

## **Book Reviews**

**Reviews Editor: Dr. Paul Downes, Dublin City University, Ireland**

While the latter three books being reviewed here are directly aimed as being resources for teachers, it is arguable that the first reviewed book on highly sensitive people in an insensitive world is also an apt domain for teachers to reflect upon. The reviewed books reflect perennial themes of the tension between individual differences and categorisations regarding social and emotional experiences, mental health and wellbeing, as well as specific learning difficulties- with related tensions between a search for normative approaches to social and emotional worlds and a plea to recognise individuality. Interestingly the much misunderstood Jungian contrasts between extraversion and introversion are invoked, terms that have become reduced somewhat to categories rather than two potential modes of experience available to us all and for education systems to facilitate.

**Paul Downes  
Reviews Editor**

# 1. *Highly Sensitive People in an Insensitive World (How to Create A Happy Life)*

**Author:** Ilse Sand  
**Publisher:** Jessica Kingsley Publishers  
**Year of Publication:** 2016  
**ISBN:** 978-1-784-50324-6

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Ilse Sand's book offers the reader a comprehensive and personal account of what it means to live in this 'insensitive world' as a 'highly sensitive person.' Social and emotional learning is thankfully a key focus in educational research at present. Reflecting on the concept of 'highly sensitive people' offers us an opportunity to appreciate a lesser focused on element within the extremely expansive range of aspects to be considered within this sphere. It invites the reader to think about the diversity of psychological and emotional characteristics that young people in a classroom may have. This concept originated with Elaine Aron's (1997) work. Sand begins her work by outlining the characteristics of *Highly Sensitive People*. These characteristics include being highly sensitive to sensory inputs, being easily affected by the moods of other people, being conscientious and receiving more inputs and thinking deeply about them than other people.

Written in an extremely personal and conversational style, Sand's book almost seems to resemble a long therapy session in which a highly sensitive person's idea of her/himself and their place in the world is deconstructed and rebuilt through a whole different lens. She argues that the trait of being highly sensitive has long been viewed through a deficit perspective, and associated with negative ideas such as introversion and narcissism. Her work reframes this and presents the 'highly sensitive' trait as something that can flourish under the right circumstances.

Beginning with an extensive description of the characteristics of highly sensitive people, the book then includes a chapter dedicated to analysis of high standards highly sensitive people place on themselves and the low self-esteem that can ensue from this. This is followed by a chapter with advice as to how people can organise their life according to this highly sensitive trait, then a chapter with advice on how to benefit from one's ability to relate to others and to be present in situations. Chapters on facing negative aspects such as anger, guilt and shame follow, with an entire chapter dedicated to mental health problems that may be related to being highly sensitive. Following on from this is a chapter about developing and growing, which talks about loving yourself and being yourself. Sand includes a short chapter on research done on the highly sensitive trait, primarily by the above mentioned Elaine Aron. The book ends with 'a gift for the highly sensitive,' an epilogue detailing inspiring activities, and activities to be used when you are over-stimulated.

The book attempts to provide people with ideas as to how to relate these personal characteristics to the context they live in, to reject hegemonic social norms that demand specific characteristics and to embrace and enjoy themselves as they really are. Of particular interest to educators and those interested in social and emotional learning are chapters relating to mental health and self-esteem. Advice given in the book is specific to the highly sensitive trait, but much of it could be applicable to any person suffering with self-esteem issues.

The book describes in great detail cognitive processes that people suffering from self-esteem issues engage in, which might be useful for educators considering the impacts that they have on diverse children and young people in their classroom practice.

While the book provides ample opportunity to empathetically engage in the experiences of others, a process which nobody will deny is of fundamental importance for anybody working with people, and young people in particular, its specific aim is to empower ‘highly sensitive people’ to engage with this trait in a positive way and to derive benefits from it. For people working in education it is not always relevant to the classroom context. The trait of being ‘highly sensitive’ of course deserves attention, but as a reader I was struck by the fact that many aspects of being highly sensitive would be viewed positively in a classroom setting, and educators reading this book might not consider treatment of highly sensitive people to be a priority area in terms of their continued development as emotional educators. Nonetheless, it offers a valuable insight into a little known phenomenon and is an interesting and entertaining read.

#### **Reference**

Aron, E. (1997) *The Highly Sensitive Person*. New York, NY: Broadway Books

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## ***2. The Other Side of the Report Card. Assessing Students’ Social, Emotional and Character Development***

<b>Author:</b>	<b>Maurice Elias, Joseph Ferrito and Dominic Mocerì</b>
<b>Publisher:</b>	<b>Thousand Oaks, California, USA</b>
<b>Year of Publication:</b>	<b>2016</b>
<b>ISBN:</b>	<b>978-1-4833-8667-6</b>

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Well-designed assessment is crucial to evaluate and monitor students' progress, providing valuable feedback and information to both learner and teacher on strengths to be celebrated and areas which need further development. It is necessary for both academic learning as well as social and emotional learning. Bringing in new instruments to assess social and emotional learning, however, may require classroom practitioners to adopt new ways of assessing student behaviour, over and above existing classroom demands. As a result, they may be reluctant to engage in tasks which would require additional time and energy to their already busy schedules. Maurice Elias and his colleagues have come up with a very innovative idea of how to go round this barrier, making use of an existing, teacher friendly tool. In *The Other Side of the Report Card*, the authors provide a roadmap on how to design and implement a report card comment system to assess students' social, emotional and character development, making use of the current report card system in schools.

In the first chapter, the authors underline the advantages of adding social, emotional and character development to the existing report card system rather than adopting new instruments for assessing this aspect of learning, including practicality and feasibility, the emphasis on positive behaviour, and indications for age-appropriate as well as early interventions. Chapter two then provides examples of adapted comments sections from various schools, such as rubrics and Likert rating systems, including a sample set of 'typical' report cards comments and a set of activities to assist the reader in evaluating his or her own school report cards. The following three chapters then guide the reader through the process of making decisions on what and how to adapt, keeping in mind such factors as existing programmes, school culture, needs of the school community, and flexibility. Chapter 6 identifies the most common challenges likely to be met when adapting the card report system and suggests various strategies on how these may be overcome, including parent-teacher conversations. Chapter 7 serves as an implementation index, identifying the areas to be 'checked' and providing practical strategies on how this could be effected. The concluding chapter appears to be more of an 'optional' chapter, providing a more theoretical discussion on the literature in the area, particularly the rationale for the other side of the report card system in assessing social, emotional and character development in school.

*The Other Side of the Report Card* is a very practical, accessible and school friendly guide for districts, schools and classroom practitioners on how to make use of an existing, long-standing tool to evaluate a relatively new area of learning which is now being introduced in many schools. Amongst others, it includes guided activities to analyse existing report cards, samples of report card designs, tables illustrating the pros and cons of using rubrics and Likert rating systems, and case studies highlighting common challenges. Each chapter includes also a very useful overview, summary and take away and reflections points, while a list of useful resources is included at the end of the book. This guide is an accessible and invaluable resource for schools in their efforts to promote and implement quality social, emotional and character education for their students.

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### ***3. Mental Health and Wellbeing through Schools. The way forward.***

**Author:** Rosalyn Shute and Phillip Slee  
**Publisher:** Routledge: London and New York  
**Year of Publication:** 2016  
**ISBN:** 978-0-415-74527-7

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With twenty per cent of school children facing mental health difficulties, with half of mental health difficulties beginning before the age of 14, and with mental health difficulties in children and young people

being on the increase over the past decades, *Mental Health and Wellbeing through Schools* comes as a very topical and timely book. Though the book's topic will not be new to the journal's reader, the book examines the issues involved through a fresh and creative approach, bringing together a panel of international experts on mental health and wellbeing from across the world, including Australia, Japan, USA, Canada, UK, Italy, Israel and Palestine amongst others. The authors discuss a wide range of contexts, stages of development and issues in mental health and wellbeing in schools from different perspectives, including education, psychology, public health and social work amongst others. The book thus has a wide range of appeal to anyone involved in the promotion and provision of mental health and wellbeing in and through schools, at research, policy development or practitioner level.

*Mental Health and Wellbeing through Schools* is a provocative book, opening up for discussion the various challenges in mental health and wellbeing initiatives in and through schools, presented in four sections: challenges for school leaders and organisations, challenges for the school teachers, challenges of new technologies in mental health initiatives, and challenges related to targeted interventions. These sections are preceded by an excellent chapter by Brian Graetz who underlines the current challenges facing mental health and wellbeing in and through schools. These include amongst others, lack of resourcing and inadequate policy framework, the quality of individual programmes and the implementation demands on schools, the role and function of schools in mental health and wellbeing, the views on mental health and wellbeing of school leaders, staff, parents and students, the need for collaboration with out of school staff, the need for schools to make informed choices about which programme/s to adopt, particularly in view of ongoing and aggressive marketing, the increasing online programmes and mental health apps, and staff professional learning in programme implementation.

These challenges are then taken up by the various authors in the subsequent book sections and chapters, with each chapter providing also possible solutions to the challenges being discussed. This book is not only about challenges, however, presenting also possible solutions to such challenges. Some of the areas and topics discussed in the chapters include dealing with problems through adaptive and flexible school management, the challenges and opportunities for schools when implementing evidence-based mental health programmes, fidelity vs. adaptation in programme implementation, the role and contribution of parents, professional learning for teachers and early childhood educators, the use of internet and technology, using online environments to build staff capacity, and targeted interventions for students with disability, autism, suicide, and depression. In the final chapter, the editors then draw the main themes which emerged from these chapters in mapping the way forward for the promotion and provision of mental health and wellbeing through schools.

*Mental Health and Wellbeing through Schools* is based on the latest evidence on what works in promoting mental health and wellbeing for school children. At the same time it is also grounded in the actual realities of schools, offering directions and solutions for the complex challenges raised in the book. This is an accessible resource for all those involved in mental health and wellbeing initiatives through schools at research, development, implementation and evaluation levels, ranging from educational authorities, policy

makers, school leaders and teachers to teacher educators, researchers and mental health professionals amongst others.

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#### **4. Specific Learning Difficulties: What Teachers Need to Know**

**Author:** Diana Hudson  
**Publisher:** Jessica Kingsley Publishers: London and Philadelphia  
**ISBN:** 978-1-84905-590-1

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Diana Hudson is a biology and learning support teacher as well as a mentor and tutor for students with specific learning difficulties (SpLD). The author has a diagnosis of dyslexia and of her four children three have diagnosed SpLD. *Specific Learning Difficulties: What Teachers Need to Know* is an insightful and practical guide for those working with students with SpLD. In this book, Diana Hudson breaks down myths regarding dyslexia, dyscalculia, dysgraphia, dyspraxia, Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD,) Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD), Asperger Syndrome, and Obsessive Compulsive Disorder (OCD) with an in depth, strengths focused description of each SpLD. Particular attention is paid to the social and emotional effect of SpLD and how this can impact a student's learning and life. Hudson makes clear from the beginning that this book is not an effort to 'cure' students with SpLD but offers insights and a wealth of strategies to help these students find their strengths and develop learning styles that enable them to achieve success in school.

Written in an informal and direct manor the language makes this book very accessible to all readers. Hudson adhered to a structured layout with each learning difficulty discussed using the same headings. These are revealed at the beginning of each chapter. Hudson begins by providing a definition of the SpLD. How one can spot a student with the SpLD is then explained before the author lists common indicators and common strengths associated with the SpLD. Subsequent headings include; "How can I help in the classroom" and "Individual help". Each chapter concludes with a summary of key points. The summary offers a useful opportunity for the reader to reflect on the most important points. The structured layout ensures a comprehensive overview of each SpLD and makes it is easy for the reader to return to the book and quickly find desired information.

The focus is on what educators can do to facilitate learning differences, in awareness of the difficulties students may be experiencing and ready to explore where their strengths may lie. A problem-solution focus on the emotional and social effects of having a learning difficulty is central to this guide. A teacher's power to boost self-esteem is rated highly. Reiterated throughout the book is the advice, "Your attitude and approach are important". Supportive teaching guides the valuable advice offered by Hudson as

educators are encouraged to listen to the learner and be flexible with approaches. Unqualified professionals should be cautious not to use symptoms of SpLD offered to diagnose students. Although the author offers tips to spot students with SpLD educators should keep in mind that their most important job is to get to know the student, not to place them into a category. Throughout, the author shows an awareness of the importance of the rest of the child's day in school, outside of the classroom. Concerns about isolation and depression are emphasised as Hudson warns that students with SpLD may have a difficulty establishing and maintaining friendships. Communication between staff members and students with SpLD is recommended to create an effective support network for the students. Easily adopted, practical advice such as assigning an adult mentor to students with SpLD to offer emotional support justifies the books validity for an international audience.

The final chapters of the book offers tips to help students with SpLD improve organisational skills, approaches to exams and revision. A myriad of strategies educators can draw on to facilitate learning differences are outlined by the author. Factual, in depth reasoning explains differences to highlight why students may find these skills challenging. Practical and innovative ideas are offered to educators that may help students overcome barriers. A huge strength lies in the emphasis placed on the emotional effect of SpLD by Hudson, something which can often be overlooked by a focus on students' actions and not the source of his/her distress. Hudson continually reminds the reader that each student is different and does not offer one solution but a selection of strategies to trial.

Interspersed throughout the book are anecdotes, did you know segments and views from the inside. "Did you know?" segments offer interesting facts and insights that enrich the portrayal of learning difficulties. Anecdotes from Hudson make the author relatable and the reader is more inclined to trust in her advice as she voices first-hand experience with SpLD. "Views from the Inside" strengthen the authors portrayal of learning differences. Voices of people with SpLD reveal valuable insights into their realities. By revealing success stories from people with SpLD the reader is reassured that facilitating learning differences can lead to endless possibilities.

Overall *Specific Learning Difficulties: What Teachers Need to Know* makes for a user-friendly, practical and valuable addition to bookshelves in schools internationally. The guide helps educators identify SpLD as in awareness of learning differences strategies can be employed to ensure all pupils experience success. An educator's role extends to providing emotional support for pupils to realise their capabilities. Hudson highlights the role of educators and adults in the lives of students with SpLDs to enable each student maximise on their skills and talents by using their learning differences advantageously. Hudson maintains throughout that success for people with SpLD "may well be not "in spite of" their SpLD but 'because of' them" (p.211). Hudson's celebration of the unusual ways of thinking learning differences allow for could influence mind sets internationally.

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