



Square Pegs

A book for school leaders who find themselves caught between a rock and a hard place.

The education system isn't fit for purpose, and probably hasn't been for some time. It's rarely inclusive and it doesn't work for so many 'vulnerable' pupils – that catch-all group of children with SEND, below the poverty line or at risk of abuse and neglect. In fact, to go a step further it's actively damaging many children who are square pegs in a system of inflexible, budget-constrained round holes.

This book is a handbook for school leaders who want to do the right thing by their school community, but face conflicting agenda and impossible decisions on a daily basis.

They may know that certain students aren't able to engage, but referrals for assessments are taking well over a year. They may recognise that some students really need a different, more appropriate setting, but their EHCP application has already been refused and the parents are having to go to tribunal. They may be aware that other students have such extreme anxiety that if they do make it into school they're probably not learning anything anyway, yet both children and parents want nothing more than for them to be able to attend.

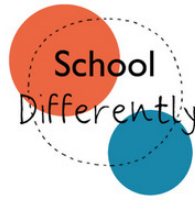
Coronavirus has given us a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to change this. It's shown us that online learning can work successfully, that some children have thrived without the stress of attendance, academic pressure or constant assessment. (It's also shown us that other children have been adrift without the structure of the school day, the supervision of caring adults and the safety of an environment away from home). It's shone a light on financial hardship for many families, lack of access to online learning and the role of school as something which goes way beyond education. It has most definitely shown us that one size doesn't fit all and we need to address the fact that it's not working for an increasing number of children, and do so urgently.

Changing the system is going to be hard, but what we can do is to give school leaders (and others working in education) the tools they need to make those difficult decisions and ensure that their school does the best possible for all its students. This book covers some of the key topics, from setting out the context and defining the square pegs, to providing invaluable advice around the problem of conflicting agenda. It talks about the importance of identifying needs accurately and comprehensively, offers clarity on the complexities of the legal system and its relevance in education, and provides examples of strategies that are used in youth work, specialist settings and alternative provision and how these can be applied in mainstream settings.

The book is part of a wider conversation about School Differently, which asks the question 'is the English education system fit for purpose?'. This has initially involved a group of individuals from very different backgrounds, but with the aim of extending the invitation to a wider audience. Similarly, the book brings together an eclectic mix of contributors – a lawyer, 17 year old, skills advisor and founder of a digital design agency, to name a few.



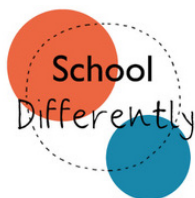
ch	title	notes
1	Introduction	<p>The current education system is failing too many children, particularly the square pegs or more ‘vulnerable’ pupils</p> <p>(NB. explore the issue around the definition of ‘vulnerable’. It has become a catch-all for very different groups of children – see ch 3)</p> <p>Many school leaders want to do the right thing by their pupils/families, but it’s hard to know how/what to do/where to look. This book aims to help.</p>
2	One size doesn’t fit all (and the square pegs that don’t fit)	<p>There are more square pegs now than ever (NB. are there more children with problems or is it that the current system is too narrow and rigid to work for them, or is the system actually causing the problems?). Square Pegs refers to the ‘challenging’ cohort who are the subject of the book.</p> <p>The factors that create square pegs include:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> i. SEND (and all its sub-categories) ii. MH issues/SEMH (includes bullying, trauma) that isn’t necessarily SEND iii. Chronic ill-health, especially in early years iv. Financial disadvantage/poverty v. From an ethnic minority/BAME, or with EAL vi. At risk of abuse/neglect vii. Disengaged viii. Young carers ix. LAC <p>Every child will be different, and many will have a unique mix of these factors/needs. Our system is ill-equipped to identify individual needs, so many go unsupported or have one need highlighted whilst other more disabling needs remain unidentified.</p> <p>When it comes to square pegs we’re not doing a good job of identifying their needs. And because we aren’t addressing their needs they’re (a) acting out = challenging behaviour, (b) withdrawing = school refusal or (c) disengaging = ‘truanting’.</p> <p>All these square pegs are ‘vulnerable’ but in different ways. Some have safeguarding needs. Some have challenging behaviour. Some mask/withdraw. Some see no relevance in the curriculum. Some are more worried about where their next meal is coming from. Some are young carers. Vulnerable has become a catch-all for all of these (this catch-all definition of ‘vulnerable’ is very unhelpful, as their needs are completely different and so our response must be different)</p> <p>The truth is we’re all human. Humans are individual – we’re all unique. So a one size education system will never fit all.</p> <p>There’s also an inequality issue because these children can’t access the education system as it stands (ref ch 6 on legal angle)</p>



3	<p>The consequences of a one-size-fits-all system (for CYP & families)</p>	<p>Children’s and parent’s experiences when they don’t fit (make it real).</p> <p>The triggers that tend to instigate intervention are absence, exclusion or significant lack of academic progress (Progress 8 scores?), so it is the children who are outliers on these metrics that are highlighted. Disruptive behaviour can’t be ignored; masking/withdrawal often goes unnoticed.</p> <p>However, the response to these educational ‘triggers’ of under-performance are making matters worse. Zero-tolerance behaviour policies. Parental fines and prosecutions for absence. Schools being judged on attendance and attainment.</p> <p>There’s also a huge cohort of children that remain under the radar because they just about cope – they attend and they are no trouble. It doesn’t mean they are thriving, or learning life skills, or being prepared for life as a working adult in 2030+.</p> <p>Consequences when a child doesn’t fit are huge: loss of education, youth crime, family cost and stress, MH, off rolling, non-elective home ed etc.</p>
4	<p>Identifying need (what we need to do first, for every child)</p>	<p>If we assume that absence, exclusion and a lack of academic progress are all the result of some form of unmet need(s), whether that’s within child, school or family/community (and more likely a multiplicity of factors), then we need to address the need(s) in order to address the problem.</p> <p>One difficulty: no effective screening process to identify need. Suspect that even when need is currently identified it may not be accurate/comprehensive. Long wait lists for assessments (but you need to have an idea what the problem is first anyway).</p> <p>Another issue: often one need is identified and then it’s left there and no one looks any further. Usually there’ll be a multiplicity of needs and it’s really important to look at the whole picture and the way one need impacts on others.</p> <p>Another difficulty: even if need(s) are accurately identified, hard to access interventions from external agencies (long wait lists, high thresholds, high cost)</p> <p>Lots of talk about Early Intervention and Child-Centred but rarely happens.</p> <p>Schools may want to provide interventions but be unable to afford them.</p>
5	<p>Support, not punishment</p>	<p>Sometimes the root cause of problems can’t be solved by schools. But just recognising that these ‘unsolvable’ problems are creating other problems and providing emotional support can make all the difference.</p> <p>Sometimes it’s a ‘within child’ issue – a learning difficulty, ASD, neurodiverse issue. Again, there may be long waiting lists to access external assessments or therapies, but recognising this and being supportive of the stress this causes rather than sanctioning the resulting behaviour (disruptive or school refusal) will still help.</p>



		<p>Sometimes it's connected to the school environment and sensory issues. There are lots of relatively easy/inexpensive adjustments that can be made to the environment so that it becomes more inclusive.</p> <p>There are strategies that will help with 'challenging' behaviour, persistent absence, sensory issues.</p>
6	<p>Children have rights (important, because many school leaders don't know this stuff)</p>	<p>Many school leaders don't fully understand their legal duties, or those of their LA/Academy Trust (cite Lucinda Ferguson's research).</p> <p>Here it is in a nutshell...</p> <p>Legal obligations – Education and SEND Law, Human Rights (in legalease)</p> <p>It's left to parents to hold schools/LAs to account through inadequate complaints systems/inspectors.</p> <p>The missing bit is accountability and consequences for schools/LAs when they break statutory guidance.</p> <p>Role of Ombudsman and EFSA (Academies worse).</p>
7	<p>Belonging and the local community (whatever that looks like)</p>	<p>Use local resources, as a school or group of schools. University students (postgrads in psychology, other subjects?).</p> <p>See what local charities/community groups could offer.</p> <p>Tap into parents' expertise – added bonus of improving parental engagement.</p> <p>Added benefit of helping to shape school to match needs of local community and embed it</p>
8	<p>Being trauma informed (a great starting point that will help ALL children)</p>	<p>Humans are relational. For children to learn they must first feel safe and secure. Trust is key.</p> <p>Three-way relationships: school-child-family, all of which must be underscored by trust.</p> <p>ACEs-aware schools will by definition be inclusive and work for all, because they're based on relational principles and the neuroscience of behaviour.</p> <p>Recovery Curriculum.</p>
9	<p>Making it relevant (curriculum & pedagogy – so much scope here)</p>	<p>Current curriculum isn't relevant to adult life in 2030+ so not relevant and not preparing our children for their future adult lives.</p> <p>Needs more personalisation, relevance, need to re-introduce creative/arts subjects which help many square pegs express themselves. Also vocational elements and life skills.</p> <p>Increasingly schools are looking at delivering the national curriculum through projects that more pupils can relate to, which combine subjects. (examples: XP Trust and Debra Kidd's example of a Yr 8 project to deliver aid in a Haiti village?)</p> <p>So much disengagement is down to children not seeing any relevance in what is being taught. Bring it to life, connect it with their lived experiences, show how different academic subjects interconnect and have daily relevance.</p>



10	Investing in transition	<p>A key trigger point and often where it all goes wrong for these children. Most (not all) transition programmes focus on children with EHCPs and on the SEN register, with a nod to parents.</p> <p>There are SO MANY differences beyond the obvious between primary and secondary and particularly in the relationship between school and parents. Secondary schools often make matters a lot worse for themselves by not getting this relationship right from the start. An Ed Psych PhD project in Worcestershire evidenced that investing in building the relationship with ALL parents as part of a wider transition programme reduced absence with those Yr 7s the following year. BUT transparent & honest workshops with parents essential to build trust.</p> <p>Different elements that need to be addressed for a smooth transition: school environment, staff, pedagogy, relationship with parents, rules, friendships, etc.</p> <p>Interesting that several newer school models are now ‘through’ key stages (so 2–18) to address the transition issue.</p>
11	Tech-mate (so much potential here for tech to free up teachers, support square pegs and inform school leadership)	<p>There are HUGE opportunities for technology, not only to help square pegs but to free up teaching staff to do the relational stuff. Also to improve the data analyses amongst groups where the official stats really don’t tell you much.</p> <p>Examples:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • wristband in the classroom for anxious CYP – can alert the teacher without having to hold up a card • in classroom tools for staff to help them support specific children • AV1s who can be the eyes and ears of a child in the classroom when they aren’t able to attend • Online provision with live interaction and monitoring for children unable to attend – will help reintegration as they’re less likely to have fallen behind • Gaming to engage disengaged kids or those who struggle to talk openly about their problems <p>Coronavirus has given us a unique opportunity to incorporate remote/blended learning for the benefit of pupils and teachers.</p>
12	Managing conflicting agenda (the school perspective)	<p>School leaders are pivotal to the culture and ethos of a school. They are also given significant autonomy in how they respond to ‘problem’ pupils, which leads to a lot of inconsistency from school to school. For parents this can feel like a complete lottery and is not always easy to gauge when ‘choosing’ schools (not that there is in reality much of a choice). The staff response will also be largely dictated by senior leadership.</p> <p>Even the best school leaders are faced with challenging decisions and conflicting agenda on a daily basis. They have to balance the requirements/narrative of the DfE, LA/Academy Trust, Ofsted with what they feel is right for their own community.</p> <p>How do school leaders do the right thing and put their children, families and staff before anything else? What can/can’t they do within the current system? Where are the loopholes? Where can the boundaries be pushed?</p>



13	Giving staff agency (because it's been taken away)	Recruit wisely (from the right PGCE courses/with the right attitude). Offer CPD. Make sure they are equipped to identify need/support square pegs. Make sure they have a good support network & mentoring. Encourage creativity and innovation.
14	Learning from youthwork (TRUST is key, but also the way that youthwork has traditionally built really important relationships with square pegs and between square pegs, in their local communities)	Trust and trusted relationships are key. Goes three ways: school, parent, child. All need to trust each other. We could learn a lot from YW and the way it relies on building trusted relationships with young people, creates peer communities, and often uses vehicles like sport/hobbies as a vehicle for opening up. Youth workers also walk alongside young people, understanding their lives/issues. We must provide the time/expertise to do this within education if we want to address some of these problems. Also embeds schools/learning/education in their local communities. Social mobility?
15	Learning from special schools, alternative provision and independents	AP has the opportunity to do things very differently (much higher pupil:staff ratio etc.) They often work with the most challenging pupils. What do they do that mainstream schools could learn from? What is constrained by cost and what is do-able in a mainstream setting? Independent schools often do things differently, and were able to transition to remote learning far quicker than many mainstream schools during lockdown. What can we learn from the independent sector?
16	Rethinking qualifications (employers don't need to know you have a 2:1 in Art History, they need to see your skills/what you can do)	NB what can mainstream schools actually do about this? They can add things like Skills Badges but can they sidestep GCSEs? How does the IB fit here (good or bad?) What channel of the current system has the most freedom in terms of qualifications – free schools? What would have to happen to change things? Is it the qualifications that are driving the curriculum? Are the exams the worst part of the XP school experience, with the pupils doing well in spite of having to sit GCEs/A levels? What happens to university if a school didn't do GCEs/A levels? E-portfolios. Digital skills badges.
17	Involving business	Businesses have been saying for years that the education system is not producing the candidates it needs for today's economy. We also know that many business leaders are disabled by ACEs that often derive from their experiences at school.



		Is there a way of involving business in shaping the system, which benefits both business and CYP?
18	Conclusion	<p>There is hope. Lots of room for manoeuvre, in spite of this Govt and the system/situation it has created.</p> <p>Invite readers to share their stories/comments on the School Differently website or by self-nomination for the awards programme?</p>