

S Q U A R E P E G S

Inclusivity, compassion and fitting in
A guide for schools

To many people
Scary
work is too hard
no friends friends
Cant cope
Pains in my Stomach
Worry for the next day when I come home
Cant eat in school because I feel sick with worry
hard to find lessons
too loud



Fran Morgan with **Ellie Costello**
Edited by **Ian Gilbert**

Praise for *Square Pegs*

There is an old African saying: 'Until the lions have their own historians, the tales of glory will always be written by the hunters.' Fran Morgan has assembled here some lions and while they don't write too many tales of glory – although there are some – they do make us all realise why so many square pegs unnecessarily gain so little from our schooling system. Twelve years ago, Michael Gove sent a King James bible to every school. The next secretary of state for education should send a copy of this book to every new head teacher and put it on the reading list for all initial teacher training courses.

Tim Brighouse, former Commissioner for London Schools

This is one of the most riveting books on education I have read in a long while. Its aim – to provide practical solutions for schools and families struggling with the increasing number of children who don't thrive in our current system – could not be more timely. The array of richly qualified writers places compassion, purpose and student autonomy at the heart of best practice. Their approach would surely work not just for those who avoid school, but for those stuck within it. *Square Pegs* is a must-read for parents, governors, staff and students who're up for a quiet classroom revolution.

Madeleine Holt, filmmaker and education campaigner

This is a book that is firmly on the side of children as they try to come to terms with a school system that is designed to encourage conformity. It highlights the way some schools manage to set the child at the heart of what they do in every sense of the term. There are case studies that shine a light on the child's perspective and solutions offered for other schools to try. Reading it is both heart-wrenching and uplifting ... but uplifting wins.

Mick Waters, Professor of Education, University of Wolverhampton

This book is steeped in the experience and expertise of families, teachers and leaders. It tells the story of a system that is fraught with unintended consequences, brings the lived experiences of young people alive and challenges the notion of one-size-fits-all strategies. The voice of school leaders and teachers, ambitious to see the young people in their care thrive, roar at us across the page. It's a book of confidence for professionals and parents alike to rise above the distracting noise about attendance, exclusion and 'what works' narratives. A much-needed book ensuring the voice and experience of young people is heard and helping to inform what happens next.

It's a must-read for everyone with a vision of an education system that can be 'fixed' through collaboration and brave actions.

Margaret Mulholland, Inclusion Specialist, Association of School and College Leaders

Our high-stakes, test- and exam-focused system is failing too many children. It literally fails those who struggle to attend school or are marked as failures in exams. It metaphorically fails those who attend and get their grades, but at a personal cost to themselves, their love of learning and their families. This will continue to be the case for as long as schools are judged in the main on test and exam results, placing the burden of whole-school success or failure on children's shoulders.

For the good of every child and, indeed, of educators themselves (most of whom want to provide the best possible learning experiences and strive to do so in spite of our one-size-fits-all model for education), it's time to listen to the canaries in the cages – the children who simply cannot cope, let alone thrive, within our restrictive, reductive system. Change made for those who suffer most will benefit the whole school community.

Alison Ali, More Than A Score campaigner and strategic communications expert

In recent years, many schools in England have started to implement strict policies around behaviour, curriculum and attendance. As the screws tighten, more and more square pegs (read 'deeply distressed young people') have started voting with their feet. When you stop going to school, it creates all kinds of problems: home visits, financial penalties and, incredibly, the threat of custodial sentences for the parents and carers of persistent 'offenders'. The fact that so many young people should choose such strife over attending school should tell us something very important about their lived experience of our one-size-fits-all education system. It seems likely that increasing numbers of square pegs will continue voting with their feet until we reach crisis point. But this crisis can be averted if we listen to the voices of those affected now. This brilliantly curated book is an absolute must-read for anyone interested in creating a more diverse, empathic, responsive educational ecosystem that works for *all* young people.

Dr James Mannion, Director, Rethinking Education and co-author of *Fear is the Mind Killer* with Kate McAllister

No child should miss out on a good education and the chance of opportunities in life just because their school doesn't give them the support they need to succeed. Most schools cherish and value the children who have special educational needs; there are also some who do not place inclusion high on their list of priorities, and exclude or marginalise children rather than provide the mental health and therapeutic support they need.

Recently, a 13-year-old girl with autism gave me a list of what a good school for her would look like: well organised, supportive, calm, focused on learning, there to help. These are all things we would want to see for every child in every school. After spending two years out of the classroom because a succession of schools was unable to meet her needs, she went on to find a school which understood her and provided the springboard she needed to do well. She went on to achieve great things in her GCSEs and is now in sixth form. Like Square Peg, I want all schools to see the potential in all children and provide the support they need.

We should all be grateful to Square Peg for all they do to advocate for children who need most help, and for showing how schools and parents can work together with children to provide a positive environment to learn. Every child deserves the best start in life, and positive outcomes for all children must be at the heart of a successful education system.

Anne Longfield, CBE, Chair of The Commission on Young Lives

In order for a society to become healthy, whole and progressive, it must be willing to listen to the square pegs that it has created within itself. It is when square pegs choose to be silent and when they choose to communicate that we must pay careful attention to, for the sake of all of us. Everyone who was gifted with a square peg in their life will tell you so. Square pegs are our compass and our orienteers: they are the first to notice when we lose our way, the first to see that we have crossed our own boundaries, and the first to feel when we single-mindedly keep digging one-shaped holes. This is why this book had to be written, and this is why it must be read by anyone who cares about the education system of this country.

I have been following Fran, Ellie and their many supporters, diligently collecting piece by piece of evidence for several years, to assemble the overly complicated puzzle of square pegs, to improve our society. The result is brutally honest, yet optimistic. It is visionary yet chooses a pragmatic approach and offers many quick wins. It offers a sensitive choice of a diverse set of writers, through which one thread of pearls is coming out very clearly: it is about compassion, consent, community and relationships. It is about holding our societal compass close to our hearts and struggling to keep it safe. This is the struggle of all of us – or at least it should be.

Dr Carmel Kent, lecturer at the Open University, educational researcher, author of *AI for Learning* and a parent with lived experience

Making schools more inclusive is essential to ensuring the wellbeing and ability to thrive of every young person. Creating a sense of belonging and using trauma-informed strategies to help the system welcome the square pegs, rather than continuing to force them into round holes, is clearly the way forward. The current government one-size-fits-all approach, particularly to SEND and behaviour, needs a rethink.

This book offers a wealth of practical examples of how collaboration between schools and families, alongside the will to make a culture shift, can lead to successful inclusion practices. It is very readable and contains practical advice and solutions, framed within the current educational context, that leaders, teachers and support staff can use to create the right systems and support to ensure that every child and young person really is more than just 'fine in school'.

Judy Ellerby, Lead Policy Manager, SEND, Disabled Members, Behaviour, Exclusions, National Education Union

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Page 79, Table 6.1: Physiological needs and interventions from S. Kempself, S. (2018) *Roots of Inclusion* [unpublished Nottingham City Council Educational Psychology Service document]. Used with kind permission. Page 90, Figure 7.1: The ladder of co-production from members of the National Co-Production Advisory Group – see <https://www.thinklocalactpersonal.org.uk/co-production-in-commissioning-tool/co-production/In-more-detail/what-makes-co-production-different>. Used with kind permission. Page 172, Figure 16.1: The bio-psycho-ecological model of school belonging from Allen, K-A. and Kern, M. L. (2017) *School Belonging in Adolescents: Theory, Research and Practice*. Singapore: Springer Social Sciences. Used with kind permission.

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square peg *or* square peg in a round hole

informal: a person or thing that is a **misfit**, such as an employee in a job for which he or she is **unsuited**¹

The trouble with square pegs is that by forcing them to fit the system's round holes, you end up damaging the peg, not the hole.

¹ See <https://www.collinsdictionary.com/dictionary/english/square-peg>.

FOREWORD BY SIR NORMAN LAMB

I have long been a supporter of Square Peg. I first became aware of their work in my time in Parliament and have been keenly following them ever since. The support they provide families facing challenges in education is of immense value, and they have given a voice to those children and young people who are experiencing persistent absenteeism, many of whom have mental health problems and unmet needs. Square Peg has also played a significant part in promoting the importance of an inclusive and supportive education system that works for all children and young people.

Education is a key pillar in children and young people's lives as they grow and develop, and in particular, plays an important role in their mental health and wellbeing. It's crucial in improving life chances, maintaining social connections, providing access to support and helping children learn how to look after their mental health.

Education should be inclusive of everyone no matter what a child's needs and experiences may be, and this is a principle I have strongly endorsed throughout my career. However, the reality lies far away from this, and sadly the education system currently operates to celebrate uniformity rather than embracing diversity.

We have seen this most recently in the behaviour agenda, where the use of punitive approaches has become commonplace in responding to children and young people's behaviour. I have been particularly horrified by the rise of school exclusions as a form of punishment, with data showing a steady increase in the use of both suspensions and permanent exclusions before the COVID-19 pandemic hit.

Often, the children who face exclusion are the ones with the greatest need. Children communicate their distress through their behaviour, and challenging behaviour can often be the result of underlying conditions, unmet emotional needs, difficulties at home, at school or in the community, and exposure to trauma. We also know that the use of punitive approaches to behaviour can be harmful to children and young people's mental health and actually has the potential to re-traumatise. The cost of exclusion both to the individual but also to society is incalculable. The loss of human potential is tragic.

We need to urgently move away from a system where we punish and exclude children and young people for their life experiences and needs, and instead move to a place of compassion and understanding. This means creating supportive and inclusive school environments for all children and young people to thrive and offering help to those who are struggling most.

It's my strong belief that by seeking to understand children and young people and their needs in a more sophisticated and compassionate way, then learning can be

facilitated. After all, happy, healthy children are better able to learn. At the heart of this should be prioritising whole-education and trauma-informed approaches to mental health and wellbeing in every setting across England. Such approaches are vital in helping to create a culture where every student is recognised and valued.

I am sure this book will be of great practical value to many school leaders, educators, practitioners and professionals, and I would like to thank Square Peg for all they do to advocate for those who need it most, including our education workforce.

Prologue:

THE CANARIES IN THE MINE

BY JO SYMES

What if our ‘square pegs’ aren’t the problem? What if they are actually the canaries in the mine, alerting us to the mounting problems in our education system?

In her book, *Troublemakers: Lessons in Freedom from Young Children at School*, Carla Shalaby (2017) discusses ‘animal sentinels,’ animals which are purposefully used to provide advanced warning of disease, toxins and other environmental threats to humans. She explains that these species are selected based on their heightened susceptibility to particular hazards. They are often sacrificed to save us.

The most famous example is the canary, used in coal mines in the early 20th century to give advanced warning of deadly gases, such as carbon monoxide. Because these birds were small and had particularly sensitive respiratory systems, the poison killed them quickly, leaving the miners with enough time to get out and save themselves. What if, suggests the author, we saw our square pegs as such canaries?

The child who deviates, who refuses to behave like everybody else, may be telling us – loudly, visibly, and memorably – that the arrangements of our schools are harmful to human beings. Something toxic is in the air, and these children refuse to inhale it. It is dangerous to exclude these children and silence their warnings. (Shalaby, 2017: xxxiii)

Shalaby learned the canary metaphor from Thomas, a father of a 5-year-old boy who could not – and would not – comply with the behavioural expectations of his kindergarten teacher:

Though the child suffered a mood disorder, Thomas challenged the assumption that the disease made his son inherently broken or bad. Much like the canary’s fragile lungs, this child’s brain leaves him more susceptible to the harms of poison. He’s more sensitive to harm than the average child. Still, the problem is the poison – not the living thing struggling to survive despite breathing it. After all, in clean air, canaries breathe easily. (Shalaby, 2017: xxii–xxiii)

Look at our square pegs. Look at the list of children refusing to attend your school, with or without the knowledge/agreement/complicity/other of their parents.¹ Look at those who are constantly in trouble when they do attend. Look at those who have been excluded, shamed, moved on. Look at those in your bottom sets, in your nurture rooms, in your 'special classes', in your conscience. What are they saying? What warning are they giving you? What will you do now you hear them?

References

Shalaby, C. (2017) *Troublemakers: Lessons in Freedom from Young Children at School*. New York: New Press.

¹ This is discussed further in the Introduction. Am I complicit if I prioritise my child's mental health and knowingly agree not to force her into school? The law says I am. What do you say?

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Dave is the head teacher of Flakefleet Primary in Lancashire (www.flakefleet.lancs.sch.uk), which won Happiest Primary School and Primary School of the Year Runner Up at the National Happiness Awards in 2019. Its real claim to fame, though, was as a recipient of David Walliams' golden buzzer at *Britain's Got Talent* in 2019. Dave also presents on BBC Bitesize and Live Lessons.

Mary Meredith

Mary is assistant director of learning and skills at Hull City Council. She was a teacher, special educational needs coordinator and senior leader for 20 years prior to moving into a local authority role, initially at Lincolnshire County Council as a special educational needs and disabilities and inclusion lead. She advocates for trauma-informed approaches in schools. Find her at www.marymered.com.

Marijke Miles

Marijke is head teacher at Baycroft School (www.baycroftschoo.com), a special school in Hampshire, and chair of the SEND sector council at the National Association of Head Teachers. She has more than 15 years of experience as a head teacher and has written for the *TES* and *Huffington Post*. She has a wealth of

experience supporting children with special educational needs and disabilities, particularly those in local authority care.

Professor Georgina Newton

Georgina is an associate professor of education at the University of Warwick. Her research focuses on teacher wellbeing and agency.

Edward Pearson

Edward has been a paramedic on the front line for 23 years. His experience in dealing with 999 calls involving children and young people has taught him the importance of putting parent voice front and centre.

Lorraine Petersen, OBE

Lorraine is an education consultant and special educational needs and disabilities specialist based in Worcestershire. She has 25 years of experience in the mainstream school environment as a teacher and head teacher, and was CEO of the National Association for Special Educational Needs for nine years. Find her at www.lpec.org.uk.

Dr Jane Pickthall, MBE

Jane is a virtual school head who promotes the education of looked-after children in North Tyneside. She is a trauma and attachment expert, and was awarded an MBE in the New Year Honours list in 2021.

Dr Maddi Popoola

Maddi works for Nottingham City Council and is keen to collaborate with other services to ensure that educational psychologists are key contributors to national government policy through quality evaluation and research. She co-authored a report in 2021 with Dr Sarah Sivers and the Pupil Views Collaborative Group on young people's experience of education in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Tom Quilter

Tom is senior development officer for the Information, Advice and Support Services Network at the Council for Disabled Children (CDC – www.councilfordisabledchildren.org.uk). He studied social policy and held a variety of roles within both local authorities and the charity sector prior to joining the CDC.

Professor Kathryn Riley

Kathryn is professor of urban education at the Institute of Education, UCL's Faculty of Education and Society and co-founder of the Art of Possibilities (www.theartofpossibilities.org.uk). She is an international scholar whose work bridges policy and practice. International work includes two years heading the World Bank's Effective Schools and Teachers Group. She has taught in inner-city schools, held political office in London as an elected member of the Inner London Education Authority and been a local authority chief officer. Her work on belonging is widely published.

Dan Rosenberg

Dan is a partner at Simpson Millar (www.simpsonmillar.co.uk), specialising in education and public law. Qualified since 2004, he works across a wide range of areas in education law and community care, with a particular interest in children and young people.

Alison Sauer

Alison is the chair for the Centre for Personalised Education (www.personalisededucationnow.org.uk), runs the Sauer Consultancy and is a regular contributor to government consultations on elective home education. She is widely regarded as an expert on flexischooling.

Nick Shackleton-Jones

Nick is the founder and CEO of Shackleton Consulting (www.shackleton-consulting.com), following on from more than 10 years as director of learning at BP, PA Consulting and, more recently, Deloitte. He is the author of *How People Learn: Designing Education and Training that Works to Improve Performance* (2019) and a regular public speaker.

Dr Sarah Sivers

Sarah is a child, community and educational psychologist. Along with Dr Maddi Popoola, she co-authored a report in 2021 on young people's experience of education in the context of COVID-19. She also set up the Education Psychology (EP) Reach-Out webinar series during the pandemic to support education psychologists. Find EP Reach-Out at <https://www.youtube.com/c/EducationalPsychologyReachOut/> featured.

Andy Sprakes

Andy is co-founder and chief academic officer of XP School in Doncaster, which was set up following the principles of High Tech High and Expeditionary Learning schools in the United States. He was previously head teacher of Campsmount Academy for eight years and deputy head for four years prior to that. Find XP Trust at www.xptrust.org.

Dr Bo Stjerne Thomsen

Bo is vice president and chair of Learning Through Play at the LEGO Foundation (www.learningthroughplay.com) and a visiting scholar at Harvard University. He spent nine years building the research agenda, network and organisational expertise on children's development, play and learning in order for the LEGO Foundation to become a leading authority on learning through play.

Trevor Sutcliffe

Trevor is a co-founder of Challenging Education (www.challengingeducation.co.uk), providing education consultancy, training and monitoring to maintained and academy schools across all phases. The main body of Trevor's work is in supporting schools and organisations to improve the life chances of children who are 'disadvantaged' or in receipt of free school meals.

Jo Symes

Jo created www.progressiveeducation.org as a resource for those exploring alternatives to conventional methods in education. This inspiration hub showcases innovations both inside and outside of the mainstream. Mainstream schooling was unsuitable for her children and she deregistered them in 2018. You can join the conversation and connect with thousands of others on a similar journey in the Progressive Education Group on Facebook.

Dave Whitaker

As a former executive principal of a number of special schools, alternative provisions and pupil referral units, Dave is now director of learning for Wellspring Academy Trust (www.wellspringacademytrust.co.uk), with its 28 schools across Yorkshire and Lincolnshire. He is an Independent Thinking associate. His first book, *The Kindness Principle*, was published in 2021.

MY DAUGHTER IS A SQUARE PEG

I founded Square Peg to try to effect change in a system which is failing an increasing number of children. They are not just the special educational needs and disabilities (SEND) children. And they are not just the ‘challenging’ ones who end up in isolation or excluded. Many young people have developed excellent coping mechanisms to get through each day, and with budgets stretched and an ever more dictatorial curriculum, they often pass unnoticed by teaching staff who are just trying to survive.

This book is for those in education who want to do the right thing by their square pegs, but are constrained by (often counterproductive) government and local authority directives. We know it is possible to forge a different path within the current system, and we have contributions from schools which are doing just that. This book was compiled to provide creative, inspirational and pragmatic advice, so that those in the mainstream sector are better able to support their square pegs; supporting the supporters, if you like.

My story – the beginning of this book’s journey – is one of many; all unique but with common elements and similar, often catastrophic, end results.

It was after a particularly traumatic summer that my 8-year-old daughter missed nearly a year of primary school. Later on, she missed most of secondary school. Why? That’s simple: she couldn’t do it.

Let me repeat that: she simply couldn’t do it. Not *wouldn’t*, but *couldn’t*.

You may know this as ‘school refusal’, but I would like you to erase that phrase and reframe it in terms of barriers to attendance instead. She was not refusing to go to school. She just couldn’t. Initially, her particular barrier was not trusting that I was safe when she was at school. Later, on moving to secondary school, she didn’t trust the adults who were tasked with keeping her safe. She also couldn’t see the point of a lot of what she was being taught or the way in which it was being taught. She is a great judge of character and, to be fair, she was often on the money. The secondary school prioritised its position in the league tables above all else, and made it clear that children should be seen and not heard. Her strength of character was her undoing in a system that allows – even encourages – such an approach from schools. Ironically, that same strength of character which meant that she didn’t fit the system will most likely be her springboard to an extremely successful future.

Many children 'mask' in school by pretending they are fine. I know my daughter did. They desperately want to be there and fit in along with everyone else, but attending is a daily struggle – one that eventually breaks them. Persistent absentees (a Department for Education label for those whose attendance drops to 90% or less) are a real problem for schools because they lower attendance figures, with the threat of a potential downgrading by Ofsted if average attendance is deemed inadequate. I have heard of head teachers whose performance reviews include an attendance key performance indicator, with personal consequences for missing the target. For parents, absenteeism brings with it the threat of fines and prosecution if a child's attendance falls below a magic threshold (increasingly upwards of 95%). Yet 'chronic' or 'persistent' absence is a global problem, widely recognised to be multifaceted and complex, and only made worse by threats and sanctions. It's a problem with no quick fix in an education system where one-size-fits-all is sadly both convenient and cost-effective (in the short term).

Like many parents in the same position, our journey was a roller coaster. At times it was horrendous; at others we were lifted up by wonderful individuals – 'champions' who changed our trajectory. And that is really the message of this book: that, despite a system which frequently causes damage and exacerbates problems, it is within the gift of governors, school leaders, senior leadership teams and individual teaching staff to rewrite that narrative and make a huge difference to the lives of square pegs and their families. And all the children who struggle in different ways and for many and varied reasons are just that – square pegs in a system of round holes. They are often made to fit the system rather than the system being made flexible enough to meet their needs.

The first step to addressing a problem such as this is recognising that it's a problem and not just a few wayward children with lenient parents. I'm sharing our story here, but we are far from alone. Before we go any further, I want to share with you the messages we have received from just a few other square pegs – their pleas to schools and expressions of what it has felt like for them to be forced to do something they simply cannot do. Please read these and remember them; these children and their families are the driving force behind this book.

To many people
Scary
work is too hard
no friends friends
Cant cope
Pains in my Stomach
Worry for the next day when I come home
Cant eat in school because I feel sick with worry
hard to find lessons
too loud

C, age 11

Please can I go to a school where I ~~can~~ feel safe
and accepted for being different. I don't want to keep
going to schools where I get bullied, hurt and
discussed in bribes 😞
I want to wake up excited to go to school
and do my work and also enjoy my time there.
I want to go to a school where I am listened to.
I don't want to be awake all night worrying about
going to school.
I want to spend time with my mum and dad ~~and~~ and not
watching them doing work 24/7 on calls and filling out
forms. They look tired and they sometimes get upset.

WHY don't you ^{help} me and children like me more?
I will be a grown-up soon and it will be too late!

Z, age 13

I feel like I don't fit in at school because I am different and it's really confusing because there has been loads of assemblies about everyone being equal and how to treat everyone right but I feel like I'm not being treated properly by the people who said it. I feel like nobody understands me and so I feel like I can't show my real feelings. I also feel like I don't fit in because I'm not normal. What's it like to be normal. I just feel so alone at school I wish there were more people like me. Assemblies and break times are too busy I feel like I'm being surrounded by a big mob of people.

M, age 9

I FEEL WORSE
 THAN OTHER
 CHILDREN AND
 I CAN'T DO THINGS
 THAT THEY CAN
 MY TEACHER DOESN'T
 UNDERSTAND

H, age 8

It is almost like everything from 9:00 to 3:20 is CONSTANTLY on my back, I could go on and on and on and on forever

I come in and there is telltales messing about in the cloakroom

I go in and we have a full R.E afternoon and my least favorite subjects because it is, from my perspective, complete and utter bullcrap.

I can't hear the teacher

I lose my pen and get in trouble from the annoying teaching assistant, like unbridge but not obsessed with kittens and pink.

I can't see the board

I go for a drink and trip over

I am not allowed to go to the toilet when I am desperate

The teacher gets angry for litterally the smallest thing

She punishes the WHOLE class for the telltales actions

I could go on forever and I have had to go through

1050 days (approximately) of it

I have just had enough and can't do it anymore, wanting to just die and get it over with, not needing to have responsibilities and having to get up and go to a school I'm not happy in with git teachers and git telltales and bloody fictional subjects that will help me in no way, shape or form get a decent job

How do I pay taxes?

I DONT KNOW.

But atleast I know the lord's prayer off by heart!

S, age 10

I don't understand why I cannot go to school. Primary said I couldn't even go in for class photos or my last day because they didn't have anyone to look after my diabetes but people who have been trained were all still there. My friends asked me why the Head hates me so much and that made me really sad. I really wanted to start secondary in September and get back to learning but I still don't have a school to go to. I don't think it is fair that I don't have a school just because I need someone to help me with things. It would help me if people at school would understand that I have autism and dyslexia. I wish they helped me with stuff when it is difficult instead of just making me feel stupid and telling me I need to try harder. Don't keep telling me I am rude when I can't make eye contact and don't keep telling me off when I can't answer questions or tell you how I am feeling because that is really difficult for me. It makes me really unhappy that I have diabetes when people at school say I can't do things or even be at school because I need some help to stay safe. The nurses always say having diabetes doesn't stop you doing anything but that wasn't true at my school. I just want to feel normal and not hate myself for all the things I have. Even when I have told people at school how I feel they have ignored me or told me it isn't true. I feel safe and happy at home and football because people there help me and listen to me and make me feel normal and I just want it to be like that at school.

O, age 12 (asd, type 1 diabetes, hypermobility, dyslexia)

O, age 12

Every lesson yesterday felt so long I felt trapped. I couldn't escape, the whole of my body hurts and yesterday I got a head ache and tummy ache. Sometimes my leg twitches and that's when its really bad.

If I feel like there wasn't an exit that day then the next day I cant go in because it feel like there will be no exit again.

Sometimes I've been to the hub and its no help at all. Sometimes I've used the card and everyone has been in a meeting. Or I've used it and I've said that I cant do the lesson because I'm so stressed and I'm told that not being in lessons is not an option, refusing is not an option. So I feel that I can't do anything to save it and it makes me more stressed.

If I go into school and have a rubbish day like I usually do then the next day there is more of a chance that I wont go in.

People say if I go in, it makes it easier for me the next day, but it doesn't work like that for me, it makes it worse. Basically 60% of the time, if I've gone in that day its been so bad that I've not gone in for the next 2 days because going in didn't help me in any way.

In school I have thought about committing suicide many times, more than anywhere else. I've thought about hanging myself . I've planned how to do it. It relieves me.



To the school

I would like to inform you how I feel at school and at home.

AT HOME:

At home I feel very stressed and most of the time at least 30minutes to 1 hr I cry or feel sad and can't do the normal day to day based things like getting dressed, simple things like that and this affects me at school to be independent. To be honest I feel like I'm a clumsy person that no one wants to listen to because I feel like I can't be heard, and no one wants to listen.

AT SCHOOL:

At school I might not show it but I feel uncomfortable and very stressed as people say they promised to do something and it never happened for example on the start of term 1 I asked to work alone or in a smaller group they said " I promise you this will happen in 1-2 weeks " and this was 1 of the 5 things that they/you have promised me that never happened. The canopy door drop off isn't working either as I was told I can wait there as long as I want until I go into class this never happened and I felt overwhelmed and I ran out back to my mum and dad crying unable to go in and what dint help was how they dealt with it by getting me quickly away from my mum and dad which increased the impact of stress and most of those reasons are a few of about 23 of why I feel unable to go into school and this is sometimes why I don't go into school

p.s I need this to change quickly as its getting worse and I cant be happy at the weekend and I am getting nightmares and I break things and not paying attention and to be honest I don't feel like I should be living as I am not being listened to which I have a right to and I'm always stressed which I shouldn't be.



13.9.2020

To anyone reading this

I wanted to write how I am feeling, because apparently you didn't have the heart to believe my mum when she told you. You have - there's no other way of putting this - ruined my life. You have put my life on hold for the last two years and I am ^{so} sick of it. Everyday I dream, hope for a better life but all you have done is shut my life down. How dare you. You are supposed to be there for the youth, to help them grow up into better people. All you have done to me, and many others, is disgrace and ruin us. I don't understand how any of you sleep at night. We ~~and~~ are children, cannot stress this enough, CHILDREN and you are making us ~~wish~~ ^{wish} we were dead. I wish I were dead because of your actions. Not a day goes by where I don't consider it. I live in isolation, NOT because of the Pandemic, but because you can't show 1 bit of empathy to me. You are evil people. I just want to be happy, is that so much to ask for? Why is it that you and your families can be happy but I have to sit in my bed all day doing nothing but wishing for a better life. It is honestly so morally wrong and unacceptable. You have took my life from me and I hope Karma meets you one day. You have had 12 years to help me but you delayed it everyday of those years. I hope you won't decide to stay this way. I hope you have atleast 1 ounce of humanity left in your money-hungry soulless bodies. I hope you realise that I have dreams too.

the 14 year old whose life you ruined.

A Square Peg's 10 Commandments

Dear Teacher

I wanted to write to tell you my 10 top tips for children like me.

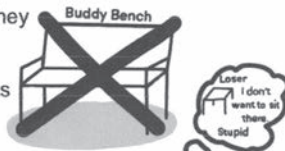
1. Be more respectful to children, listen to their feelings and do not ever doubt them. Otherwise I just give up telling them to you at all.



2. Don't tell me to stop crying when I'm upset. Don't tell me to turn my frown into a smile because the other children are staring at me.



3. Don't put me on the Buddy Bench. They don't work, they make me feel rubbish and hot inside. That's not how friendships work. When you felt lonely and no one was noticing, did sitting on the Buddy Bench help you?



4. Don't put me in the same room or same table as my bullies. It gives them more chances to kick or push or threaten to stab my hand with their pencil. And children who are a friend stop being a friend once the bullies are on the same table.



5. Don't change where I sit every time it's a new term. Making work friends in new topics takes ages. It's like someone has died when you change the seats around.

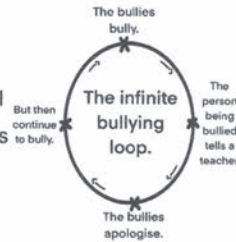


L. age 13

6. Don't do tests on the first day of term. Or the second or the third. It makes my brain fizz and my mouth goes dry and the clock ticking is so loud and I can't remember anything especially from before the Christmas holiday. Just because I can't remember right then, it doesn't mean I can't tell you about it. When it's a new term, please can we focus on having fun together first?



7. Understand that bullies don't give up. Just because you've made them apologise, and you say 'it's done,' it isn't. And if I pluck up my strength to tell you they're doing the same things again, don't sigh or make your mouth small. Making a bully say sorry doesn't change what they're doing every day.



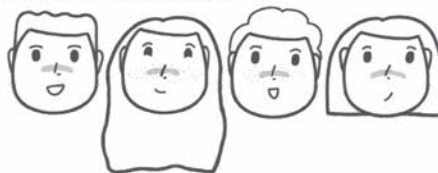
8. Don't take my playtime away if I haven't done all the work in time. I can't think of an acrostic poem on the spot sometimes, especially when you said yesterday my writing wasn't good enough. If my brain has frozen, I'm not naughty. A run around and fresh air might be a good time to make a new friend instead especially if you have bullies.



9. Don't move me down the learning board for not remembering something or asking for help. It's not my fault if I don't understand something. I don't care if everyone else in the class understands and I don't, it doesn't make me bad. You're the teacher.



10. When you are kind and gentle, I feel so much better. If you tell me I haven't got something right YET, I can try to do it again. When I make you laugh, I feel brilliant. I like it when you are happy.



This school is ruining my life.
I am angry all the time and it's really frustrating. When I'm in the school I am trapped. If I ask to get out of class they just tell me to do deep breathing and that makes me have a panic attack. Because I mask, they ~~don't~~ think I am fine in the school. THEY ARE DOING NOTHING. If I go in all the time, I just come out.

B, age 11

How School Made Me Feel

Through years 8 to year 10 (age 12 to 15) i felt genuinely scared to go to school. The idea of walking through the school gates made me scared and made me feel sick. The school were not supportive of me, and i felt that no one beyond the school gates cared about my wellbeing. It felt as if the only thing they cared about was my attendance and they had no empathy or understanding of my situation.

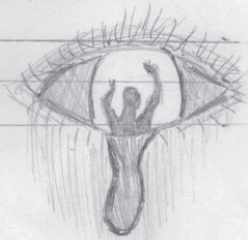
I felt embarrassed to tell the support people at school how i felt because i knew that they wouldn't do anything different. I used to cry every morning and it would be a physical battle to get me into school.

Inside school i felt trapped and felt like i couldn't be myself. I wanted to leave and never go back.

I didn't enjoy anything anymore and i was always sad. I was constantly upset, stressed and worried.

School made me lose myself.

-Becky 17



*C in my head	fmlb
OMFG I keep hearing these people speaking negative things to me	Good Lord Every time I walk in to the school gates it is like a cowboy hunter chasing me

School Sucks! | KILL ME!

Every body tells me it's OK but really I feel like I am on my own and every body is against me and I have had so many bad / traumatizing experiences in my life that I honestly don't believe ANYONE anymore and lets be honest with our selves here I am going through this alone no matter what ~~any~~ anybody says or does I am still going to be that one AUTISTIC kid

A B C D E F G H I hate myself and you no I always will want to kill myself.

There are common threads in these words – of not fitting in, being understood, or valued. Of a lack of flexibility, ‘solutions’ chosen by adults that don’t work for the children they are designed to support, of children trying to be heard and their words falling on deaf ears. And of parental concerns being disregarded (see Chapter 8: ‘Lessons from a 999 call’). No child should feel like this on a daily basis, with no way out. And for those who may still think it’s just a few wayward children, let’s see what the data has to say. Since exclusion receives a lot of attention, we will start with the most recent pre-pandemic data on suspensions and exclusions (on the basis that the pandemic skewed much of this data).¹

In 2019/2020, there were 5,057 permanently excluded pupils in England, with 154,524 receiving a suspension or fixed-period exclusion (FPE). However, only 61,608 received more than one FPE and only 156 were ‘repeat offenders’ with 20 or more FPEs.² We know that there is a well-trodden path from exclusion to youth justice (Arnez and Condry, 2021), and that the numbers have been growing steadily. Of course, behaviour that puts the safety of the child, their peers or staff at risk needs to be addressed, and behaviour that disrupts the class must be managed. All of this has led to exclusion being in the spotlight, with commensurate attention, investment and resources. The controversial debate in education is how this sort of behaviour should be managed, with advocates of zero tolerance focusing on disciplinarian behavioural approaches and advocates of trauma-informed, attachment-aware neuroscience seeing behaviour as a means of communication and focusing on relationships and compassion.

Now let’s look at persistent absence. For the 2018/2019 academic year, there were 771,863 persistent absentees, rising to 921,927 in the autumn term of 2019. That is more than nine times as many pupils as those who have received more than one suspension, yet absence receives little attention bar the standard ‘attendance equals attainment/bums on seats’ narrative. In the autumn term of 2019, 60,247 pupils missed 50% or more of the academic year, up from 39,250 three years previously.³ These are huge numbers compared to exclusions, yet until COVID-19 arrived they sat completely under the radar. More recent numbers probably disguised a continuing growth in persistent absence within discounted COVID absences, and we may not be able to accurately separate the impact of the pandemic for some time.

What is also astonishing is that for approximately 40% of ‘persistent’ absences,⁴ there is no formally recorded reason (usually coded O for ‘other’ unauthorised absence, C for

1 We have consciously used pre-pandemic data throughout this book, for the reason cited above.

2 For data on permanent exclusions and suspensions in England for the academic year 2019/2020 see <https://explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/find-statistics/permanent-and-fixed-period-exclusions-in-england>.

3 For data on pupil absence in schools in England for the academic year 2018/2019 see <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/pupil-absence-in-schools-in-england-2018-to-2019>.

4 For average data on pupil absence in schools in England across recent years see <https://www.gov.uk/government/collections/statistics-pupil-absence>.

‘other’ authorised absence, N for no reason yet or I for illness).⁵ In contrast, for exclusions, there are no less than 11 reasons, ranging from theft to physical assault against an adult (Department for Education, 2017: 17) and only 17–18% are classified as ‘other’⁶ (with a proposal that the ‘other’ category now be removed). ‘Attendance equals attainment.’ ‘It’s vital for safeguarding.’ ‘One day missed is one grade dropped.’ We hear these messages constantly, but how can we know what support to put in place or what interventions might help if we don’t understand the underlying problem?

The really dangerous consequence of a lack of accurate data is the assumptions that are made. To illustrate this point, let me share two conversations about the total number of persistent absentees. One was with an ex-deputy head teacher who simply *believed* that 90% of these pupils were disengaged from education. In other words, they were just truanting. The other was a psychiatrist who stated that, in her professional opinion (and she sees non-attenders on a daily basis), 80% of these pupils had an anxiety-related issue which impacted directly or indirectly on their ability to attend school. That is a discrepancy of hundreds of thousands of children. We cannot simply make assumptions about the truth, when the only truth is that we don’t know why these children are absent. There is also a conflated argument, reinforced through teacher training, that because excluded children often have a history of persistent absence, persistent absentees are therefore more likely to exhibit antisocial behaviour or end up in prison. That is just another unfounded and dangerous assumption.

Despite claims to the contrary, we have an education system that has been starved of cash, that is coerced into valuing academic attainment above all else, that has a process for identifying and supporting children with SEND which is great on paper but failing miserably in practice (House of Commons Education Committee, 2019), and it’s generally accepted that our child and adolescent mental health services are hugely overstretched and failing to meet need (Crenna-Jennings and Hutchinson, 2020). On top of that, the UK has some of the least happy children in the world (Children’s Society, 2021), who are arguably under more pressure than any prior generation and facing a future that doesn’t look too appealing (think climate change, the economy, Brexit-related issues, COVID-19 and its ongoing fallout, a cost of living crisis). Of course, the square pegs have always been there, and in increasing numbers in recent years, but the pandemic has shone a stark light on the disadvantages that many children and young people face.

If the data doesn’t tell us what is behind issues like non-attendance (and, remember, this is just one aspect of what makes a square peg), what do we know? Although anxiety can so often be the trigger that leads to persistent absence, as was the case with my daughter, underlying causes are many and varied.

5 See <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/pupil-absence-in-schools-in-england-2018-to-2019>.

6 See <https://explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/find-statistics/permanent-and-fixed-period-exclusions-in-england>.

We do know that in terms of pupil characteristics, the square pegs (or at least those who appear in the official absence and exclusions statistics) are all the usual suspects: pupils on free school meals, who account for 32% of all persistent absentees, and those with SEND (25%) – mainly children on SEN support, but also 25% of all children with an education health and care plan (EHCP).⁷ Those from ethnic minorities and with English as an alternative language feature too, but to a lesser extent. Many square pegs will have social, emotional or mental health (SEMH) issues, which covers a vast array of need and could apply to any of us at some point in our lives. Yet even with – or despite – these acronyms, we are still missing the nuances involved.

Take SEND. There are children with undiagnosed SEND and there are those who have been diagnosed but remain unsupported. Indeed, the term SEND covers a massive range of need, from complex physical disabilities to underlying health conditions (including SEMH), which create secondary needs with debilitating anxiety and mental health issues. It spans those with EHCPs and the much larger numbers on SEN support, not to mention the intersectionality issues that arise when we cross-reference these challenges with factors such as gender, sexuality, social background and ethnicity. Put simply, for many children and for many reasons, the mainstream school environment is just too much.

Some square pegs – whether they go to school or not – will have experienced bullying. Some, perhaps many, will have experienced trauma, and we touch on this in more detail later, particularly in Part IV. Some will have chronic health conditions which constitute a SEND issue or simply require some ongoing process of adjustment to the norm. Then there are those children whose needs are fuelled by circumstances at home or in their local community, which not only make school a low priority but create behaviours deemed unacceptable by the system (from being there and causing problems to causing problems by not being there). Some will struggle to fit temporarily; for others it's a more permanent state of affairs.

So, what can we do when faced with such a vast and diverse range of underlying needs? My experience suggests that the only way school leaders can respond effectively is to build trust, invest in relationships and collaborate with families in order to help create the right culture and environment which allows them to meet each child's needs. It starts with ensuring that those needs are accurately and comprehensively identified, in order to agree the support (in its widest sense) that is necessary for the child to utilise the education system and carve out their own best path. Securing that support can be another mountain to climb, but if the trust and relationships are strong there will be things that can be done to help along the way.

⁷ See <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/pupil-absence-in-schools-in-england-2018-to-2019> and <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/permanent-exclusions-and-suspensions-in-england-2019-to-2020>.

All of this starts with genuine, empathetic listening (often referred to as ‘active listening’). That means listening (and really hearing) the square pegs and their advocates – in most cases, their parents. Square pegs are the canaries in the mine, telling us that there is a palpable tension between an education system driven by efficiencies of scale, top-down control, data and results, and trying to educate children who are, like the rest of us, confoundingly and beautifully unique. If we do not show ourselves as willing to listen, we leave children, especially younger children, with two main routes for expressing their emotions: they act out or they shut down. Those who act out and exhibit ‘challenging’ behaviour often find themselves sanctioned and even excluded. Those who shut down and withdraw may remain under the radar, going unnoticed behind masked struggles for the entirety of their school career. Others may survive in that mode until their coping strategy fails, their attendance plummets and they become one of those pesky ‘school refusers’.

My daughter was a case in point. We never really got to the bottom of her unmet needs (too often the system is just looking for a diagnosis box to tick). In primary school, things improved, although not through the children and adolescent mental health services support we received, which was potentially counterproductive, but through a member of the school’s senior leadership asking a simple question in a staff meeting: was there a teaching assistant prepared to work with us? That led to our first ‘champion’ (and square pegs and their families need all the champions they can find). Mrs B earned our trust and gave both me and my daughter the supportive relationship we so badly needed. It took many months, and was only possible because she was committed to helping us and really believed that she was ‘the one’ who could help my daughter to return to school. She *was* the right person; it wouldn’t have worked with Mrs C who had spare capacity, or Mrs D whose job it was to support all the square pegs. Genuine relationships are the only ones that genuinely count. They allow support to be tailored to specific needs and delivered under an umbrella of trust.

It’s also worth noting that blanket interventions don’t work. Many of the standard strategies (arriving a little late or leaving a little early, a ‘get-out-of-class’ card, building up a part-time timetable and so on) work some of the time for some square pegs but their effectiveness is limited (Not Fine in School, 2020). Just as adults don’t ‘mend’ or perform after a standard offer of therapy, so the speed with which a square peg can heal, and the support they need at any point in time, will vary hugely.

We were lucky in other ways too. We were never actually fined or prosecuted, although my daughter was told on several occasions that we would go to prison if she didn’t go to school (please note: this doesn’t work). One of the huge frustrations with persistent absence (or school ‘refusal’ as it remains stubbornly known across much of academia) is the judgement of whether parents are knowingly allowing their child to be absent, as this then makes them complicit. *Knowledge*, *agreement* and *complicity* all (obviously) have different meanings and their use will be extremely sensitive, loaded

and triggering to those whose children have struggled to attend. It's tied up in the legal stuff too – parental responsibility and the lack of recognition that it's not refusal.

It's also tied up in some of the research in which academics have pigeonholed school 'refusers' according to whether the absence is with their parents' knowledge and/or complicity. If my daughter had been 'acting out' and received a FPE instead, the same argument would apply, except that it wouldn't be a criminal offence. If she was 'truanting' (another word we don't use), I may have known or not known, understood or been complicit. But if it was a result of her needs not being met at school, then we would still have remained unsupported and potentially been fined or prosecuted. I would probably have had little agency over any of these scenarios other than trying to advocate on her behalf. Of course, I could have not cared, but this may have been because the system also failed me, so why would I expect anything different for my own children?

Back to our champions. Later, in secondary school (our second), we were gifted a deputy head teacher who believed that his school was there to serve his local community, whatever that looked like. Mr A took my daughter on roll, and she 'did' secondary school without ever setting foot on site. A Statement of Educational Needs meant that we could pay for a tutor (other-worldly and with buckets of wisdom, but that's another story), and we had a fortnightly exchange of work with the school. He registered our home as an exam centre, even sending invigilators so she could take her GCSEs. That gave my daughter the results she needed to go to a mainstream sixth-form college, and, combined with her jaw-dropping strength of character, she never looked back. Without Mr A that wouldn't have been possible. His school and the first secondary school in my daughter's story are less than two miles apart, but a whole cosmos separates their ethos and culture.

All of this requires time, flexibility and resources, but, even before that, it needs senior leaders to step in and protect families from the rigidity and inflexibility of the system. They must create a culture and environment that can scaffold each child and collaborate beyond the school walls to find innovative and creative solutions. They must bend the rules where necessary and use all the resources they have within their school and community networks (and some) to make it work. That is what this book is about.

By the way, my daughter has now completed a degree in criminology. She never fitted in and went through hell as a result; we weren't far behind. She will be a success despite the system, and I am all the more proud of her because of it. So, here's to all the square pegs out there. Because those that don't fit the system teach us the really important stuff in life – and we need to listen.

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A one-size-fits-all education system is creating a growing number of 'square pegs' – children and their families who don't fit in and who are suffering in many ways as a result.

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*Dr Carmel Kent, lecturer at the Open University, educational researcher, author of *AI for Learning* and a parent with lived experience*

Fran Morgan founded Square Peg in 2019, following her own daughter's struggles in the education system, having seen clear evidence that there were (and still are) a growing number of square pegs. After 14 years working in this field to support other parents and effect change, she has now retired to pick up the reins on her copywriting business.

Ellie Costello joined Square Peg as director in 2020, having experienced life as the parent of children with underlying needs which impacted their ability to access and 'fit' the education system. She now runs the organisation, as well as working as an expert by experience with local authority and health teams in her home county of Warwickshire.

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