Metacognition is a term that is both easy and difficult to grasp. At its most basic level, few will have difficulty in appreciating John Flavell’s original conception of the significance of thinking about the very process by which we think. If cognition relates to thinking, then metacognition clearly goes beyond that process to consider the process itself. The assumption that in doing so we should be helped to become more efficient and effective thinkers seems eminently sensible and easy to understand. Unfortunately, once we begin to try to explain exactly what is happening when we attempt to think about our thinking, the issue becomes considerably more complex.

Since the early work of Flavell and Anne Brown in the United States, almost 30 years ago, numerous articles and a fair number of books have been produced trying to explain the phenomenon and relating it to a wide range of human endeavours. The problem for the uninitiated is that most of the books serve rather to confuse than to explicate, and each set of researchers tends to come up with their own definition and not to relate their work to that carried out in other areas. What has been needed for some time, therefore, is a book which describes clearly the origins and developing application of the term, whilst drawing together and summarising many of the most significant research findings. Shirley Larkin’s book serves just such a purpose and does so extremely well. In doing so, it reaches at times well beyond the remit of its title, but does not suffer inordinately in doing so.

The book is divided into four sections, each of which has several chapters covering a particular theme. The first three chapters provide an overview of the ways in which the term has been used and makes a strong case for its value when applied within educational contexts to such issues as more appropriate ways of teaching children at both ends of the abilities spectrum than formal teaching methods often allow. Along the way, we are treated to some helpful reflections by the author on the importance of allowing more time for children to think, the ages and stages at which we can reasonably assume that children are capable of self-reflection, the nature of consciousness, the significant part played by language and the contribution of metacognition to developing wisdom. There is an interesting and thought-provoking introduction also to the relationship between metacognition and theory of mind. Space does not allow any of these issues to be dealt with in great depth, but they are introduced into the discourse in such a way as to stimulate the reader’s own reflections on the breadth of application of the concept.

The next section consists of three chapters devoted to an overview of metacognitive research studies relating to various aspects of the school curriculum. Pride of place is given to science and mathematics, since these are areas to which many of the author’s own studies have been largely devoted, but equal attention is given to literacy and, most interestingly, the value of discussion by young children on collaborative writing tasks. This is a topic that is examined in the author’s paper in the current edition of this journal. Metacognitive applications to other curriculum areas are also covered, including PE, RE, history and geography, e-learning and the creative arts. As is to be expected, some of the work described in these areas has been carried out with older children and adults and the descriptions are tantalisingly brief and rather thinly spread. There is surely another book to be written, perhaps by the same author, devoted to ways of enhancing the teaching of all curriculum areas and life-span activities by drawing upon lessons learned from metacognitive research.

In the latter sections of the book, Larkin begins to explore reasons why promising research outcomes from metacognitive interventions are rarely maintained over the longer term. She concludes, quite sensibly, I believe, that the problem may well lie at the level of policy makers. A fascinating comparison is drawn between recent reviews of the primary school curriculum in England and New Zealand. Whilst the former, exemplified in the Rose Review, is largely outcomes based and full of good intentions about enhancing ‘understanding’ and producing confident learners and responsible citizens, it says very little about how this is to be achieved. The New Zealand curriculum, by contrast, provides much more details about core competencies and how best these can be developed. In this they take, in Larkin’s opinion, a strongly metacognitive approach, although many of us working with ‘thinking schools’ would be likely to suggest that metacognition is just one important element of a much broader cognitive approach to education. Whilst Larkin does make mention of the thinking skills movement and some of its controversies, this again is really only dealt with in passing.
The book’s final section introduces more recent developments and provides speculation about worthwhile future research. Interestingly, one is left with the impression that the author has moved further and further away from a reliance on the outcomes of experimental studies of a positivist nature towards an acknowledgement of the value of more qualitative and interpretative in situ examinations of what exactly happens when young children and others engage in activities where they are required to think about their own thinking processes. In doing so, she cites warmly the later work of Jerome Bruner and his seminal work on ‘Acts of Meaning’.

What is particularly refreshing about this book is the style in which it is written. Larkin clearly knows her topic inside out. I have rarely read a text of this nature in recent years where I have turned so frequently to the references and made a note to look up this or that study that I had not previously encountered. However, this is far from a dry tome. The style is thought provoking and thoroughly engaging. It is also balanced in a way that does not leave one with the impression of being preached at. It is not inexpensive and is comparatively short, but to my mind offers excellent value for money. If metacognition is an area about which you feel you know very little, but would like to know more, I recommend ‘Metacognition in Young Children’ unreservedly.

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