
Book review

Square Pegs—Inclusivity, Compassion and Fitting In: A Guide for Schools

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The authors tackle the widespread, almost epidemic problem of children who are unable to access normal learning environments, or those who are being excluded or forced out of the system due to behavioural issues or persistent non-attendance. The authors are both experts with considerable lived experience. They are the founders of the Square Pegs organisation, which strives for change in the one-size-fits-all education system that frequently fails those children who are neurodiverse, suffering from the effects of trauma or from a poor socio-economic background.

The two authors primarily act as editors, as the book is a collection of works from a wide variety of over 50 individual contributors, including headteachers, lawyers, parents and people with lived experience. Fundamentally, the book is a guide for schools and is aimed at teaching staff. However, the content is not weighed down with heavy educational jargon and is therefore easily generalisable to parents or those working outside of direct education such as social workers or support workers.

The 38 chapters are neatly organised into 5 key sections and vary in length from a few easy-read pages to more thorough discussions. The first of these main sections begins to identify some of the key problems and introduces the reader to the concept of 'square pegs'. The stand-out chapter here is the contribution from William Carter, a neurodiverse person from a complex home background, who was effectively written off during his early schooling. William describes how barriers to

learning are not seated in low motivation or the inability of a child, but in deeper problems within the educational system and the access changes that are needed. He cites practical examples of how flexibility in a school's thinking and approach can have a significant impact on pupil access, including reflections on his own journey to become a doctoral candidate at the age of 23.

The law and the educational legal system are the focus of the book's second section and, although this would be useful information and guidance for school staff, this should be essential reading for parents of children who may have high rates of absence. While some of the chapters in this section cover subjects such as exclusion, flexible schooling and the often-fragile teacher/parent relationship, it is the two consecutive chapters by education law specialists, Dan Rosenberg and Mike Charles, that really cover the key legal elements relating to what parents should expect and what schools can do.

Section three covers the essential need for good-quality relationships across the education system and beyond—including relationships between educators and pupils; between school staff and their leadership or with parents; or relationships between children and their peers. The section opens with two insightful chapters examining the theory of belonging and its importance for learners, both in a school setting and in the wider community. The rest of the section covers a range of subjects including transition, autonomy, punishment and alternative ways of delivering education.

The effects and causes of trauma and mental health issues are covered concisely but effectively in the nine chapters that make up part four. This section opens with two very clear chapters on brain functioning from Andrew Curran and Helen Andrews. The topics of play, wellbeing, anxiety and mental health are also covered, before the book closes with three comprehensive chapters concerning trauma. However, the best of these has to be Dave McPartlin's heartfelt tale of guiding his 'square pegs' to the live finals of *Britain's Got Talent*.

Section five is the closing section of the book and its shortest at only four chapters. Despite its brevity, the section looks at what can be done now, while acknowledging that a significant amount of work is still needed to provide fully inclusive educational environments.

This is an excellent book that provides a wealth of insight from a varied range of experts. It covers many aspects of how the education system fails to include children who do not fit into the round holes, although the real jewel in the book's crown is also its most tragic. Within its opening 20 pages are real-life accounts of children who are square pegs. Cleverly presented in the children's own handwriting, these pages are pertinent and emotive. Anxiety, isolation and a wish to be dead are the common themes here. These types of thoughts from children must change, and Square Pegs is an essential tool in helping effect that change.

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