

Fred Bonner, Rosa M. Banda et al., *The Blueprint for Belonging: A Reflection on Square Pegs and Round Holes* (New York: Routledge Press, 2021, 978-1620367728, 432 pp.) *The Blueprint for Belonging: A Reflection on Square Pegs and Round Holes*

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There are books that inform and books that affirm. *Square Pegs and Round Holes: Alternative Approaches to Diverse College Student Development Theory*, edited by Fred A. Bonner II, Rosa M. Banda, Stella L. Smith, and Aretha F. Marbley, belongs to the second. It reshapes how we think about development and belonging. For those who live and work beside Black students in spaces that often misunderstand belonging, this text feels like permission to exhale.

From its opening pages, Bonner and his colleagues make one truth clear: traditional student-development frameworks were not built with Black students in mind. Rooted in Eurocentric psychology, these theories defined maturity and autonomy through lenses that excluded culture, spirituality, and ancestry. *Square Pegs and Round Holes* gives language to what many educators have always known intuitively. The language of theory has not captured the depth and duality of what it means to be Black in higher education.

Rather than forcing students to fit existing models, the editors create a space where development is reimagined through the lens of liberation. They begin with the premise that culture, community, and faith are not external to growth but its foundation. What makes this work striking is how directly it recenters Black humanity as the core of development. The editors refuse inclusion into outdated theories and call for reconstruction. They remind us that development is inseparable from healing, identity, and liberation.

A central contribution of *Square Pegs and Round Holes* is Fred Bonner's Multicontextual Model of Diverse Learning Environments (MMDLE), which redefines how scholars and practitioners understand development. Older theories, such as Chickering's Seven Vectors and Perry's Scheme of Ethical Development, assume that all students move linearly toward autonomy. Bonner rejects that view and offers a framework grounded in context, culture, and community. He shows that development unfolds across overlapping spaces, the academic, familial, spiritual, and sociocultural, and that growth for Black students cannot be separated from these worlds. MMDLE views learning as relational rather than individual and defines

thriving as the ability to move among contexts without losing self. Belonging becomes an ecological experience rather than an institutional goal, honoring the intellectual and spiritual fullness that Black students bring to higher education. Bonner transforms the educator's task from helping students adjust to helping institutions adapt, shifting practice from assimilation to affirmation.

One of the most memorable chapters, "Finding My Way Black," embodies the spirit of the book's title. Written in the tradition of critical self-narrative, it illuminates the emotional and intellectual work that Black students undertake to exist authentically in spaces that were not built with them in mind. The author describes the daily act of navigating what Bonner calls multicontextuality, "the simultaneous awareness of being both insider and outsider, visible and unseen." "Finding My Way Black" uses storytelling as a theory, showing that identity development for Black students is not about adapting to a dominant culture but about constructing freedom within it. Through this reflection, the book transforms development into an act of reclamation. It names survival, pride, and truth-telling as essential learning outcomes and reframes success as self-definition rather than acceptance.

The book's chapters on Black student experience are its heartbeat. Each contribution speaks with urgency and authenticity, portraying development as both personal and collective. The writers never sanitize or simplify. They speak to students directly, affirming that they were never the problem. The system was never designed for their brilliance, but they hold the tools to create something better.

For educators and counselors, this book functions as a mirror. It invites us to see both our students and ourselves more clearly. The editors do not speak about students from afar; they write in dialogue with them. The tone feels communal, not analytical, as if the pages themselves are holding conversation and reflection. Each chapter bridges theory and practice with ease. The writing encourages contemplation rather than prescription and challenges us to rethink mentorship, advising, and leadership inside institutions that have not always earned the trust of Black learners. Bonner and his collaborators model a form of critical care that refuses neutrality. They remind practitioners that neutrality, in the presence of inequity, becomes complicity.

For those in student life or educational leadership, the book asks honest questions. Whose comfort does a policy serve? What does growth mean if

it requires leaving identity behind? It invites us to measure success not by conformity but by authenticity and to imagine growth as a return to self rather than a departure from community.

One of the most beautiful aspects of *Square Pegs and Round Holes* is its tone. It is rigorous yet compassionate. The editors know that theory alone cannot heal wounds left by exclusion, but naming and affirming can. The book honors the unity of intellect, emotion, and spirit. For Black students, education has always been spiritual work. The authors write about faith, family, and cultural pride as developmental strengths. In doing so, they reclaim what has often been dismissed as nonacademic and reveal it as the essence of resilience.

Reading the book brings to mind students who have been told they are too expressive or too proud for the spaces they inhabit. Too often, that feedback is treated as a behavioral issue instead of an invitation for the institution to listen. This text tells those students that their fullness is not a flaw. It is the foundation.

In a moment when higher education often confuses visibility with equity, *Square Pegs and Round Holes* models what real transformation requires. It shows that inclusion without cultural understanding is assimilation. The editors and contributors call institutions to evolve instead of asking students to conform. This book also validates the wisdom of practitioners who have always believed that care, culture, and rigor belong together. It recognizes that the deepest truths about learning are witnessed, not measured. Bonner and his collaborators elevate that wisdom to its rightful place as knowledge.

For Black educators, this book feels like home. It legitimizes a collective way of knowing that values empathy, relationship, and spirituality. It calls us to lead with conviction and heart while grounding our work in theories that reflect the lived reality of Black students. *Square Pegs and Round Holes* is both theory and testimony. It celebrates Black student development as an act of liberation. It reads like a conversation between generations of scholars, mentors, and students who have refused to give up on the idea that education can heal.

This book belongs in every space that claims to care about student success and inclusion. More than that, it belongs in the hands of those who accompany students through the hard work of becoming. Bonner II, Banda, Smith, and

Marbley have created a work that redefines the field. For Black students and those who serve them, this text is not only scholarship. It is scripture. It teaches that the goal of education is not to smooth our edges but to honor the shape we were always meant to be.