

The industrial disregard of students

Madeleine Holt

Square Pegs: inclusivity, compassion and fitting in – a guide for schools

Fran Morgan with Ellie Costello, and edited by Ian Gilbert, Carmarthen, Crown House Publishing Ltd, 2023. 376pp, paperback, £24.99, ISBN 9781781354100

British schools should set clear, demanding standards that pupils must meet ... Opting out, privatisation, parental choice ... could all help change schools from producer- to consumer-oriented organisations.

You will be relieved to know that this passage isn't from the riveting new book *Square Pegs*. It's a summary of a speech given by a 20-year-old Michael Gove to the Oxford Union when he was an undergraduate. (You can find it on page 82 of *Chums: how a tiny caste of Oxford Tories took over the UK*, published by Profile and written by Simon Kuper.) But this passage is from *Square Pegs*:

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 evryone (sic) right but I feel like I'm not being treated properly by the people who said it. (p4)

There is, as any historian of education will identify, a clear and causal relationship between the young Gove's vision of education and the effect that his subsequent policies as education secretary have had on our education system and on far too many young lives caught up in it.

The big idea that Gove carried out so zealously is standardisation. Only through treating all children as one-size-fits-all can 'standards' be effectively enforced across the system. In just the same way, any effective manufacturing process will ensure that all products meet the same high standards before leaving the factory.

The trouble is that children are not products. They are not all the same. And they have feelings. When you start imposing a standardisation process on them, inevitably a good number will be rejected for not meeting expected standards. Or they will remove themselves because the experience of trying to be what they are not is too agonising. They are the square pegs that don't fit the compliant round holes that have punctured every fibre of the school system in England.

Square Pegs tells the story of these children, their pain, and how parents and professionals can help make school more bearable for them. They wouldn't exist if – for all Gove's talk of listening to 'consumers' – families had a stronger voice within

our education system. If anything, Gove has gone out of his way to silence their voices through an unaccountable academy system and weak legislation to protect children. The silenced families are, of course, often from less 'advantaged' backgrounds. Race, class and unmet additional needs are the throbbing ostinato in *Square Pegs*, a hymn to compassion and inclusion.

There are two sides to the book. First, and through a rich array of different contributors, we hear about what is wrong with the English education system in the eyes of the children who don't fit in. Second, we hear about a multitude of often small, practical steps that schools can take to make the experience better for these students.

When it comes to what's wrong, the book is an elegant compendium of what's gone awry with English education since 2010: we see unadulterated dogma, the evidence-free spread of 'zero tolerance' behaviour policies and their state-sponsored embrace by headteachers despite a parallel rise in permanent exclusions, the turf wars between academies and local authorities in our horribly fragmented system, the lawbreaking without sanction to 'deal' with kids who might harm academic results.

The common thread in this long list is that the most vulnerable children are always on the receiving end, are made to feel responsible and are usually profoundly damaged as a result. As the psychologist Dr Chris Bagley points out, these children are often already painfully lacking in self-esteem. The behaviourist approach of putting students in isolation for the smallest breach of the rulebook, and, at its most extreme, permanent exclusion, is the worst possible approach for these students. And we are international outliers in this.

Bagley sums it up: 'Crucially, no research evidence – ever – has been presented in support of this punitive approach. It is thoroughly ideological. Zero tolerance, in particular, is psychologically illiterate. Ask yourself: if zero tolerance and inflexible behaviour policies are so effective, why are more and more children being excluded from mainstream schooling?' (p132).

One of the most powerful aspects of the book is hearing about the travails of individual children from those who've tried to help them. Sometimes their stories end badly, being chucked out and finding the well-trodden path into the youth justice system. Or they endure crushingly poor mental health which scars the rest of their lives. Other times the story ends upliftingly. And it's these stories that are so very valuable in *Square Pegs*.

We hear about the importance of mentors, of finding the space in the curriculum for unhappy students to find their passions, of treating families as equals and co-producing strategies, of using language carefully (eg. 'policies' not 'rules'), of giving students voice and agency, of removing setting and with it the achievement-inhibiting bottom set. A common theme is the importance of relationships between staff and students and

among students so as to develop a feeling of belonging – something schools have no statutory requirement to do. Schools like XP in Doncaster get their own chapter to talk about ‘crew’, a half-sized tutor group which builds supportive relationships between students in daily 45-minute sessions.

Some of these things are easier to do than others within the tightly policed English system, driven as it is by the fear of Ofsted and the demands of a bloated curriculum to shove limitless facts into young minds. But time and again the pragmatic contributors to *Square Pegs* remind us that it can be done, and that small steps can make a huge difference to individual lives.

At the heart of *Square Pegs* is a plea for flexibility. For not treating all students the same. In this sense it tackles the fundamental distinction between equality and equity. Gove and his acolytes have cleverly marshalled arguments around equality as guarantees of social justice: all children should have the right to the same core body of knowledge, and only by treating everyone the same can we ensure standards across the board. But, as the nine-year-old at the start of this review shrewdly points out, treating everyone equally doesn't make everyone happy.

I can't help thinking that many school leaders will struggle intellectually with the idea of treating children in a more individual way. You can imagine them being fearful that if they let little Johnny have certain perceived concessions (leaving school five minutes early to avoid bullies on his way home, having time out of the core curriculum, etc.) then every family will be clamouring for the same treatment.

Nor can I help thinking that, in the end, only a system that mandates the space, time and resources within its structure to allow *all* children to experience a more sophisticated and personalised approach will work. For this to happen, Ofsted must be dramatically reformed and renamed, high-stakes testing ended in primary schools, and GCSEs and A-levels gradually phased out (and that's just for starters). All of this would save money. This, plus new funds from taxing private education, could be the start of resourcing English schools properly, so they can start to deliver the personalised support that every student deserves.

In the end, the sheer economic cost of our current approach will surely prompt change: the millions wasted funding places in pupil referral units, the cost to the criminal justice system and to the NHS and social services in so many depleted lives.

But what *Square Pegs* evokes so brilliantly is the emotional cost of our industrial disregard for students who don't fit in. I'll end with another testimony from one 12-year-old. Be warned, this not an upbeat ending – far from it. Its moral power should move us to bring about change:

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 won't go in ... 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. (p6)

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