



BOOK REVIEW

## Supporting Change in Autism Services: Bridging the Gap between Theory and Practice

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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.26203/dxmy-6q79>

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**To cite this article:** MOUAWAD, R., (2015). Supporting Change in Autism Services: Bridging the Gap between Theory and Practice by Jackie Ravet *Education in the North*, **22**(Special Issue), pp.90-91.



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## Book Review

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### **Supporting Change in Autism Services: Bridging the Gap between Theory and Practice**

**Jackie Ravet**

**London: Routledge Taylor & Francis Group (2015) pp.144**

**Paperback £24.99**

**ISBN 978-0-415-50828-5**

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**Reviewer: Reem Mouawad, School Principal, Step Together Association**

*Supporting Change in Autism Services: Bridging the Gap between Theory and Practice* by Jackie Ravet defines the major challenges faced by many practitioners when trying to implement new strategies in their every-day work caring for individuals with autism. Ravet is senior lecturer and director of the Masters Programme of Autism and Learning at the University of Aberdeen, the UK. She writes in a clear, comprehensive and inspiring style to portray and explain the many aspects of autism, and to suggest practical and realistic approaches to improving the quality of services offered mainly in inclusive settings.

Ravet describes and critically examines key factors that facilitate or inhibit good practice through what she calls “the autism lens”. She encourages practitioners to find holistic, practical, person-centred solutions when dealing with individuals with autism, rather than being limited by or focussed solely on challenging behaviour patterns. Ravet believes in empowering, through training, practitioners to change their teaching methods. She supports them in finding new and creative ways of dealing with challenges, and the reader can clearly sense her enthusiasm and passion, as well as her determination, when seeking to help maximize potential benefits for persons with autism, whether in a school setting or in the workplace. She emphasizes the vital need to support the development of the full potential within each individual, and “puts people with autism first and ideology second”.

The general perception of autism tends to be one of mystery and fascination, but also of paradox and complexity. At a first glance, the literature in this field appears extensive and all-encompassing, but a closer examination reveals that the research published rarely focuses on practicalities. Ravet is realistic when explaining the controversies and dilemmas attached to this affliction, and acknowledges that working with individuals with autism is far from being an easy task. In fact, the main rationale behind her book is Ravet’s own research into the apparent increase in the number of individuals diagnosed with autism, as well as her survey of services provided in inclusive settings. They often proved to be sub-standard, mainly due to poor training of practitioners working in these institutions – and sadly, the ones paying the heavy price for such inadequate services are those supposedly being cared for.

Although mainly describing the situation in the UK, and Scotland in particular, Ravet’s book addresses everyone who provides care for, works with, or trains individuals with autism. The author calls for improved strategic planning for autism training and, throughout the chapters of her book, offers knowledge and understanding of the important skills and resources needed to actually upgrade and enhance practice. Each chapter starts with a detailed and precise description of the existing situation and a review of literature to concretize what Ravet intends to explain and how to apply her theory in practice. She then analyses possible barriers, as well as the positive and negative influences practitioners may encounter during the implementation phase.

Ravet reviews theoretical approaches within the autism literature and explores critically current research and evidence-based practices. Her way of reviewing theories and published

studies is non-judgmental, fully acknowledging the importance of earlier work and previous experience. She provides case studies to help link and exemplify existing ambiguities and controversies through practical situations, making them meaningful and relevant also in other settings. In addition to such case studies illustrating her ideas, of value to the practical field is also her use of charts and tables to present information, thus making it easier for the reader to understand and assimilate her theories and proposals. Ravet aims to help make teaching and care provided by practitioners more effective and decrease failure rates through improved inclusive practices and confidence-building measures. Her overall aim is to link theory and practice to make the every-day life of an autistic person less threatening.

Another case study illustrates how inter-professionalism and networking facilitates joint working across boundaries, and also explains inhibiting factors. Ravet defines inter-professionalism related to policy and legislation, as well as how it creates cross-service unity. She describes the various complexities and stresses the importance of communal partnership, shared opportunities and collaborative work through joint initiatives to provide the basis for professional training and education in autism. How to create an autism-friendly workplace is also explored, detailing the need for holistic planning for training and practice improvement.

The main theme of the book is covered in a description and analysis of key issues relating to the transformation of theory into practice to support a change. It is essential to note that training is only one among other factors – including attitude, organization and leadership – that affect practice. There exists a complex interplay of factors that require careful examination in order to achieve improved service and practice. Ravet concludes that professional action – despite the numerous and diverse factors, influences and complexities that might affect it – can make a change in the life of individuals with special needs, including those with autism.

*Supporting Change in Autism Services* inspired me as a reader to expand my work in teacher-training on autism in particular, as well as reinforcing my strong advocacy for participatory collaborative work and strategic planning. My one concern relates to my main call to integrate not only theory and practice, but also art into the equation. Art is very important not just for individuals with autism, but also for practitioners working in this field to help them understand the hidden aspects behind autistic behaviour. Art, being both practical and very innovative, can be a means in helping to deal with challenging behaviour patterns and to boost confidence in individuals with autism.

I consider Ravet's book a valuable manual that opens a window into many concealed and obscured areas of autism practice. As well as being practical, it is both moving and realistic in its descriptions of existing situations and challenges.