Review of the book *Square Pegs: Inclusivity, Compassion and Fitting In: A Guide for Schools*, by Fran Morgan with Ellie Costello, edited by Ian Gilbert

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Square Pegs analyses and attempts to tackle one of the most pressing problems facing the modern UK education system — that is, the growing number of young people who feel they do not "fit" in school, to the extent that their wellbeing, mental and physical health, and access to education are in jeopardy, with many not able to attend any form of schooling at all. However, this is not a book which merely seeks to reiterate traditional, within-child perspectives of non-attendance. Instead, it poses difficult questions for all those working within the education system about their role and impact on the inclusion of every child. *Square Pegs* is written by those with direct experiences of either parenting or supporting young people who have not felt included in the system — including a number of educational psychologists. It skilfully outlines a range of relevant legislation, case studies and psychological concepts, including fulfilment of needs and self-determination theories, and explains their relevance to young people's school experience in an accessible way.

The opening metaphor, describing children who struggle with school for whatever reason, as "the canaries in the mine, alerting us to the mounting problems in our education system" (p. 3) is powerful not only because of its fundamental truth but also because of its stark warning of the very real danger which lies ahead in terms of the mental health and wellbeing of young people if meaningful change is not enacted. While this message is addressed bluntly, the book takes a non-confrontational stance on the individuals within the system. It points out the failings of organisations and emphasises the damage done when young people do not have access to the support they need, while acknowledging the often good intentions and impossible situations of those enacting these destructive policies (such as non-negotiable behaviour systems and rigid expectations). Recognising the futility of blame, the authors seek instead to guide all practitioners to "reframe our relationship with [the system] and our relationships with others within it" (p. 109), towards recognising how they can alter their personal practice to become a force for good within a flawed system rather than adding to the erosion of young people's belief in themselves and their ability to participate in school and society.

The power of the book comes from its collaborative nature, with chapters authored by educational psychologists, teachers, school leaders, parents, mental health and medical practitioners, lawyers and social workers. These many perspectives combine to form an all-encompassing educational handbook on how to understand and navigate potential issues that can create barriers to belongingness. In this way, the book embodies the message it sends to schools and education leaders — that improvements can only be made through participation, listening to and valuing all perspectives, and finding ways to co-produce strategies and develop constructive relationships between children, their families, their schools and outside agencies.

In a book filled with profound insights and practical strategies, ranging from quick fixes, which schools could apply with immediate effect, to calls for long-term societal shifts in attitudes to achievement and epistemological value, the most memorable element is the inclusion of authentic words, pictures and narratives of children who have been failed by the education system. As educational psychologists, we are aware of the power of hearing pupils' voices, and this book amplifies those voices loudly and demands that all educators listen.

One shortcoming was its limited examination of the impact of systemic racism on young people, especially concerning the feelings of belonging of those whose ethnicity or cultural background is in a minority within their school population. This issue is touched upon in some chapters, for example regarding discriminatory bias through punishments, particularly for black Caribbean boys, and neurodiversity campaigner William Carter speaks movingly about his time as a former "square peg" and subsequent academic success, sharing that his mixed race identity is "something that many students will tell you makes a difference" (p. 69). However, as racism is such an insidious problem in UK schools, with more than 60,000 instances of racist bullying recorded in schools between 2016 and 2021 (Sapouna et al., 2023), a more detailed exploration of how to promote inclusion through actively antiracist education needs to be a key focus for future discussion.

I would encourage all educational psychologists to read this book, not because it will lead to radical changes in your perspective — indeed, *Square Pegs* promotes the kind of person-centred, strengths-based, relational approach which

most of our profession already espouse — but instead, for the fact that it is a useful resource to share amongst schools and a young person's wider system, prompting consideration not of how to change children to fit their school, but how to adapt the environment so that it works for every child. What *Square Pegs* seeks to do is disseminate this ethos throughout the education system and help overburdened, pressured school staff working in the mine to recognise and reflect on the warning the canaries are giving them and to see the light above ground leading them towards a better way to imagine our schools in the future.

References

Sapouna, M., De Amicis, L., & Vezzali, L. (2023, February 24). Addressing racist bullying in schools. *Runnymede Trust*. https://www.runnymedetrust.org/blog/addressing-racist-bullying-in-schools