New Perspectives in Special Education: Contemporary Philosophical Debates
Michael Farrell
Routledge (2012)
Review by Ann Hedges

When I first saw this book, my initial reaction was ‘Oh what have I let myself in for’. My background is in learning disability nursing, and while special education does play a part within the nursing curriculum, it is in a limited way. However, I do have an interest in the subject, particularly in integrating children with Autistic Spectrum Disorders. Several of my Link areas are Schools.

Initially reading the text from cover to cover, I found it very heavy going. This negatively coloured my view of the book. I think few people would read it through in the way I had, as most people would dip in and out, looking at particular issues of interest. Having dipped in and out, I can appreciate the strengths of the text more.

I found the layout of the book very helpful. At the beginning, there is a detailed summary of the content of chapters, which has proved very helpful while writing this review, and I am sure will be useful when looking for appropriate content. In most chapters there is also a section which looks at the Implications for Thinking and Practice of the particular issues identified in the chapter. Thinking Points are also included at the end of each chapter, which allows for reflection on what has been read. If the book is used as a course text, these could be used as discussion points.

The first two chapters which explored definitions of disability were interesting, particularly from a learning disability nursing point of view. The terms ‘disability’ and ‘difficulty’ are frequently interchanged, which leads to confusion and inaccurate recognition of care needs, even by health professionals. The sociological implications of disability are also well explored. In some places I felt there was some repetition, or the content is poorly ordered. For example, Piaget is introduced in one chapter, with an evaluation of his ideas, while Piaget’s stages of development are not explored fully until the following chapter. The remaining chapters explore in depth a number of psychological and philosophical theories which underpin special education. At the end of the book there is a discussion on practical application of the theories explored within the curriculum, considering issues such as resources and assessment.

So who would find this book useful? Student nurses now only have a short three-week placement in a learning disability environment, and while for many this will be in a special needs school, I feel much of the content is too deep for them. Some aspects may be appropriate for
some student nurses. For example, some child branch students may find the discussion on the work of Piaget and child development stages of particular interest; and for mental health students, the chapter on psychoanalysis may be of interest. However, I think the people who would find this book most useful would be those involved in Education and Special Education. For students, it would be a valuable resource, while for those already in special education it would be a useful reference book to update and enhance their existing knowledge base.