the Mark Lathams of this world. That is why we need John's advice on how to proceed, in his words, to "develop behaviours that will eventually have them function in what we would call normal conditions". And yes, "normal conditions" are what they face when they leave school, "where the world is unwilling to modify its expectations ... regardless of the cause of their problem".

So what to do? John combines philosophy, psychology, and personality traits to describe an 'ideal' self, and describes four categories which underpin how we prepare kids for acceptable access to their communities – including classrooms. These are sense of self, relatedness, autonomy and aspirations. Understanding these is a prerequisite for helping students achieve success. Only then can the reader travel with John as he unfolds approaches, structures, boundaries and relationships. This is a well-written book. John successfully blends the research with his own experience and the impressions gathered over his career. It is a powerful mix.

As a former teacher and principal I confess to not allocating enough time to professional reading about effective practice. Maybe I thought I was too busy - or rationalised my inertia by asking "what would he/she know" and wondering if the proffered solutions were sufficiently born out of real school experience.

But in more recent years I've wondered about the time it took and the price I paid (and the price paid by others), in repeating mistakes. You know the scene, playing out Einstein's definition of insanity: doing the same thing time and again, while expecting different results. Books like *Neuroscience and teaching very difficult kids* can help us break such cycles. Good professional learning doesn't take time, it invests it in something that pays real dividends. Reading John's book is a very good investment.

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