LONELINESS AND CLASSROOM PARTICIPATION IN ADOLESCENTS WITH LEARNING DISABILITIES:
A SOCIAL COGNITIVE VIEW

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A thesis submitted in fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy
2010
KEYWORDS

Loneliness, learning disabilities, classroom participation, social cognitive theory, social model of disability, social skills, bullying, peer-rejection, social perception, social awareness, constructionism, Bandura, ethnography, narrative.
ABSTRACT

Students with learning disabilities (LD) often experience significant feelings of loneliness. There is some evidence to suggest that these feelings of loneliness may be related to social difficulties that are linked to their learning disability. Adolescents experience more loneliness than any other age group, primarily because this is a time of identity formation and self-evaluation. Therefore, adolescents with learning disabilities are highly likely to experience the negative feelings of loneliness. Many areas of educational research have highlighted the impact of negative feelings on learning. This begs the question, ‘are adolescents with learning disabilities doubly disadvantaged in regard to their learning?’ That is, if their learning experience is already problematic, does loneliness exacerbate these learning difficulties? This thesis reveals the findings of a doctoral project which examined this complicated relationship between loneliness and classroom participation using a social cognitive framework.

In this multiple case-study design, narratives were constructed using classroom observations and interviews which were conducted with 4 adolescent students (2 girls and 2 boys, from years 9-12) who were identified as likely to be experiencing learning disabilities. Discussion is provided on the method used to identify students with learning disabilities and the related controversy of using disability labels.

A key aspect of the design was that it allowed the students to relate their school experiences and have their stories told. The design included an ethnographic element in its focus on the interactions of the students within the school as a culture and elements of narrative inquiry were used, particularly in reporting the results.

The narratives revealed all participants experienced problematic social networks. Further, an alarmingly high level of bullying was discovered. Participants reported that when they were feeling rejected or were missing a valued other they had little cognitive energy for learning and did not want to be in school. Absenteeism amongst the group was high, but this was also true for the rest of the school population.

A number of relationships emerged from the narratives using social cognitive theory. These relationships highlighted the impact of cognitive, behavioural and environmental factors in the school experience of lonely students with learning disabilities. This approach reflects the social model of disability that frames the research.
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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

Learning disabilities (LD)

Response to intervention (RTI)

Department of Education and Training (DET)

National Center for Learning Disabilities (NCLD)

Australian Learning Disabilities Association (ALDA)

Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSMMD)

National Joint Committee on Learning Disabilities (NJCLD)

Interagency Committee on Learning Disabilities (ICLD)

Wechsler Intelligence test for Children-Revised (WISC-R)

Progressive Achievement Test (PAT)

The Achievement Test Desk Reference (ATDR)

Mild Mental Retardation (MMR)

Department of Education and Training (Queensland) (DET)
STATEMENT OF ORIGINAL AUTHORSHIP

The work contained in this thesis has not been previously submitted to meet requirements for an award at this or any other higher education institution. To the best of my knowledge and belief, the thesis contains no material published or written by another person except where due reference is made.

Signature:

Date:
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

My husband

Mike, what an epic journey, huh? How could I have done this without you? Thanks for supporting me in so many ways for so long and so well: for taking the lion’s share of the housework and childcare when I needed you to; for supporting me financially for what seems a very long time; and for being my soft place to fall when things weren’t going well. Thanks for bragging about me and for looking at me the way you do.

My parents

Thanks mum and dad for showing me it’s never too late to become interested in education, for encouraging my curiosity and sense of adventure and for correcting my grammar!

My sister

Nichola, thanks for your faith in me. When I said, ‘Who knew?’ you knew.

My supervisors

Jo and Sue, you are both such warm, encouraging, patient, conscientious, pedantic supervisors! You’ve been fantastic to work with over the last [mumble] years. Thanks for never giving up on me. You’ve gone above and beyond the call of duty, letting me cry it out when I was miserable, celebrating with me in the happier times and for taking me out and getting me drunk when I was stressing about confirmation. Thanks so much. I’m looking forward to that bottle of Moet!

My sons

My special little men, Lewis, Luke and Finn, I’m so sorry I’ve been such a dragon for the past few months. Thanks for your understanding and patience.
Author’s Note

Like the ghost of Christmas past, let me guide you through my project, from its conception through the development, then sit down next to me and listen to these kids. Watch them as they try to negotiate the turbulent waters of the classroom. Don’t resist because the telling is strange, just sit back and listen to their stories. What you are about to read is not a thing of fiction, but the everyday reality of a group of people who need your compassion and understanding. I will narrate it for you, positioning myself in the story, because it is an intimate account of some very personal experiences. So humour me with the change in style—it will all make sense at the end.

2 Author’s notes will be used throughout to locate the researcher in the research process as story.
CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

Significance and Aim of Study

The present study examined the relationship between loneliness and classroom participation in adolescents with learning disabilities (LD) in Queensland, Australia. Learning difficulty in individuals with LD cannot be ascribed purely to the presence of a learning disability. A more contextual focus is needed. Using social cognitive theory, loneliness and classroom participation in adolescents with learning disabilities is examined by considering cognitive, behavioural and environmental factors. The present chapter provides an overview of the issues and approach that informed the study and the relationship between this project and existing research in the field. The chapter then provides a discussion of the limitations of the design before finishing on a note about the researcher.

Research Question

‘What is the relationship between loneliness and classroom participation in adolescents with learning disabilities?’

Research Issues

A learning disability is described as a neurological condition that negatively affects academic functioning (Flanagan, Ortiz, Alfonso, & Mascolo, 2002). However, although there is clearly a relationship between the presence of a learning disability and academic functioning, this linear relationship needs to be unpacked and consideration given to influences external to the individual. This has been addressed in this study using a social cognitive theoretical framework. That is, in this project social cognitive theory was used as a device to enable examination of the phenomenon by recognising that individuals are not just a product of either their biological makeup or their
environment but a combination of internal and external influences. These influences motivate our actions to an extent that, “people are neither powerless nor free,” (Bandura, 1977, p. vii) but engaged in a process of negotiation with their inner compulsions and outer forces. It is proposed that the academic difficulties faced by these individuals are the result of the interaction between behavioural, personal, and environmental factors (Bandura, 1977, 1986). If practitioners concentrate on ‘treating’ merely what is perceived as the ‘cause’ of academic difficulties (the learning disability), whilst ignoring the contribution of behaviour and environment, comprehensive or stable solutions will not be generated (Jones & Charlton, 1996).

Learning Disabilities

Consensus has not yet been reached on an acceptable definition of LD because of the heterogeneity of the category (Kavale & Forness, 2000). This means that research in the LD field has been conducted using ambiguous and inconsistently applied definitions and identification methods that are questionable (Flanagan et al., 2002). However, agreement has been reached on a number of aspects of LD that assist in identifying the field in question.

Learning disability is a sub-category of learning difficulties, which is a general term that includes difficulties caused by purely environmental concerns (Myklebust, 1995), such as insufficient instruction or neglect. Learning disability has been identified as a neurological condition that presents itself as a discrepancy between actual and potential learning ability (Myklebust, 1995). Researchers over the last few decades have suggested that students with learning disabilities not only experience cognitive difficulties (Pearl, 1992), but also endure difficulties in achieving and maintaining positive social relationships (Brown & Heath, 1998; Margalit, 1998; Pearl, 1992). These social difficulties often are related to peer rejection and subsequent feelings
of loneliness (Asher & Gazelle, 1999; Carr & Schellenbach, 1993; Margalit, 1998; Moisan, 1998).

The ‘social skill deficits’ model of learning disability (Farmer & Pearl, 1996; Kavale & Forness, 1996; Moisan, 1998; Stone & La Greca, 1994) implies that problematic peer interactions are the result of individual deficits within the child as a consequence of having a learning disability (Kavale & Forness, 1996; Moisan, 1998). However, such a biological, ‘individual deficit’ model of LD is too shallow an explanation for the social or academic difficulties experienced by these individuals. The present study promotes a more social model of disability in that disability is considered, ‘fundamentally social, cultural, political, historical, discursive and relational phenomenon,’ (Goodley, 2001, p. 210). That is, although individuals possess different abilities and disabilities, this only becomes problematic when comparisons are made with others (Danforth, 2008). The criteria for these comparisons are not founded on issues of equality or moral action, but on normative discourses. It is these discourses that restrict an individual’s capacity to thrive, not their individual short-comings (Danforth, 2008).

A pragmatic reality is that abilities and disabilities are valued, and devalued, by the educational climate that created them. Unless and until change occurs within such a climate, steps need to be taken to ensure all participants are able to develop to their potential (Danforth, 2008). In terms of those with learning disabilities, research is needed to identify the areas in which intervention could help to ameliorate their capacities. Unfortunately, the large proportion of past research is grounded in a medical model of disabilities.

Research suggests that individuals with learning disabilities experience cognitive difficulties that make social communication problematic. These problematic cognitions (Pearl, 1992) include social perceptions (Pavri & Monda-Amaya, 2000) and attributions (Tur-Kaspa, Weisel, & Segev, 1998) that affect the way they think about themselves and others, in addition to the
difficulties associated with participating in school as a social context (e.g., Haager & Vaughn, 1995; Margalit & Al-Yagon, 2002; Mishna, 2003; Valas, 1999). This range of social difficulties are particularly relevant for the effective negotiation of the school context.

Although there is significant data to support the contention that children with LD experience school differently to their peers, children with LD are not formally identified and labelled in the Queensland Department of Education and Training system. Labelling is a contentious issue in the field of education as labelling encourages educators to make assumptions as to the learning needs of the child, rather than getting to know the child and tailoring learning to meet their individual needs, regardless of aetiology (Graham, 2006). This contention is acknowledged. However, in order to conduct the current research in the field of LD, and to answer the research question, there was a clear need to identify students with LD. Therefore, students were identified as sharing the characteristics commonly associated with the presence of a learning disability.

Research has revealed that students with LD are more likely to experience significant feelings of loneliness (Margalit & Al-Yagon, 2002; Pavri & Monda-Amaya, 2000; Tur-Kaspa et al., 1998; Yu, Zhang, & Yan, 2005) which are, “persistent realities of everyday experience,” (Margalit & Levin-Alyagon, 1994, p. 3) for these students. Therefore, a definition of loneliness and the surrounding issues will now be discussed.
Loneliness

Loneliness is not to be confused with aloneness (Buchholz & Catton, 1999). ‘Aloneness’ may be considered a positive experience and a, “developmental necessity,” (Buchholz & Catton, 1999, p. 1) whereas loneliness is the affective reaction to a discrepancy between desired and actual social relationships (Cotterell, 1996; Peplau, Miceli, & Morasch, 1982; Qualter & Munn, 2002; Weiss, 1973). By this rationale, a person who chooses to be
alone is not lonely. A lonely person is one who is not satisfied with their relationships. A distinction between social loneliness and emotional loneliness (Weiss, 1973, 1982) should also be made. Social loneliness is seen as social isolation, either due to rejection or neglect, whereas emotional loneliness is seen as a cognitive reaction to the absence, or perceived absence, of a close personal relationship (Perlman & Peplau, 1982; Qualter & Munn, 2002; Weiss, 1982). Loneliness in adolescents with learning disabilities could be the result of both difficulties with peers, which often leads to rejection (social loneliness) and problematic perceptions of self and environment (emotional loneliness). In order to examine the relationship between the social and cognitive factors, this study adopted a social cognitive approach.

**Social Cognitive Theory**

Social cognitive theory states that environmental stimuli do not directly influence behaviour, but are mediated by cognitive processes (Evans, 1989). That is, individuals are not just a product of either their biological makeup or their environment but a combination of internal and external influences (Bandura, 1977). This relationship was explained with the introduction of the model of triadic reciprocality.

The model of triadic reciprocity, expounded by Bandura (1977, 1986), suggests that human functioning occurs in an on-going negotiation between cognitive/personal, behavioural and cognitive factors. When discussing students with learning disabilities from a social cognitive perspective, then, we must not look just at the direct link between learning disabilities and academic difficulties, or a medical model of learning disabilities, as this is concerned merely with the personal/cognitive and behavioural domains respectively within the model of triadic reciprocity. Triadic reciprocity concerns behavioural, personal/cognitive, and environmental factors. Therefore, consideration must also be given to the environment by consideration that the individual is created by, and creates, the world around
them in equal measure with the individual’s biological predisposition. This includes the school environment in interaction with social behaviour and cognitive processes. The school environment is influenced by a range of social, political and cultural factors. These factors influence, and are influenced by, each other and contribute to academic difficulties which, in turn, contribute to the way a person thinks, acts and is treated in their environment.

**Gap in the Research**

Although loneliness is a significant issue for students with learning disabilities, it is largely marginalised in the learning disabilities literature. LD studies have focused on behavioural, cognitive or environmental concerns, but not loneliness. Other research which informed this study has focused on loneliness and environmental, cognitive or behavioural issues, but not LD. Loneliness has been explored in relation to disability and a small number of studies have focused on LD, but not the behavioural, cognitive and environmental aspects of loneliness and LD and they did not examine this in regard to classroom participation. Studies into LD tend to focus on early childhood years, not adolescence as this study did. This study addressed each of these issues. Further, this study addressed a number of concerns raised in the literature regarding the examination of social interactions in the classroom, the relationship between bullying and LD, the way Theory of Mind and attribution assessment is conducted. A discussion is now presented on how this study addressed each of these issues.

**LD and Behavioural Issues**

Studies conducted with students with LD have focused on behavioural concerns such as social skills/deficits (Conte & Andrews, 1993; Kavale & Forness, 1996; Moisan, 1998; Stone & La Greca, 1994; Vaughn, Zaragoza, Hogan, & Walker, 1993), social functioning (Vaughn & Elbaum, 1996) and
competence (Brown & Heath, 1998; Bryan, 1994; Coleman & Minnett, 1993; Margalit & Ben-Dov, 1995; Vaughn & Hogan, 1994) and parent, teacher and self reports of social competence (Haager & Vaughn, 1995). In addition, aspects such as social strategies and goals (Oliva & La Greca, 1987), temperament and behaviour comparisons with students without LD students (Bender, 1985) and psychosocial characteristics and classroom interactions (Pearl, 1992) have been investigated in their relationship to students with LD. However, these studies did not consider a social model of learning difficulties by an examination of the interrelationship of these behavioural concerns and environmental or cognitive issues, as the present study did, or how this was related to loneliness and classroom participation.

**LD and Cognition**

A range of cognitive matters such as self perceptions and attributions (Bear, Kortering, & Braziel, 2006; Jacobson, Lowery, & DuCette, 1986) and attribution training (Shelton, Anastopoulos, & Linden, 1985), social attributions (Tur-Kaspa & Bryan, 1993) and loneliness attributions (Tur-Kaspa et al., 1998) have been studied in relation to students with LD. Further, there has been research into non-verbal LDs (Dimitrovsky, Spector, Levy-Shiff, & Vakil, 1998), Theory of Mind development (Charman & Campbell, 1997), metacognition and depression (Palladino, Marcheschi, Marcheschi, & Marcheschi, 2000) and academic achievement and motivation (Chapman, 1988). However, these studies did not investigate cognitive concerns in relation to environmental and behavioural issues and examine the relationship between this and loneliness and classroom participation as the present study did.

**LD and Environment**

Few studies examine the individual (with LD) within the social context and the impact of this context. Of the studies conducted which take an environmental perspective to the study of students with LD, teacher perceptions (Busch,
Pederson, Espin, & Weissenburger, 2001; Christensen & Elkins, 1995; Kataoka, van Kraayenoord, & Elkins, 2004) have been investigated in addition to the role of peers in terms of teasing (Martlew & Hodson, 1991) and bullying (Mishna, 2003; Morrison, Furlong, & Smith, 1994). A number of studies used sociometric rating (Margalit, Tur-Kaspa, & Most, 1999; Ochoa & Olivarez Jnr, 1995) to gauge the levels of acceptance and rejection of students with LD. However, these studies did not also look at the contribution of behavioural and cognitive factors and how these were related to loneliness and classroom participation as was the focus of this study.

**Loneliness and Environment**

The present study was informed by a variety of studies that examined loneliness and environmental concerns such as interactions with peers and teachers. This included an examination of peer rejection (Asher, Parkhurst, Hymel, & Williams, 1990), peer relations and language disorders (Asher & Gazelle, 1999), peer victimization and social anxiety (Storch, Brassard, & Masia-Warner, 2003) peer networks and dyads (Hoza, Bukowski, & Beery, 2000) and friendship quality (Parker & Asher, 1993) and its relationship to loneliness. In addition, teachers’ and children’s (Galanaki & Vassilopoulou, 2007) perceptions of loneliness have been investigated. Loneliness has also been examined in different contexts such as the school setting (Krause-Parello, 2008) and prison (Ireland & Qualter, 2008) and student perceptions of school have been found to be related to loneliness and Grade Point Average (Dobson, Campbell, & Dobson, 1987), but these studies did not focus on individuals with LD. The present study addressed a number of these issues in their interaction with behavioural and cognitive factors in a selection of students with LD.

**Loneliness, Cognition and Behaviour**

Few studies have been conducted which examine loneliness and personal/cognitive concerns, such as social dissatisfaction and self-efficacy
for peer interaction (Galanaki & Kalantzi-Azizi, 1999) and a number of studies have examined the behavioural aspects of loneliness including use of social strategies (Nurmi & Toivonen, 1997) and personality, peer relations and self-confidence (Chipuer, 2004) which was examined in the Australian context, again, not in relation to students with LD. The present study addressed issues relating to loneliness and the three domains of social cognitive theory (environment, behaviour and cognition) and considered the relationship between this loneliness and classroom participation in students with LD.

Loneliness and Aloneness throughout Development

The differences between aloneness and solitude in childhood (Galanaki, 2004) have been investigated plus loneliness has been investigated throughout the different stages of development, such as childhood (Asher, Hymel, & Renshaw, 1984), adolescence (Buchholz & Catton, 1999; de Minzi & Sacchi, 2004), and senescence\(^2\) (van Baarsen, Snijders, Smit, & van Duijn, 2001). Predictors of loneliness at high school and university (Jackson, Gordillo, & Chen, 2007) have also been studied in Australia and social adjustment at college (Cutrona, 1982) was the focus of one American study. The present study examined this loneliness in adolescence within the context of an Australian high school culture.

There are two important reasons for focusing on adolescence. The first is that this age group experiences significant rates of loneliness (Buchholz & Catton, 1999; de Minzi & Sacchi, 2004). This could be because peer relationships and peer-group belonging are essential developmental concerns during adolescence (Nurmi & Toivonen, 1997) and, therefore, the stakes are higher. The second is related to the first in that existing studies on loneliness appear to focus on children (Asher et al., 1990; Chipuer, 2004; Galanaki, 2004; Galanaki & Kalantzi-Azizi, 1999; Margalit, 1998; Margalit & Al-Yagon, 2002) or the elderly (van Baarsen et al., 2001).

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\(^2\) Old age
Loneliness and Addiction Research

In addition, loneliness has been studied in terms of correlating concerns such as alcoholism (Loos, 2002) and drug use (Rokach & Orzeck, 2002) and the qualitative and quantitative aspects of loneliness (Forest, 1985) have been explored. However, in these studies the origin of the feelings of loneliness was not examined.

Loneliness and Disability

Studies have been conducted which explore the relationship between loneliness and disability (Pavri, 2003) and children with special needs generally (Margalit, 1994). Specific disabilities, such as Mild Mental Retardation, have been examined in relation to loneliness, depression, and social skills (Heiman & Margalit, 1998), but there is also a small cluster of research into loneliness and LD. Such studies have been conducted in China, looking at loneliness, peer acceptance and family functioning (Yu et al., 2005). There was also a Norwegian study which looked at peer acceptance, loneliness, self esteem and depression in the LD population (Valas, 1999). However, the majority of research into loneliness and LD has occurred in Israel and has looked at understanding (Margalit, 1991) and experiencing (Margalit & Al-Yagon, 2002) loneliness and LD. Behavioural aspects of loneliness such as loneliness and classroom adjustment (Margalit & Levin-Alyagon, 1994) and loneliness and social competence (Margalit & Ben-Dov, 1995) were examined, but only in preschool children (Margalit, 1998) whereas one Israeli study investigated self-perceptions, coping strategies and preferred interventions (Pavri & Monda-Amaya, 2000) in children aged 9-11, which relates to behavioural, cognitive and environmental aspects of loneliness. However, none of these studies considered the impact that loneliness would have on classroom participation or had an adolescent focus as the present study did.
Loneliness and Classroom Participation

Very little research has been conducted into the relationship between loneliness and classroom participation. Generally, negative moods or emotions are said to have a detrimental effect on the cognitive processes necessary for effective learning (Oatley & Nundy, 1996). More specifically, researchers have found that loneliness affects cognitive functioning (Pavri & Monda-Amaya, 2000) and social loneliness is related to academic achievement (Galanaki & Kalantzi-Azizi, 1999). Lonely students have revealed that they feel lonelier during lessons (Pavri & Monda-Amaya, 2000), but the nature of this phenomenon had not previously been ascertained. The present study provides an illustration of this phenomenon. Furthermore, studies into loneliness, in general, are largely quantitative whereas loneliness, being a very subjective experience (Jones, 1982), warrants a more qualitative approach, such as the one used in the present study.

Issues Raised in the Literature

A number of concerns have been raised in the literature in that very few studies have been conducted on the social interactions of students with learning disabilities within the classroom (Jones, 1982) and investigation of the cognitive and behavioural aspects of peer interactions is necessary to understand school participation (Juvonen, 1996) but this has not yet been conducted. Further, it is considered that the relationship between LD and bullying warrants closer examination than has been provided to date (Mishna, 2003). In addition, arguments have been made for Theory of Mind (to be discussed in chapter two) development to observed, rather than tested (Dunn, 1996), particularly in regard to children with LD (Dorfman, 2001) and attribution assessment to use real-life scenarios in the school context, rather than a clinical setting (Jacobson et al., 1986). The present study addressed these concerns.
Research into the cognitive, behavioural and social influences of academic achievement have been called for in the literature (Francis et al., 2005). However, qualitative research has not previously been conducted which has described and interpreted the classroom interactions of adolescent students with learning disabilities in terms of their social skills, friendship networks, bullying, and associated feelings of loneliness. Neither has a study been carried out to identify the relationship between these factors, their problematic social perception and awareness, and ability to thrive in the classroom using a social cognitive framework to examine the interaction of personal, behavioural and environmental factors. This study addressed these gaps in the research using the research question,

‘What is the relationship between loneliness and classroom participation in adolescents with learning disabilities?’

**Overview of Research Design**

The reality of being a lonely adolescent with learning disabilities in the classroom is necessarily subjective. In order to understand and interpret this phenomenon, it is necessary to engage with the experience and construct a representation of the situation based on the interaction of the realities of the participants, the researcher and, indeed, the reader. Considering the nature of the phenomenon under investigation, constructionism is considered a useful way of thinking about the nature of reality.

The present study is informed by naturalistic inquiry. The study is emergent by nature and does, therefore, rely on the basic premise of naturalistic inquiry in that the researcher went out ‘into the field’ and gathered data that occurred naturally (Schwandt, Lincoln, & Guba, 2007). However, it is questionable whether any data occurs completely unprovoked in the presence of a researcher (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). For this reason (and others to be discussed later) the research design challenges aspects of naturalistic inquiry
and allows for greater flexibility in the methods, particularly in regard to trustworthiness.

The design is qualitative in nature. This is due to the phenomenon under investigation. It would have been possible to use scales to ascertain levels of loneliness in a population or a battery of tests to ascertain levels of learning disability. These measures would have identified whether loneliness is experienced exponentially in relation to the level of learning disability but would not have addressed the research question, which sought to discover the myriad of idiosyncratic relationships between loneliness and classroom participation in this population. A qualitative case study was considered the most appropriate methodology for describing and interpreting this relationship based on close examination of behaviours and the social environment and exploration of the participants’ social cognitions.

To explore the social activities and interactions of students in a school context, elements of ethnography were also utilized. This allowed examination of the cultural activities and customs of the place and the participants. Data collection for the case studies and reporting of the findings were highly influenced by narrative inquiry which is, “the study of experience as story,” (Connelly & Clandinin, 2006, p. 477). Therefore, in order to construct these stories, interviews and observations, which have been described as the most tried and tested methods of qualitative research (Silverman, 2001), were utilised. The resultant data addressed the question, ‘what is the relationship between loneliness and classroom participation in adolescents with learning disabilities?’

Considering the emergent nature of the design, a descriptive/interpretative approach to analysis was deemed most suitable. The approach recognizes and exploits the relationship between the researcher and the participant (Tolman & Brydon-Miller, 1997) by an explicit acknowledgement that the resultant data will be a negotiation between how the participants perceive and report their experiences, and how the researcher engages with, and
reports, this material. Analysis, in the present study, was not a distinct process. The analysis occurred throughout data collection to allow the researcher to critically analyse what she was seeing and hearing (Bogdan & Biklen, 1992) and to provide irritants (Glesne & Peshkin, 1992) to direct the focus of subsequent data collection. The resultant data were then managed using NVivo software and a thematic analysis, where themes were identified, developed and subsumed (Cresswell, 1998), was conducted. In such a process, the researcher is considered integral to this process and, therefore, the following section is devoted to bringing the researcher to the foreground to make her contribution transparent.

**About the researcher**

Approximately 2 years into my Bachelor of Education Degree my niece, who had not long been in the school system, was ‘identified’ as having learning difficulties and was withdrawn from classes to attend lengthy support sessions. I began to ask myself questions about the nature of schools and students, and particularly about the social implications of withdrawing students from the classroom. During this time I came across a number of texts that suggested a line of enquiry that would become my PhD study. These can be summarised using the following quotes:

“It is likely that children experiencing learning and behaviour difficulties will have had more difficulty than many of their peers in learning incidentally the skills of effective communication,” (Lewis, 1996, p. 51);

“Children with disabilities experience more loneliness than nondisabled children,” (Margalit, 1994, p. vii);

“We know all too well that children who are feeling alienated or threatened have no emotional or cognitive energy for learning,” (Ramsey, 1991, p. ix);

“There is more widespread, intense loneliness at adolescence than at any other stage,” (Brennan, 1982, p. 269).

More recently the study developed a less medical orientation, which is illustrated by the following quote:
“A given trajectory and speed of development, occurring across a range of different activities that a child may attempt in an educational program, is only rendered problematic when framed in reference to a series of cultural expectations that confer unsatisfactory judgement,” (Danforth, 2008, p. 59).

This concept, based on a social model of disability, offers the perspective that, although children may have strengths and weaknesses, the benchmark for what is considered a strength or a weakness is culturally and politically determined. The social model of disability significantly influenced the fabric of the study by considering the influence of the environment and framing the research issue within its sociocultural and political context.

Casual discussions revealed that not everyone who is lonely will have difficulty achieving academic success at school. Friends have told me that they were very lonely at high school so turned their energies to something they were good at – school-work. This was seen as something they could succeed at and was, therefore, a safe refuge. I asked myself, ‘what would happen to those lonely people for whom learning was not a safe refuge?’

Since this time I have taught in a variety of schools in the UK working in mainstream classrooms and also in an annexed social ‘inclusion’ unit designed to integrate children with emotional and behavioural difficulties back into the mainstream school. A significant proportion of the students in the unit were ascertained as having learning disabilities. These students quite clearly experienced social difficulties and a proportion of the students voiced their reluctance to being reintegrated into the main school on social grounds and were, in fact, back in the social inclusion unit the following year. My observations there allowed me to clarify and develop the current project.

In conclusion, this thesis represents a personal journey. It outlines the literature, methodology, findings, discussion and implications of a research project which examined the relationship between loneliness and classroom participation in adolescents with LD in Queensland, Australia. Loneliness has been found to be a significant concern for students with learning
disabilities and the relationship between loneliness and their ability to participate in the classroom warranted examination. This relationship was examined using a social cognitive perspective. The study was qualitative in nature, with a research focus which reflected a constructionist epistemology and which used the tenets of naturalistic inquiry. The case-study approach was ameliorated by ethnographic and narrative inquiry influences. What follows is a more thorough discussion of these elements.

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<td>I’ve introduced you to the research issues, the gap in the research, the research question and located myself in the study. You will be aware of the general scope of the study and the research design and how this came about. Now you have some terms of reference I will go into more depth.</td>
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CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

This chapter provides a review of the issues relating to loneliness and learning disabilities (LD) in the classroom. A comprehensive definition of loneliness is provided, which outlines the different types of loneliness and their significance to the study. Following this is a description of the special characteristics of adolescence that make loneliness such a significant issue at this stage of development. A discussion is then offered on the problematic nature of defining and researching LD, particularly in the Queensland, Australian context. The subsequent sections are devoted to a discussion of loneliness and LD from a social cognitive perspective. For manageability this topic is divided into the behavioural aspects of loneliness and learning disabilities, such as social difficulties and communication skills; cognitive aspects of loneliness and LD, including social perceptions, non-verbal LD, attributions and Theory of Mind; and the environmental aspects, such as peer-rejection, bullying, school culture, belongingness, inclusive education and the influence of teachers. It should be understood that these are arbitrary divisions as these factors are interacting determinants, in that they each contribute to the creation of the others in an on-going negotiation, and are discussed as such. Social cognitive theory can be considered the ‘lens’ through which these issues were examined and reported. For this reason the literature review begins with an explanation of social cognitive theory and the relevance of using such a theory for the present study.

Social Cognitive Framework

Social cognitive theory (SCT), which was developed by Albert Bandura, is one of a range of theories which seek to explain the process of learning (Schunk, 2008). Traditionally this theory was considered a neo-behaviourist, psychological theory in its epistemology as learning was deemed to be endogenous or located within the self (Martin, 2004) as a result of the interaction of behavioural, environmental and cognitive factors (Bandura, 1997). However,
The epistemology of social cognitive theory has expanded to reflect dramatic shifts in the research program of those adopting SCT over the decades - from empirical studies of observational learning and modelling processes to qualitative studies of affect, self-efficacy and self-regulation - that has broadened the scope of the theory and its epistemology (Champion, 2009, para. 6).

As a result of this shift, social cognitive theory is now considered to be more of a sociocultural theory of learning (Martin, 2004; Packer & Goicoechea, 2000), particularly in its consideration of the impact of environment on learning (Champion, 2009). The following is a discussion of the development of social cognitive theory and the extent to which the theory has been applied, particularly in recent years.

Bandura (1986, 1995, 1997) has been a major contributor to psychological theory. His theories of social learning, social cognition, aggression, morality and self-efficacy challenged the existing social biological theories that suggested that human behaviour was initiated by biological imperatives (Evans, 1989). Bandura believed that this view was too simplistic (Evans, 1989). His theories have, at their core, aspects of cognition in relation to behaviour; that is, people do not react instinctually to their environment but that they learn to respond to their environment. A brief review of social learning theory and social cognitive theories is provided to emphasise the nature of social cognitive theory, beginning with his earliest, and perhaps most well known theory of learning: social learning theory.

**Social Learning Theory**

Social learning theory is considered a neo-behaviorist theory (Martin, 2004) in that it builds on the traditional behaviourist assumption that learning is located within the individual. Social learning theory provides an explanation for learning that includes the individual’s behaviour and the behaviour of others. In an interview Bandura told Evans (1989) that the traditional ‘trial and error’ notion of learning is problematic because certain things need to be learned without making costly mistakes – the example given was driving a
car. It is not advisable to learn to drive by climbing in and setting off as the results could be tragic. Instead, Bandura believed that people are capable of learning through the observation of competent models that demonstrate behaviour and consequences (Bandura, 1977). These consequences include what Bandura called ‘vicarious reinforcement’, which is the ability to learn from the reinforcement of others’ behaviour. The observer learns by extracting the rules of the behaviour and internalising them, rather than simply imitating the model (Evans, 1989). Bandura built on social learning theory when he developed his theory relating to social cognition.

*Social Cognitive Theory*

Social cognitive theory is an extended version of social learning theory in that it includes beliefs, perceptions and expectations (Evans, 1989). This does not merely apply to learning in the traditional sense, but to human functioning as a series of learning processes. The crux of this theory is that environmental stimuli do not directly influence behaviour, but are mediated by cognitive processes. Bandura’s (1973) aggression and morality theories provide examples of how this mediation occurs.

Bandura (1973) suggested that humans are not genetically predisposed to aggression, as the social biologists proposed. Rather than being a simple stimulus/response relationship, as with the early behaviourist theories, Bandura believed the response is tempered by cognitive control (Evans, 1989). That is, a distressing experience can motivate humans to react in a number of ways including aggression, withdrawal, or the use of problem-solving strategies, based on cognitive mediation. A distressing experience can instigate biological responses, such as an adrenaline rush, but the adrenaline rush is actually a consequence of the impending threat, an expectation of harm, which is a cognitive process, not a biological one.

Bandura (1973) was also interested in how people engage and disengage their morality and the repercussions if this disengagement did not happen. It
seems that people can convince themselves to act in a manner that goes against their moral standards if they choose an advantageous comparison to temper their self-censure (Evans, 1989). To provide an example, it is possible to go back to aggression and question why people would choose to act aggressively when they are fundamentally opposed to violence. They would have to make a cognitive justification of the act, to think about the act in a way that disengages their morality, to enable them to commit the act. To do otherwise and still commit the act would cause self-censure, which is detrimental to their self-esteem. However, social cognitive theory takes a less linear perspective on the issue.

At the heart of social cognitive theory is what Bandura called his ‘model of triadic reciprocality’ (Bandura, 1986) in which behaviour, cognitive and other personal factors, and environment have a reciprocal relationship with each other. That is, social cognitive theory seeks to explain human behaviour using the assumption that individuals are not just a product of either their biological makeup or their environment but a combination of internal and external influences. These influences motivate behaviour to the extent that, “people are neither powerless nor free,” (Bandura, 1977, p. vii) but engaged in a process of negotiation with their inner compulsions and outer forces. To use Bandura’s own words,

> Personal and environmental factors do not function as independent determinants, rather they determine each other. Nor can ‘persons’ be considered causes independent of their behavior. It is largely through their actions that people produce the environmental conditions that affect their behavior in a reciprocal fashion. The experiences generated by behaviour also partly determine what a person becomes and can do which, in turn, affects subsequent behavior (Bandura, 1977, p. 9).

This includes an element of agency, which is an individual’s ability to choose from a range of behaviours which are mediated by cognitive and environmental factors (Schunk, 2008). To elaborate, an individual might be predisposed to act in a certain way because of the interaction of cognitive
and environmental factors, but would be capable of making choices within those boundaries.

Social learning theory is concerned with vicarious learning through observation of competent models. Social cognitive theory is also concerned with vicarious learning, but adds the role of *symbolic* models (Evans, 1989). Bandura's earlier theory concerned observation of, sometimes brief, events, whereas social cognitive theory is concerned with the use of symbols to, "process and transform transient experiences into internal models that serve as guides for future action," (Bandura, 1986, p. 18). While the former theory talked about learning the 'rules' of an encounter and applying them elsewhere, 'symbolizing capability' allowed people to travel forward in time to see for themselves the consequences of their action before they plan a course of action (Bandura, 1986). This is what Bandura called 'forethought capability', which is tempered by a 'self-reflexive capability' or self-analysis that causes people to look inward to evaluate these courses of action, thoughts and the like. In this way people are able to imagine scenarios they have never experienced in reality and learn from them. Getting back to the stimulus/response argument, not only did Bandura consider that environmental events cause cognitive reactions that, in turn, cause behaviours, but he also suggested that people can be impelled into action from an inner desire with no environmental provocation, which he called 'self-regulatory capability' (Bandura, 1986).

An important concept within social cognitive theory is self-efficacy. This is a person’s belief in their ability to control aspects of their life (Bandura, 1997). Self-efficacy determines the choices people make, as they are more likely to engage in activities that they perceive they can master (Evans, 1989). Again, this relates to the mediation of environment and behaviour in that people do not act on every opportunity afforded to them. People use cognitive processes, including beliefs and perceptions, to motivate them into action. Higher levels of self-efficacy encourage the setting of more challenging goals.
and greater motivation in achieving those goals (Bandura, 1997). Low self-efficacy, on the other hand, leads to low self-esteem, which can create depression or stress (Evans, 1988) and a reluctance to attempt difficult tasks (Bandura, 1997). In relation to the present phenomenon, loneliness and classroom participation in adolescents with learning disabilities, this means that beliefs about abilities, both social and academic, motivate social and academic actions, which influence the behaviours of those in the school environment which, in turn, has an impact on self-efficacy for social and academic functioning. That is, often one's low self-efficacy leads to further meeting the low expectations other have of them.

In recent years social cognitive theory has been applied to vastly disparate learning contexts such as education (Nelson & DeBacker, 2008), media violence (Steward & Follina, 2006), and military psychology (Litz, 2007). Self-efficacy and self-regulation, principally, have received significant attention particularly in the school context. However, triadic reciprocality, in particular the impact of environmental influences on learning, is much less fashionable. Considering the social nature of schooling, the influence of school environment on learning deserves much more consideration. As social cognitive theory shifts towards a more sociocultural theory of learning (Martin, 2004; Packer & Goicoechea, 2000) it can assist in providing this social perspective.

Social cognitive theory is a learning theory. That is, it provides a way of thinking about the process and product of learning. When discussing students with learning disabilities from a social cognitive perspective, then, we must not look just at the biological link between learning disabilities and academic difficulties as this is concerned merely with the personal/cognitive and behavioural domains respectively within the model of triadic reciprocality. Triadic reciprocality concerns behavioural, personal/cognitive, and environmental factors. Therefore, consideration must also be given to the environmental influences by examination of the relationships between the
learning environment, social behaviour, and cognitive processes. These factors influence, and are influenced by, each other in a reciprocal manner and contribute to academic difficulties. These academic difficulties, in turn, shape the way these individuals think and behave and affects the nature of their learning environment. Exploring this interrelationship through research is essential to developing an understanding of the experiences of students with learning disabilities. If practitioners concentrate on ‘treating’ merely what is perceived as the ‘cause’ of academic difficulties (the learning disability as a personal/cognitive factor), whilst ignoring the other issues, comprehensive or stable solutions will not be generated (Jones & Charlton, 1996). One aspect within the personal/cognitive domain which has received attention in the field of learning disabilities is loneliness, which is now discussed.

Loneliness

Most people can identify a moment, at least, when they have felt lonely. Loneliness is generally associated with sadness and perhaps yearning. If pressed to attribute reasons for the onset of feelings of loneliness, perhaps people would say it was because a valued other is missing - whether that valued other is an actual person who is absent for a period of time, or whether the individual lacks a connection with a valued other. These elements have been identified in the research. The following is an overview of loneliness definitions and theories plus a discussion of related research.

Definitions of Loneliness

Loneliness has been described as an unpleasant emotion (Rotenberg, 1999) often associated with peer rejection (Asher et al., 1990). In fact, peer rejection is a major factor that has been identified in the literature as justification for loneliness (Carr & Schellenbach, 1993). However, research has found that typically developing students who reported feelings of loneliness were often engaged in sound dyadic relationships, much the same as their non-lonely peers (Qualter & Munn, 2005). This suggests that a more
social cognitive perspective is needed. That is, loneliness is not merely a cognitive reaction to an environmental stimulus, but a more complicated interaction of behavioural, cognitive and environmental factors.

It has been suggested that the key to understanding loneliness is to acknowledge that it is more closely related to how an individual perceives their existing relationships within the context of social norms and expectations than the absence of relationships (Rotenberg, 1999). This provides both cognitive and environmental components in addition to the social behaviour component (Asher & Gazelle, 1999; Tur-Kaspa et al., 1998). Loneliness, by definition, involves cognitive processes whereby the lonely child evaluates their social position and their self-efficacy for peer interaction (Galanaki & Kalantzi-Azizi, 1999). Peplau, Miceli and Morasch (1982, p. 136) provided perspective on cognition and its relationship to loneliness.

In arriving at the conclusion, ‘I am lonely,’ people use affective, behavioural, and cognitive cues… The affective signs of loneliness are often diffuse…lonely people are profoundly unhappy…affective cues alone are (not) sufficient to identify an unpleasant experience as loneliness… Behavioural cues…(include)...low levels of social contact, disruptions in established relationships, or unsatisfying patterns of social interaction...People can be happy in solitude...It is unlikely that people label themselves as lonely unless cognitive cues are also present...(that is)...wanting a type of social relation that is currently lacking.

Therefore, it is important in research into loneliness to look at the affective, behavioural and cognitive components of loneliness, which could be difficult if the participant does not wish to identify as lonely.

Loneliness involves the cognitive process of comparing either past and present social experiences, or comparing present social experiences with the experiences of others. Where a discrepancy exists, the individual experiences the affective discomfort associated with loneliness (Qualter & Munn, 2002). That is, major changes, like moving to a different school, could make an individual lonely if their new social environment is not as satisfying.
However, if the individual desired better quality of contact, but did not expect it (Derlega & Margulis, 1982)\(^3\), perhaps because the situation was understandable, then the feelings of loneliness would be transitory. If the individual compared their social experiences with that of their peers, such as how often they go out, who they go out with, the social value of their friends, and so on, and found it a disadvantageous comparison, then this could cause the individual to become dissatisfied with their own social experiences and loneliness would ensue.

Qualter and Munn (2002) provided the field of loneliness with data that distinguished between social loneliness and emotional loneliness. Their study of six hundred and forty English school children used sociometric tests, questionnaires and observations to ascertain the difference between social and emotional loneliness in children. They referred to social loneliness as the feeling of being socially marginalised within the peer group, and emotional loneliness as lack of a close emotional connection with another. They found that the two were quite different phenomena that could exist separately or in conjunction. That is, socially lonely or rejected children often did not experience the feelings generally associated with loneliness, just as those children who felt emotionally lonely were not necessarily marginalised in the peer group – they could be well liked. They found that socially lonely children fared better, with emotionally lonely children experiencing high levels of anxiety and low self-esteem. This is an important distinction to make but one that is seldom made in the literature. The distinction has been supported by research (van Baarsen et al., 2001) which suggests that making a distinction between social and emotional loneliness helps to explain the development of loneliness. The following section provides an overview of the development of loneliness theory which addresses the behavioural, cognitive and environmental aspects of the phenomenon.

\(^3\) See next section for explanation for this dated reference.
Theories of Loneliness

Loneliness theory has not received much attention during the last two decades. Authors in the 1990s and 2000s focused on loneliness and other issues, such as aging, abuse and other isolating experiences, but not theories relating to loneliness, its antecedents, and sociocultural conditions. During the 1980s the issue attracted more academic attention and subsequent publications addressed theories of loneliness including causes and associated difficulties. Peplau and Perlman (1982) contributed significantly to the development of this study. Therefore, an overview of their edited book is provided here with an acknowledgement that, even though the text is quite dated, it is seminal and without equal.

Peplau and Perlman’s (1982) text, Loneliness: A sourcebook of current theory, research and therapy included chapters written by a number of experts in the field of loneliness and provided much of what we know about loneliness today. For example, sociological approaches to loneliness suggest that society fails to provide the necessary support for social interaction. Riesman, Glazer, and Denney (1961, in Perlman & Peplau, 1982) and others contended that, as a result of societal changes, people are becoming overcome by, “diffuse anxiety and an over-concern with peer popularity that is never really satisfied,” (p. 127). Slater (1976, in Perlman & Peplau, 1982) considered that humans have an innate desire for community, engagement and dependence, but the emerging egocentricity or individualism in modern society prevents those needs being met, resulting in loneliness. As such, a society ever-more reliant on technology is responsible for these feelings which are shared by all members of the society. However, this approach does not explain why some people are more lonely than others.

Peplau, Miceli and Morasch (1982) offered that individuals experience differing levels and duration of loneliness according to the attributions they give (for a full discussion see section on attributions later in this chapter). For
example, a person who contends that their feelings of loneliness are the result of poor interpersonal or communication skills (being internal, stable aspects of their character) is more likely to experience extended periods of loneliness because this contention is damaging to their self-concept and prevents them from participating effectively in social interaction. Weiss (1982) alluded to loneliness as resulting from a person’s perception that their social requirements are not being fulfilled, whereas Peplau and her colleagues articulated this contention. This approach does not see loneliness as resulting from a behavioural flaw or a societal deficit; it stresses that loneliness is the result of a cognitive process, a perception relating to the precipitating event and maintaining causes of loneliness. However, it could be argued that loneliness is not merely the result of problematic attributions and perceptions, but that environmental factors are also at work.

A major contributor to the development of loneliness theory, Robert Weiss, contended that loneliness was a result of a deficiency in social requirements (1973), which highlights the contribution of environment and perception (cognition), in that one person’s requirements might differ to another’s. He was the first to differentiate between social and emotional loneliness. Perlman and Peplau (1982) described Weiss’s social loneliness as, “absence of meaningful friendships or a sense of community...being socially marginal,” (p.128) but elsewhere has been described as, “the physical absence of other people,” (Qualter & Munn, 2002, p. 233) without regard for how meaningful they were. There are also slightly different interpretations of Weiss’s conception of emotional loneliness. In Perlman and Peplau (1982) it is the, “absence of a close, intimate attachment such as a lover or a spouse,” (p. 128) whereas in Qualter and Munn (2002, p. 233) it is, “absence of a close attachment,” which could refer to a close friend, someone you can trust. Weiss (1982) uses the terms emotional and social isolation as the affective states of loneliness and explained, “the first...is produced by the absence of an attachment figure, the second by the absence of an accessible social
Within the same text, Derlega and Margulis (1982) offered their perspective on why loneliness occurs, rather than what loneliness is. They contended that there are a number of goals, or aims, of social interaction which satisfy human desires for social contact. They stated four: expressive function, which is needing a friend in order to express, or vent, feelings; self-clarification, which is discussing feelings to help understand those feelings; social validation, which is talking to a friend to get feedback about ideas and beliefs; and relationship development, which is when each party increases the intimacy of the relationship through increased levels of self-disclosure. When a person lacks a friend to share with in these ways, or they perceive that they lack a valued friend, this is the key predictor for loneliness, particularly if they have experienced this previously. The authors suggested that a person must have a goal, or aim, to fulfil; lack an available partner; believe that this situation will continue; and continue to wish for the partner before loneliness occurs.

Derlega and Margulis (1982) suggested that loneliness comprises a cognitive component: the perceived lack of a partner, and an affective component: a resulting emotional reaction. They differentiated between desired and expected social contact, which are often incongruous and stated that it is important to recognise that an individual may not be consciously aware of these desires and discrepancies. However, other theories have a much broader focus.

Flanders (1982) proposed a ‘general systems’ theory that related loneliness to every level of a person’s existence. That is, our behaviour is dictated by the interaction of everything from our biological makeup, through our social world, to the world at large, which supports a social cognitive approach. Flanders (1982) claimed that loneliness in everyday life was exacerbated by two major cultural changes in recent years: the first is that a day of rest is no
longer observed and, in its place, commercial pursuits have become the focus of these days which is not conducive to social interaction, but some might beg to differ; the second is the increase in the amount of television viewing in the average household which, again, is not conducive to effective social interaction. Of course, since then other technologies have joined television in its ability to isolate individuals, such as computers, games consoles and personal music devices. However, it is doubtful that this theory could explain loneliness in adolescence when social contact is a feature of everyday life. This suggests that cognitive factors also contribute to these feelings.

Conceptions of loneliness, then, have a few key elements in common. There is an agreement that loneliness is related to a deficiency in social requirements (Weiss, 1973; Perlman & Peplau, 1982). This deficiency can be lack of social contacts or lack of a close attachment, or perception that this is the case (Qualter & Munn, 2002; Weiss, 1982). Close friendships provide a number of benefits to the individual and the absence of a valuable friend means these benefits will not be realised (Derlega & Margulis, 1982). Loneliness is exacerbated by the way our society functions (Flanders, 1982) and a person is more likely to suffer extended periods of loneliness if they believe that it is a result of internal, stable conditions or external conditions over which they have no control (Peplau et al., 1982). These approaches to loneliness have relevance to the present study in that they include personal/cognitive, behavioural and environmental factors. Loneliness is both a result of the interaction between personal/cognitive, behavioural and environmental factors and, in turn, influences how a person thinks and feels about themselves, how they behave and how they are received within their social environment. This is supported by more recent research.

A more recent text written by Cacioppo and Patrick (2008) on the subject of loneliness focused on the need for social connection and suggested that the desire for social contact is genetically driven. That is, our requirements and
expectations for social contact are genetically inherited but humans have the ability to make decisions on how much these traits influence their behaviour and subsequent environment. This supports social cognitive theory as it adds the element of agency in that individuals possess the ability to make choices about their behaviours, but mediated by cognitive and environmental factors.

Cacioppo and Patrick (2008) contended that some individuals have a genetic predisposition to a higher need for social connection. As a result, those individuals are at a higher risk of feelings of loneliness because they have greater needs. A person with lower expectations and requirements for social connection can better endure being alone and without intimate connections. However, if an individual’s social (environment) requirements are not being met, and they experience subsequent (cognitive) feelings of loneliness, then they often seek substitutes such as eating, shopping, and drinking (behaviours) to assuage the affective discomfort. By considering the interaction of behavioural, cognitive and environmental factors, research could lead to better understanding of the outcomes of loneliness as follows.

Outcomes of loneliness

There is not much known about the long-term outcomes of loneliness (Qualter, 2003) but research is beginning to uncover some of the significant repercussions. Aside from the emotional aspects of loneliness which can be debilitating (Rotenberg, 1999) and can lead to school drop-out (Seidel & Vaughn, 1991) recent findings in genome research revealed that loneliness actually causes the immune system to be compromised, thereby making the lonely person more vulnerable to illness (Cole et al., 2007).

Cole and his colleagues (Cole et al., 2007) referred to social isolation/loneliness in their study which was conducted over a period of five years with 230 middle-aged men and women. At annual increments the UCLA-R loneliness scale was administered in addition to a variety of
biomedical, social, psychological and economic assessments. They found, “elevated risk of inflammatory disease in individuals who experience chronically high levels of subjective social isolation,” (Cole et al., 2007, p. 1). This is a biological reaction to an affective state, which suggests lonely children are more at risk of illness and, therefore, miss more school than their non-lonely peers. Children missing school is problematic, but children who have special educational needs, such as those with LD, can little afford time off school. Therefore, loneliness is a significant problem in this regard.

In the older age groups, socially isolated seniors die sooner than their peers (Olds & Schwartz, 2000). This is largely because, as a consequence of the breakdown of family structures and the disintegration of community, seniors are more likely to live alone and have less contact with their neighbours. People who are socially active are generally physically fitter than those who are socially isolated and they live longer (Olds & Schwartz, 2000). Research involving young people, however, has found that those who are socially isolated or those who do not feel a sense of belongingness (both aspects of loneliness) are more likely to abuse drugs, particularly ecstasy (Rokach & Orzeck, 2002) to alleviate feelings of loneliness. This is thought to be due to the nature of the drug, which heightens feelings of belongingness and closeness (Rokach & Orzeck, 2002). Clearly there are grave repercussions of significant periods of loneliness for many people.

Research has provided a number of intervention strategies that have been helpful for students struggling with feelings of loneliness. Pamela Qualter, of the University of Central Lancashire in the UK, has provided a wealth of data to the field in recent years (e.g., Ireland & Qualter, 2008; Qualter, 2003; Qualter & Munn, 2002, 2005; Rogers et al., 2007). She advocates, “an approach based on increasing social competence, developing mutual friendships and overcoming self-defeating thought patterns,” (Qualter, 2003, p. 10). She claims that specific loneliness intervention strategies have yet to
be developed but, in their absence, the most helpful approach for lonely children would be one which is aimed at,

Enhancing the classroom and playground climates (e.g., through cooperative group work and play interventions); changing the school ethos (e.g., through policies on behaviour); working directly with the individual (e.g., through counselling); and working with families (e.g., through family therapy to address loneliness arising from bereavement and loss (Qualter, 2003, p. 14).

This focus on whole-school or whole-class interventions could well benefit lonely adolescent students with LD also. Findings from another of Qualter’s studies revealed that a significant protective factor for loneliness is the quality or value the person assigns to their friends (Qualter & Munn, 2005). That is, even if the student has a variety of friends, they could still suffer the negative feelings of loneliness if their perception of these relationships is that they are unsatisfying. Therefore, having friends does not necessarily protect an individual from feelings of loneliness. This distinction between being alone and happy and being unhappy in the company of others has been identified in the research as a distinction between loneliness and aloneness.

*Distinction between Loneliness and Aloneness*

As discussed in chapter one, a distinction needs to be made between loneliness and aloneness. Being alone does not make a person lonely (Weiss, 1973). Whilst loneliness is seen as a negative experience (Buchholz & Catton, 1999) characterized by affective discomfort (Carr & Schellenbach, 1993), aloneness is seen as a, “developmental necessity”, a positive time of, “self-reflection and self-regulation, and similar to the necessary time-out (moratorium) that Erikson and others have held important for adolescents,” (Carr & Schellenbach, 1993, p. 2). In simple terms, aloneness is a self-imposed isolation whereas loneliness is not. Lonely people are often dissatisfied to the extent that they are compelled into action to remedy the situation (Cotterell, 1996), thus implying that loneliness is not desirable,
whereas aloneness is actively sought. This is particularly relevant in adolescence.

_Loneliness in Adolescence_

Loneliness is experienced at different periods throughout the lifespan for different reasons. Authors cite various different ages at which loneliness is most common, including adolescence, which is thought to be a significant age for the onset of loneliness (Brennan, 1982; Carr & Schellenbach, 1993; Dobson et al., 1987). Peplau and Perlman (1982, p. 75) reflected on why this could be the case.

…the heightened self-consciousness and introspection of youth; the consuming concern with being accepted by others of the same age; the acute sensitivity to hurt and disappointment when one seems to be ignored. Adolescents may be more vulnerable to loneliness because they hold unrealistically high expectations for their social life.

It has also been suggested that it may be because adolescence is a time at which children experience an increased need for social contact (Smilanski, 1991, in Tur-Kaspa et al., 1998). Therefore, if satisfactory social contact was unavailable before, entering adolescence would make this deficiency more acute.

Adolescence is a time of substantial identity formation in which individuals can experiment with their identity within the security of a like-minded peer group (Nurmi & Toivonen, 1997). Having a valued peer group to identify with is essential for this development (Prinstein & La Greca, 2002). If the adolescent is marginalised, opportunities for socializing in a valuable peer group are reduced. The adolescent may interact with a less valued peer group, which would reinforce feelings of social worthlessness, thereby increasing cognitive (emotional) loneliness, or they may attempt to interact with a more valued peer group, which lacks security for lonely adolescents as they are more likely to be rejected, thereby causing feelings of social loneliness.
At adolescence individuals begin to seek out more opportunities for socializing with their friends (Larsen & Richards, 1991) and those friendships become more intimate (Buhrmester, 1990). It has been found that the quality of those relationships, in terms of level of intimacy, is related to social adjustment and interpersonal competence (Buhrmester, 1990). Quality of friendship is very important in loneliness research because, as discussed earlier, it is the individual's perception or evaluation of the quality or value of their friendships that causes the social dissatisfaction which leads to feelings of loneliness (Peplau et al., 1982).

Because of the growing need for independence and autonomy, adolescents actively seek social interactions that are detached from those of their parents (Cotterell, 1996). Peer rejection makes this task more difficult. If, for some reason, individuals are rejected by their peers, or accepted by peers that are deemed to have lower social value (unpopular students) they will measure their ideals against this reality and judge themselves accordingly (Rotenberg, 1999).

Loneliness is clearly a significant concern for adolescents. Considering adolescents spend a significant proportion of their time in the classroom, this context needs to be considered in any discussion of loneliness in adolescence.

**Loneliness and Classroom Participation**

There has been a limited amount of research conducted that explores the relationship between loneliness and issues that might prevent a student from engaging effectively in the classroom. Studies have found that affect has an influence on information processing (Dunn, 1996) and that feelings of loneliness, specifically, cause feelings of, “anger, restlessness, impatience, uneasiness, and an inability to concentrate,” (Cotterell, 1996, p. 78) and affect memory capabilities (Ellis & Hunt, 1989) which would hinder the individual's ability to engage with the lesson.
Very little school-based research into loneliness has been conducted in the Australian context, but there are two such studies that provide a starting point for Australian research in the area, coincidentally both were conducted in the same state as the current study. The first, conducted by Chipuer (2004), sought to identify Australian children’s conceptions of loneliness. Chipuer conducted brief interviews with 61 children whose ages ranged from 9 to 11 and administered the Loneliness and Social Dissatisfaction scale. The majority of children identified a social and emotional component of loneliness and the children had differing levels of sophistication in the way they perceived loneliness but this made no difference to their reported levels of loneliness. This is in keeping with other studies into children’s conceptions of loneliness that found children conceive and experience loneliness in much the same way as adults (Qualter, 2003).

The other Australian study (Jackson et al., 2007) examined the predictors of loneliness in high school and university, which has more relevance for the present study. They wanted to know the extent to which parents and peer groups contributed to feelings of loneliness. The study, conducted in Townsville, northern Queensland, asked for self-reported measures from 277 high school students and 170 university students. They found social-perception factors, relations with peers, and shyness contributed to loneliness in both groups with the influence of parents as a contributor in the high school students only.

However, there are no Australian studies that investigate how loneliness is related to participation in classroom activities. Quite clearly this relationship warrants further investigation. It has been said that research on the loneliness experience of children should be conducted from a student’s perspective to aid understanding of the phenomenon and the development of intervention measures, although it was acknowledged that this is no easy task when discussing such personal feelings with children, even with efforts to build rapport and security (Pavri & Monda-Amaya, 2000). The present
study goes one step further in considering not only classroom participation as a behavioural concern, but also considers the contribution of the child’s cognition in addition to the influence of others in the school context.

Having provided an extensive discussion of loneliness theory and research, discussion will now turn to the other major feature of the study: the nature of learning disabilities.

**Learning Disabilities**

Conducting research in the field of learning disabilities has significant inherent difficulties. There are two crucial complications that need to be addressed before such a venture is considered. The first is that the field cannot agree on a definition of learning disabilities and the second is that the act of labelling a person ‘disabled’ is highly controversial. These issues will be given due consideration in the following discussion.

*The Social Model of Disabilities*

Discussions of disability are often medically orientated. That is, ‘disability’ has medical connotations and such a discussion is often replete with medical notions such as diagnosis and intervention. A diagnosis is based on measurable differences between one who is able and one who is not (Danforth, 2008). This confers a judgement about the perceived abilities of one compared to an ideal, or normal, other. Once a judgement has been made, interventions are implemented to help the ‘inferior’ individual achieve the standards of the ‘normal’, and therefore superior, individual. These beliefs are no longer deemed appropriate or acceptable.

Thanks to the work of disability rights activists and researchers, such as Mike Oliver, these normative discourses are receiving overdue scrutiny and critique (Sinclair, 1998). Oliver first coined the term ‘social model of disability’ (Oliver & Zarb, 1989) to offer a conception of disability that is socially constructed. That is, the difficulties experienced by those with disabilities are
socially constructed by a system that seeks to normalise (Goodley, 2001). As identified by Danforth (2008), one’s achievements in a variety of activities can only be considered an impediment if compared unfavourably with the achievements of others. Standards are culturally and politically created and are, therefore, quite arbitrary and promote inequity (Danforth, 2008).

Regrettably, contemporary schooling is replete with normalising discourses with its emphasis on, “dividing, sorting, and classifying practices,” (Baker, 2002, p. 663). Schools focus on individual differences and seek to support the individual to meet benchmarks based on average expectations. The social model of disabilities, on the other hand, acknowledges that there are physical and mental differences amongst individuals and that these differences can prevent a person from achieving in a particular arena (Danforth, 2008). However, the emphasis in a social model of disability is on creating schools that value a broader range of qualities in individuals (Danforth, 2008), rather than making individuals fit. Danforth posits a Deweyan perspective when he says,

The purpose of an educational science is to figure out how to better release and propel individual talents through instructional arrangements, not to identify superiors and inferiors at the start so that childhood paths of growth might be foreordained according to the predicted trajectories of each classification (Danforth, 2008, p. 50).

Part of that ‘figuring out’ more appropriate instructional methods involves identifying the characteristics of the child and developing suitable strategies. That does not mean that value judgements are made of the child’s level of ability in a range of activities, and the intention is not to normalise, but to promote growth. Danforth (2008) discusses this in terms of the intersection of nature and nurture in the creation of disability. He believes that disability is neither a medical or social construction, but a complex interaction of the two. This is based on a Deweyan philosophy which seeks to bridge the chasm between the social and medical models of disability. Therefore, it is
necessary to investigate both the biological and social factors involved in a child’s school experience to develop appropriate instruction. In a study in the field of learning disabilities, then, this involves careful consideration of the research conducted with those identified as experiencing learning disabilities, which now follows.

**Defining Learning Disabilities**

Medical definitions of learning disability abound, yet consensus has not yet been reached on an acceptable definition because of the heterogeneity of the category (Kavale & Forness, 2000). This means that research in the LD field has been conducted using ambiguous and inconsistently applied definitions and identification methods that are questionable (Flanagan et al., 2002). Therefore, a researcher choosing to study the field of LD interprets their chosen definition and uses it to select a sample of students that could, potentially, be quite dissimilar to another researcher selecting from the same pool (Flanagan et al., 2002). This has lead to claims that research into learning disabilities is unscientific and thwarted by resistance to change (Stanovich, 2005). It is argued that, to improve research and practice in the field, accurate diagnosis is essential (Brueggemann, Kamphaus, & Dombrowski, 2008).

The international definitions of LD are so disparate that, whilst reading research reports, it can be extremely difficult to ascertain whether the researchers are discussing the same characteristics when they claim their participants have learning disabilities. For example, in England, the term learning disabilities refers to genetic factors and brain damage such as Down’s syndrome and cerebral palsy whereas specific learning difficulty has been described as specific difficulties with reading or writing (The Royal College of Psychiatrists, 2004), which is more closely related to the American (Kavale & Forness, 1992) and Australian (Mungovan, Smith, & Spurr, 2002) definitions of learning disabilities. However, in America and Australia, the terms ‘specific learning disabilities’ (Kavale, Holdnack, & Mostert, 2006; The
Australian Psychological Society, 2009) and ‘learning disabilities’ (Mungovan et al., 2002) can be used interchangeably, even by the same author (e.g., see Kavale, 2001, 2005; Kavale & Forness, 1992, 1996, 2000; Kavale et al., 2006). However, once it has been established which students are the focus of attention, there are commonalities within the various definitions which have been empirically supported.

In America, Canada and Australia learning disability has been described as a significant difficulty in the acquisition and manipulation of verbal and/or non-verbal academic skills (reading, writing, reasoning, listening and speaking) (Myers & Hamill, 1990) and between two and five percent of the school population are thought to be affected (Westwood & Graham, 2000). It is thought to be a consequence of damage or dysfunction to the central nervous system (composing the brain and spinal cord) that regulates incoming and outgoing signals (Myers & Hamill, 1990).

Learning disability is generally considered a specific category of the ‘umbrella’ term ‘learning difficulty’, which includes disorders that are caused by environmental problems such as early neglect or isolation (Stone & La Greca, 1994). Learning disabilities, on the other hand, are thought to be biological in origin (Myers & Hamill, 1990; Smith & Strick, 1997), more specifically, a neurological condition that negatively affects academic functioning (Kavale & Forness, 1992) in a particular area of competence (Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, 2006; Mungovan et al., 2002).

The presence of LD is usually indicated by a discrepancy between ability and achievement (Kavale, 2001, 2005) and interferes with the individual’s daily learning activities (DSMMD, 1994, in Flanagan et al., 2002). LD is a persistent and long-term condition (NJCLD, 1994, in Kavale & Forness, 2000) which does not respond favourably to intervention measures (Kavale, 2005; Kavale et al., 2006). Recent research in the field of genetics has indicated that LDs are inherited from previous generations (Faraone et al., 1993; Robertshaw & MacPherson, 2006; Thompson & Raskind, 2003).
Students with learning disabilities also experience difficulties in the social domain including communication difficulties (Pearl, 1992), social skill difficulties (Moisan, 1998) and inability to perceive non-verbal cues in communication (Dimitrovsky et al., 1998; Myklebust, 1995). Attempts have been made to collect that research data into a coherent definition.

A seminal definition was provided by the Interagency Committee on Learning Disabilities (ICLD) in America which highlights the nature of social difficulties associated with LD,

> Learning disabilities is a generic term that refers to a heterogenous group of disorders manifested by significant difficulties in the acquisition and use of listening, speaking, reading, writing, reasoning or mathematical abilities, or of social skills [italics added]. These disorders are intrinsic to the individual and presumed to be due to central nervous system dysfunction. Even though a learning disability may occur concomitantly with other handicapping conditions (e.g., sensory impairment, mental retardation, social and emotional disturbance), with socio-environmental influences (e.g., cultural differences, insufficient or inappropriate instruction, psychogenic factors), and especially with attention deficit disorder, all of which may cause learning problems, a learning disability is not the direct result of those conditions or influences (Kavale & Forness, 1992, pp. 13-14).

However, a more comprehensive, and necessarily less concise, definition was provided by the Department of Education, Science and Training (Tasmania) as an Opening All Options II initiative ([http://www.adcet.edu.au/Oao](http://www.adcet.edu.au/Oao)) supported by the Australian Learning Disability Association ([http://www.adcet.edu.au/ALDA/](http://www.adcet.edu.au/ALDA/)). This definition concurs with the majority of those available internationally whilst reinforcing or specifying particular points that have been open to interpretation in previous definitions. Further, specific mention of non-verbal difficulties is made.

> The term learning disabilities refers to a variety of disorders that affect the acquisition, retention, understanding, organisation or use of verbal and/or non-verbal information.
These disorders result from impairments in one or more psychological processes related to learning (footnote omitted) in combination with at least average abilities essential for thinking and reasoning. Other terms such as dyslexia and dyscalculia are used more in the UK and the US and refer to particular types of learning disability. Learning disabilities are specific not global impairments and as such are distinct from intellectual disabilities.

Learning disabilities range in severity and invariably interfere with the acquisition and use of one or more of the following important skills:

- Oral language (e.g., listening, speaking, understanding).
- Reading (e.g., decoding, comprehension).
- Written language (e.g., spelling, written expression).
- Mathematics (e.g., computation, problem solving)

People with learning disabilities may also have difficulties with organisational skills, social perception and social interaction.

The impairments are generally life-long. However, their effects may be expressed differently over time depending on the match between the demands of the environment and the individual's characteristics. Some impairments may be noted during the pre-school years while others may not become evident until much later. During the school years, learning disabilities are suggested by unexpectedly low academic achievement or achievement that is sustainable only by extremely high levels of effort and support.

Learning disabilities are due to genetic, other congenital and/or acquired neuro-biological factors. They are not caused by factors such as cultural or language differences, inadequate or inappropriate instruction, socio-economic status or lack of motivation, although these and other factors may compound the impact of learning disabilities. Frequently learning disabilities co-exist with other conditions including attentional, behavioural and emotional disorders, sensory impairments or other medical conditions. Learning disabilities are not related to intelligence and can occur in severe, moderate or mild forms. People with learning disabilities have their own individual profiles of strengths and weaknesses; no
two people are exactly the same and the impact on each individual is different (Mungovan et al., 2002, para. 1-4).

A number of categories of LD have been described: dyslexia, dyspraxia, dyscalculia, dysgraphia and dysphasia (McCrone, 2007). Taking these in turn:

- Broadly, dyslexia is related to the ability to read and spell (SPED, 2008), characterised by word recognition and decoding difficulties (Reid Lyon, Shaywitz, & Bennett, 2003). It has been said that dyslexia is a continuum, from mild to severe phonological processing (Stanovich, 1988).

- In general terms, dyspraxia refers to lack of motor skill or clumsiness (Dewey, 1995). It relates to the organisation of movement of the body characterised by delays in the ability to run, jump, and walk without tripping in addition to skills such as dressing and doing jigsaw puzzles (Dyspraxia Foundation, 2009).

- Dyscalculia is related to inconsistency in the use of mathematical concepts, characterised by difficulties with arithmetic, time, measurement and the sequencing of events (Vaidya, 2004) and more abstract concepts such as budgeting and keeping score in games (Dyscalculia.org, 2008).

- Dysgraphia refers to difficulties with writing and spelling but not with reading (Mather, 2003) and manifests as illegible writing with inconsistencies in sizes and shape of letters and an awkward grip whilst watching the writing hand (National Institute of Neurological Disorders and Stroke, 2009).

- Dysphasia is the difficulty in attaching meaning to language, both written and spoken, and is characterised by difficulty with reading comprehension and understanding conversation (Apodixis Press, 2009).
However, use of these labels has received significant critical attention due to the negative consequences of labelling (see section on labelling later in this chapter).

Nonetheless, the ALDA definition is very important to the study of LD in Australia in that, primarily, it acknowledges that there is a group of individuals who have different learning needs from their low-achieving peers; it specifies that the disorder is aetiologically distinct from general learning difficulties and; it highlights the social implications. Perhaps even more important is that it gives Australian researchers a common ground from which to diagnose students; identify research participants in a reliable and consistent manner; and design intervention strategies that take into account the similarities and differences between students with LD and other groups of students with learning difficulties.

**Diagnostic Approaches**

Just as there is significant disagreement on the definition of LD, naturally there is just as much disagreement over appropriate diagnostic approaches.

Diagnosis carries heavy medical connotations and, as such, does not belong in a social model of disability. Queensland’s education system is developing an awareness of a social model of disability (see next section *Learning Disabilities in Queensland Schools*), but school practices are still based on a model that seeks to provide resources for those with special educational needs. Unfortunately, using this model, those needs cannot be identified, and associated funding cannot be launched, without diagnosis.

There are a number of approaches to diagnosis of learning disabilities, each based on what is perceived to be the most compelling aspects of learning disability definition. There is a general consensus that a child with learning disabilities will not be performing to their potential (Kavale, 2001). Using this as the basis for a diagnosis has been termed the ability/achievement discrepancy approach. It involves the administration of a series of tests
designed to gauge the IQ level and the current academic level of the student and, where a discrepancy is revealed, the student is considered to be experiencing learning disabilities.

The approach has been described by Chapman (1988), in research conducted in New Zealand. He contended that administering a full WISC-R (IQ test) was not feasible for his project. Instead he used a short form which estimated IQ for research purposes. He also administered four tests from the progressive achievement test (PAT) series. He concluded that a WISC-R IQ score of greater than 90 and a PAT score of below the 16th percentile would identify students who could be deemed to fall into the learning disabilities category. Of course, there is disagreement over the degree of discrepancy necessary to warrant a diagnosis of learning disabilities (Kavale, 2001). Others have suggested that the discrepancy should register as two or more standard deviations between achievement and IQ (DSMMD, 1994, in Flanagan et al., 2002).

In fact, these ability-achievement discrepancy models have been subject to a flood of criticism which stem from the fact that they, “seem to have very little empirical and theoretical support,” (Flanagan et al., 2002, p. 10) and no explanation for why discrepancy is part of the process of identifying learning disabilities when this concept is not articulated in the definitions of learning disability. Bruggemann, Kamphaus and Dombrowski (2008) reviewed the criticisms levelled at the ability/achievement discrepancy approach for diagnosing students with reading disabilities. They found lack of validity and reliability has been associated with this approach (Vellutino et al., 1996) in that these methods have not been proven to differentiate between students with LDs and low achieving students (Stanovich, 2005).

In a meta-analysis of studies using the ability/achievement approach (Stuebing et al., 2002), which has been described as a, “superb meta-analysis...conducted by some of the most eminent psychologists in the world,” (Stanovich, 2005, p. 105), found no evidence for this approach,
despite it being the criteria for the provision of special education services at the time. Further, as the child has to have opportunity to display differences in achievement, the approach has been accused of delay in the provision of resources (Stuebing et al., 2002) and is associated with the Matthew effect, which is when IQ scores are affected by the reading ability of the participant which appears to represent a discrepancy and, as a result, a classification of LD is made (Stanovich, 1986).

The problem with this type of ‘wait to fail’ (Vaughn & Fuchs, 2003) model of diagnosis is that such a lot of time in the early years of schooling is wasted (Bradley, Danielson, & Doolittle, 2005). Moreover, these approaches use IQ scores which were never designed to reflect potential (Flanagan et al., 2002) because IQ tests have been found unreliable for predicting achievement (Gunderson & Sigel, 2001). IQ tests are based on the precise literacy and numeracy skills that students with LD often struggle with and, as a result, IQ scores underestimate the student’s competence (Gunderson & Sigel, 2001). Further, discrepancy between the IQ score and the child’s achievement has been found to bear no relation to the level of disability experienced (Kavale et al., 2006). Others have said that, “the identification of children as having LD based solely on individual test scores not linked to specific behavioral criteria lead to invalid decisions about individual children,” (Francis et al., 2005, p. 98). Clearly this approach is not viable.

Another characteristic thought to be related to the experience of having LD is that the difficulties being experienced are long-term, persistent difficulties (NJCLD, 1994, in Kavale & Forness, 2000) which are not alleviated with intervention (Kavale, 2005; Kavale et al., 2006). This characteristic has been the basis for another diagnostic approach, known as Response to Intervention (RTI) (Flanagan et al., 2002). This approach involves administering an intervention measure, evaluating the success of the intervention, administering another intervention measure then evaluating the
subsequent success. If a student continues to experience the similar levels of difficulty then a diagnosis of LD is made (Flanagan et al., 2002).

Although there are several benefits to the RTI model, namely intervention can occur in a more timely manner (Vaughn & Fuchs, 2003); it avoids the bureaucratic procedures typically associated with special needs identification (Graham & Bailey, 2007); and takes into account difficulties caused by insufficient and inappropriate instruction (Fuchs, Fuchs, & Speece, 2002), it could be argued that this is also a ‘wait to fail’ model. First the child has to experience difficulties to come to the attention of the teacher, then the student would have to go through the potentially frustrating and demotivating experience of ‘failing’ the intervention only to have to do it all over again with more intensive measures. Others have identified possible drawbacks with such an approach.

Bruggemann, Kamphaus, and Dombrowski (2008) have summarized several problems with RTI, namely little guidance is given as to what kinds are intervention are appropriate (Fuchs et al., 2002), there is little agreement on how to measure the degree to which the student responds and whether the interventions will have a lasting effect (Vaughn, Linan-Thompson, & Hickman, 2003). They contend that more research is required to assess the effectiveness of RTI as a diagnostic method.

Kenneth Kavale, prolific writer in the field of learning disabilities, and his colleagues (Kavale et al, 2006) have claimed that RTI, as a method of diagnosis, has lead to the confusion of students with LD and low-achieving students in the research. The consequence of this has been that research appears to suggest there is little difference between the two categories (Kavale et al., 2006). However, other studies have found significant differences between the two groups (Kavale, Fuchs, & Scruggs, 1994). Therefore, a different approach is needed.
A number of neuroimaging techniques are available for identifying LD by looking at the affected areas of the brain. It has been said that,

The use of functional magnetic resonance imaging (fMRI) analyses, coupled with genetic typing, may lead to very exciting information about the neurological differences characteristic of students with LD (Graham & Bailey, 2007, p. 387).

This idea has been validated by research (Elkins, 2007) but it is clearly too costly to be routinely implemented in schools.

Current opinion appears to favour a combination of approaches; assessment of the ability/achievement discrepancy plus evaluation of resistance to intervention plus acknowledgement that the child is struggling (Kavale, 2005; Kavale et al., 2006). The reasoning behind the third criterion is that students who have high IQ but are achieving adequate grades are not seen to be in need of intervention (Flanagan et al., 2002). However, it could be argued that a child like this should be entitled to the same level of intervention to assist in achieving their potential but, regrettably, there is limited funding available and those who are struggling are seen to be more in need of the scarce resources than someone who is meeting benchmarks.

Learning Disabilities in Queensland Schools

This study was set in a Queensland school which was problematic in that the study focused on learning disabilities, yet these are not identified in Queensland schools. As a result of the recent implementation of the Smart State plan (The State of Queensland (Department of Education), 2009), education in Queensland has undergone a transformation. One outcome of this transformation is that students with learning disabilities are no longer being identified in Queensland schools despite the distinction between learning difficulties and learning disabilities once being established in the educational policies of the Department of Education and Training (Queensland) (DET, 2007, 2009; Elkins, 2007). In fact, the term ‘learning disabilities’ is no longer recognised for funding purposes in Queensland.
(Graham & Bailey, 2007). Even the term ‘learning difficulties’ is no longer in use by DET (Tess Hobbs, personal communication to supervisor, March 10, 2009).

The changes in policy demonstrate progress towards more of a social model of disability in Queensland, at least in regards to philosophy, if not practice. As an illustration, adjustments for students with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD), Hearing Impairment (HI), Intellectual Impairment (II), Physical Impairment (PI), Speech-Language Impairment (SLI), and Vision Impairment (VI) remain central to the school experience of these individuals (DET, 2010). However, in regards to the treatment of those with learning difficulties, a number of changes have occurred. As a response to the increasing diversity in Queensland classrooms and teachers’ perceptions of their ability to cater for that diversity (see section on teachers later in this chapter), a new approach is being put forward to identify the individual learning needs of each student (Department of Education and Training, 2009).

The processes of appraisement and ascertainment, which were used, in the past, to identify learning needs in the past, have been abandoned in favour of a new approach which responds to the child’s individual learning needs and focuses on what the school can provide, rather than what the child is lacking (DET, personal communication, September 17, 2008). Instead of determining the source of the child’s difficulties, the new approach focuses on improving literacy and numeracy levels across the board, regardless of their aetiology (Elkins, 2007). The suggestion is that, as educators, it is not our job to diagnose, but to respond to learning needs (DET, personal communication, September 17, 2008). It could be argued that such a process still seeks to normalise but the aim is to, “best meet the needs of all students without stigma and labels,” (Elkins, 2007, p. 397) and, as such, reflects a social model of disability.

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Reliance on personal communication with DET is due to the limited amount of information available on the topic in DET’s current policy documents or website.
The issue of labelling has received significant criticism in the literature. It has been said that labelling a child becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy (Graham, 2006) in that if a child is continually told ‘what’ they are, then they will start to believe it. Further, the process of labelling encourages those involved to bring their own preconceived notions of the label, and therefore the child, to interactions with, and to decisions about, the child, that is, we are encouraged to know the label, not the child (Graham, 2006). This contention is not in question. However, in order to conduct research into the experiences of students with learning disabilities in Queensland schools, a method of identification is required to identify students who would be eligible for inclusion in such a project. At this juncture, the responsibility for identification remains with the researchers, which creates another set of difficulties, particularly in terms of consistency. However, changes in attitudes towards labelling are beginning to take place elsewhere.

A development in the diagnosis and labelling of learning disabilities in school has emerged from New Zealand. They seem to be experiencing a U-turn on this topic, with the Minister for Education accepting the mounting scientific evidence that some children, such as those with dyslexia, dyscalculia, dysgraphia, et cetera, learn differently, so they need to be catered for differently. They now recognise the need for labelling (McCrone, 2007) to ensure students receive the assistance they need in a timely manner. In contrast, Queensland is moving away from what they term this ‘deficit model’ (Tess Hobbs, personal communication, March 10, 2009) of underachievement whereby resources are allocated depending on a diagnosis. However, it could be argued that the New Zealand approach is not a deficit model at all, but a model that embraces difference and does not shy away from labelling that difference. DET, “recognises diversity of individuals...[and] maximises educational and social outcomes of all students through identification and reduction of barriers to learning,” (DET, 2007, 2009, para. 7), but it is unclear how this is achieved in the absence of identification of the specifics of the diversity and the concomitant barriers to
learning, such as social difficulties amongst students with learning disabilities.

As early intervention is preferable (van Kraayenoord, Luke, Elkins, & Land, 1999), an approach is needed that identifies student difference in the formative years of schooling to enable proactive strategies to be put in place before the difficulties impact on self-esteem and social status and before the onset of adolescence. This approach acknowledges that these difficulties are related to individual characteristics and the environment that the individuals participate in. Such an approach would avoid the negative attributes of labelling, whilst identifying areas of additional support needs. Perhaps when schools (and society) truly celebrate difference, such an approach would be feasible. However, that discussion runs beyond the scope of this project. This thesis is concerned with the need to identify research participants for their contribution to understanding the school experiences of students with learning disabilities. This becomes almost impossible when these individuals are not identified in Queensland schools.

Queensland has now adopted an RTI approach to the identification of underachievement. It has been termed a ‘Whole school approach for improving learning through intervention’ (DET, 2009). Details of the approach, however, are particularly difficult to find on the education department’s websites. The strategy has three levels (Department of Education and Training, 2009):

- Level 1 is a whole-school, preventative intervention which is the, “normal activity of an effective and efficient school,” (p. 14) such as curriculum planning that caters for individuals in the cohort and addresses gaps between what the students, “have achieved and what they should have achieved,” (p. 14).
- Level 2 focuses on individuals who are underachieving in comparison with their peers and for whom level 1 intervention has been ineffective. This stage involves additional support in terms of instruction and
resources insomuch as they are, “effective, efficient [and] defensible,” (p. 15). If improvement cannot be measured within an appropriate timeframe, the strategies would be abandoned.

- Level 3, the ‘intensive teaching’ level, involves short episodes of instruction in specific skills or the use of assistive technologies. These episodes are jointly developed by the teachers and specialists to ensure they are commensurate with the work being undertaken in the peer-group. A few children might not respond to this level of intervention and will be assessed by a multi-disciplinary team.

At no point are the children labelled as experiencing LD or learning difficulties. Should the child’s parents require more information about why these interventions and resultant technologies are required, they can take the child to a paediatrician to seek a referral for psychometric testing and a diagnosis of LD. The diagnosis will be acknowledged by the school but, ultimately, might not make any difference to what happens in the school setting as the school decides how best to provide learning support, regardless of recommendations made by a psychologist. The underlying message here is, psychologists are not teachers, and they are not best placed to direct what happens in the classroom (DET, personal communication, September 17, 2007), as psychologists belong to a medical model of disability. However, interventions, designed around judgements made about individuals with learning difficulties, are still utilised within this approach.

It has been found that current intervention measures are ineffective for students with LD (Elkins, 2007), which means that students with LD are less likely to respond favourably to the three levels of intervention used in the whole school approach. The document fails to articulate what happens to such students who continue to struggle despite this thorough intervention process. Also, the process does not address the other obstacles to learning, such as social difficulties, which are central to the experience of LD.
Students with LD possess at least average intelligence but cannot process information the same way as their non-LD peers (Mungovan et al., 2002). The disability is long-term and persistent (NJCLD, 1994, in Kavale & Forness, 2000) and intervention strategies show very little, if any, improvement (Kavale, 2005; Kavale et al., 2006). Within a social model of disabilities, these individuals would be valued for their contributions and not marginalised for their difference. However, as discussed, the current schooling system is not truly based on a social model and, as such, normalising practices abound. Compare, for example, a student who has broken her arm, and is struggling to learn to write, with a child who is struggling to learn to write with no apparent cause. The two children have very different learning needs, and would require different approaches to enable them to achieve their personal potential. If the second child was diagnosed with a learning disability (probably dysgraphia) then diagnosis would include significant social difficulties. In addition to persistent, long-term academic difficulties, students with LD experience significantly more social difficulties than their typically-developing peers (Mishna, 2003). These difficulties are a defining characteristic of LD (Mungovan et al., 2002) and research has revealed that one of the major concerns for these students is that their experience seems to be highly correlated to persistent feelings of loneliness.

A pioneer of research into loneliness and LD, Malka Margalit (1991, 1994, 1998; Margalit & Al-Yagon, 2002; Margalit & Ben-Dov, 1995; Margalit & Efrati, 1996; Margalit & Levin-Alyagon, 1994) and others (Pavri & Monda-Amaya, 2000; Tur-Kaspa et al., 1998) have found that feelings of loneliness are, “persistent realities of everyday experience,” (Margalit & Levin-Alyagon, 1994, p. 3) of these students. She found that students with LD experienced less peer acceptance and felt lonelier than children without LD (Margalit & Ben-Dov, 1995). They were also more likely to be teased (Martlew &
Hodson, 1991) and bullied (Morrison et al., 1994) than their peers. Further research (Valas, 1999) produced similar findings and discovered that students with LD experienced less peer acceptance, lower self-esteem and felt lonelier than their peers including the low-achieving students. In fact, studies have shown that a high proportion of students with LD are socially rejected in comparison with their peers (Greenham, 1999). This research highlights the extent of the differences between the social experiences of students with LD compared to their peers. However, as discussed, a distinction between the students with LD and their low-achieving peers is not made within Queensland schools. Given that research into the classroom experiences of these students is warranted, clearly an approach for identifying eligible participants for the study was required.

Learning Disabilities Indicator Chart

Even if the field of LD could agree on a definition and a diagnostic approach, DET would not fund such diagnosis when their approach to intervention does not differentiate between learning disabilities and general learning difficulties. For this reason the researcher had to develop a strategy, based on the research of others, to identify suitable participants for the project. The strategy was to identify students whose characteristics fit the profile of learning disabilities from existing research. Research into learning disabilities could not take place without rigorous identification methods. The result was the learning disabilities indicator chart (LDIC) (see Appendix 1: Learning Disabilities Indicator Chart).

The chart details characteristics typically associated with learning disabilities to identify those students who experience learning difficulties in the absence of another explanation. The chart is grounded in empirical theory of what a learning disability is not and is designed to be used by a researcher in conjunction with parents and learning support staff to identify students who could be deemed eligible for inclusion in this LD project. There is an assumption that there would be information on file provided by the parents
and previous caregivers as to the family and academic history of the child. Where this information is not available it would need to be sought prior to participant selection.

There are a number of similar tools available to identify students with learning disabilities, but these have not been used to identify students with LD for research purposes. However, there are a number of concerns with using these tools for the current purposes as will be discussed.

Whilst it claims not to be a tool for assessing specific learning disabilities, a detailed checklist (National Centre for Learning Disabilities, 2009) (see Appendix 2: LD Checklist) has been developed by The National Center for Learning Disabilities (http://www.ncld.org/images/stories/downloads/parent_center/ldchecklist.pdf) in America to identify students ‘at risk’ of LD. The guide presents a variety of statements such as, “dislikes and avoids copying,” “Mispronounces words frequently,” and, “has difficulty rhyming,” for example, to assess different aspects of the difficulties presented and requires the ‘assessor’ to tick whether the statements apply. An abundance of ticks suggests that the student could be experiencing learning disabilities and needs to be referred for further assessment. However, this checklist lists characteristics that could easily be shared by students with low achievement and, therefore, would not be suitable for the current purposes.

Another instrument has been provided for tertiary teachers by The Department of Education, Science and Training (Tasmania) as an Opening all Options II initiative (www.adcet.edu.au/oao). By process of elimination the ‘LD decision tree’ (Mungovan et al., 2002) (see Appendix 3: LD Decision Tree) guides the teacher through a number of variables to identify the possibility of a learning disability and enable them to consider a number of remedies. By ruling out sensory impairment, health issues, and compromised educational history, for example, the teacher arrives at a decision to refer the student for psychometric assessment, the underlying
suggestion being that the child could have a learning disability. However, this chart does not identify the indicators of LD and, therefore, would not be beneficial for the purposes of participant selection.

The learning disabilities indicator chart (LDIC), which was developed and utilised in the current study, works on the assumption that the adolescent in question is experiencing difficulties that interfere with their daily learning activities. The chart asks concise questions which all have foundations in LD research and uses information from those who know the children best – their parents and teachers.

There are three stages. The first is to establish the background of the child; the second is to rule out other causes for learning difficulties (ruuling the child out of participation in the study, not ruling out learning disabilities as a cause of the child’s difficulties, as stage 2 conditions can occur concomitantly with learning disabilities); and the third is to identify the specific areas of difficulty as a defence for the decisions made in the previous two stages.

In ‘Stage 1: Establish History’ the question is asked ‘Is there a family history of learning difficulties?’ There is a growing body of research identifying a genetic element to learning disabilities. That is, inherited genetic characteristics that produce learning disabilities in subsequent generations (Robertshaw & MacPherson, 2006; Thompson & Raskind, 2003). For this reason it is important to establish whether the learning difficulties are shared by other family members.

To be considered a learning disability the condition needs to have been long-term (NJCLD, 2007) hence the question, ‘Have the difficulties been evident through the school career?’ Most students will have some difficulties at some point during their academic careers, but these can be environmental or will pass with time or further instruction. Research has shown that learning disabilities are resistant to intervention (Kavale, 2005), hence the question ‘Have the difficulties continued despite intervention?’
Students with learning disabilities do not usually experience difficulties across the board. Instead, difficulties seem to be related to one or more areas of learning (Mungovan et al., 2002) such as dyslexia, dysgraphia, dyscalculia, et cetera. The act of labelling the specific academic difficulty necessarily sits within a medical model of disabilities. However, it is considered that although individuals have strengths and weaknesses within the academic disciplines, those with learning disabilities have consistent limitations within an area of competence such as reading, writing, mathematics or listening, rather than a problem with a subject such as science or geography as one would expect in the mainstream population. The question, ‘Are the student’s difficulties specific to a particular area (or areas) of the curriculum?’ addresses this point. A deeper analysis of this issue is provided in Stage 3.

The next question, ‘Are the student’s difficulties unexpected (in terms of your impression of their cognitive (attention/memory/reasoning) potential?)’ is related to the previous question in that students with learning disabilities are usually bright, articulate children with a perplexing and frustrating inability to thrive in a particular area of the curriculum (Kavale, 2005). At this point the researcher would be reasonably confident that the student in question would be a likely candidate for inclusion in a learning disabilities project. However, there are a number of extenuating factors that might also cause learning difficulties.

In ‘Stage 2: Rule out other causes’ the researcher must ask the following questions:

2:1 ‘If English is a second language, does the student experience similar problems in their first language?’

2:2 ‘If intelligence tests have been conducted, is the student in the average range or above?’

2:3 ‘Have auditory or visual discrimination problems (reduced sight or hearing) been ruled out?’
‘Have health problems which affect concentration been ruled out (e.g., Diabetes)?’

‘Has the student received adequate teaching and resources in the past and been in regular attendance?’

If the answer to any of the questions is ‘no’ then this suggests the student is not appropriate for inclusion in a research project into learning disabilities because they have other factors that could be causing the difficulties and this would be impossible to confirm without a battery of tests. If a student with English as a second language does not experience similar problems in her first language this suggests that there is no neurological basis for her learning difficulties.

It is possible to have a neurological learning disability in addition to auditory or visual discrimination issues. However, it would be very difficult to establish whether the difficulties were solely due to the presence of a learning disability without formal testing. Therefore these individuals would not be considered for participation. The same applies to health problems such as diabetes which affects concentration. Again, it would be difficult to establish whether the difficulties were caused by the learning disability or the ability to concentrate which was caused by the diabetes.

Item 2:5 is really in two parts. The first relates to the child’s ability to access adequate schooling in the past. Obviously a child who was prevented from accessing formal education in the formative years is unlikely to ‘catch up’ with her peers during her school career without significant and long-term intervention but it would be difficult to assert that this child’s problems stem solely from the presence of a learning disability. As such, this child would not be suitable for inclusion in the project. The second part relates to truancy which is an important topic in the field of learning disabilities as students with learning disabilities often become disenfranchised with the schooling system resulting in increased levels of truancy (Putnam, 1995). It would be difficult
to say whether these potential participants had learning difficulties because they truant or truant because they had learning difficulties (or disabilities). Therefore, inclusion of such a child would be difficult to justify. The same could be said for a number of other items such as lack of parental support, poor attitude or lack of effort, low self-concept or self-esteem (Christensen & Elkins, 1995) but these could be characteristics of the type of students of interest and to rule them out in an attempt to be more clinical about participant selection would be reckless. In addition, such judgements would be highly subjective. Therefore these items have not been included on the chart.

The use of the chart does not infer judgment about the perceived abilities of the individuals involved. The chart enabled the researcher to identify students who experienced barriers to learning in certain areas, as per a social model of disability. The difficulties were unexpected, not compared with their peers, but in relation to their perceived potential. Having identified these barriers, the phenomenon will now be examined using social cognitive theory.

**Loneliness & Learning Disabilities: A Social Cognitive Approach**

The social model of disability is a way of thinking about disability whereas a social cognitive approach is a theory about learning. Learning here is defined as human functioning in that all human experience is a learning experience. Therefore, both concepts concern the social aspects of human activity but for different purposes.

As previously discussed, social cognitive theory states that behaviour is not simply a result of ‘person-situation’ interaction (Bandura, 1977; 1986) as it is mediated by cognitive processes. The model of triadic reciprocality features interacting cognitive, behavioural and environmental factors which influence, and are influenced by, each other. A person brings to any situation a life-time of experiences and idiosyncrasies that affect their behaviour and the
behaviour of others in the situation. The others also bring their own experiences and beliefs to the situation. For example, students’ social interactions in the classroom are influenced by earlier social successes or failures which cause them to act in a certain way, depending on how they are received by the other participants (Jones, 1982). Social strategies that have produced positive consequences in the past are more likely to be used again, often with pleasing results. Alternately, individuals who are not aware of effective strategies, or who have been unable to evaluate their social strategies effectively, are more likely to use inappropriate social strategies, thereby initiating a negative reaction from their peers and triggering social isolation and loneliness. This complicated reciprocal relationship between what the student does and says (behaviour), thinks and feels (cognition), and experiences in the classroom (environment) is difficult to unravel as all the aspects are interacting determinants. However, it is possible to isolate and discuss the individual aspects of that relationship without implying causation.

The following discussion centres on the three domains of social cognitive theory: behavioural, personal/cognitive and environmental, and their contribution to feelings of loneliness and failure to thrive in adolescents with learning disabilities.

**Behavioural Aspects**

Behavioural aspects relate to what the individual does that contributes to the phenomenon of loneliness and classroom participation which, for this study, includes difficulties with social skills and communication difficulties. These behavioural considerations are now discussed.

**Social Skill Difficulties**

As previously indicated, individuals with learning disabilities experience difficulties in the social domain in addition to their academic difficulties (Moisan, 1998). In the earlier literature this was termed ‘social skill deficits’ (Haager & Vaughn, 1995; Kavale & Forness, 1996) which has quite negative
connotations and belongs to a deficit model of disabilities in that it does not recognise the strengths these individuals possess. Further, it is considered that social challenges in students with LD are not merely a result of issues inherent to the child. From a social cognitive perspective, the child’s social and academic behaviours are related to their cognition which is, in turn, related to issues inherent in the school environment. This supports a social model of disability which, as Goodley (2001, p. 210) has said, “[provides] an understanding of ‘learning difficulties’ as a fundamentally social, cultural, political, historical, discursive and relational phenomenon, rather than sensitively recognising the existence of an individual’s ‘naturalised impairment.’” As a consequence, in the following discussion the phrase ‘social skill deficits’, which places emphasis on the individual, will be substituted for the more inclusive term ‘social challenges’, which emphasises the contribution of other factors, although it was not used by the authors. Social challenges mean students with learning disabilities are more frequently rejected by their peers (Heiman & Margalit, 1998) and are less often liked (Haager & Vaughn, 1995). It has been suggested that this peer rejection may be due to, “failure to perform the necessary and appropriate social behaviours,” (Tur-Kaspa et al., 1998, p. 93) because of reduced chances for ‘incidental’ social skill acquisition (Lewis, 1996) and limited possibilities for social learning (Asher et al., 1990).

Vaughn, Zaragoza, Hogan, and Walker (1993) conjectured that social challenges are not restricted to individuals with learning disabilities, suggesting that other groups such as ‘low achievers’ also present similar characteristics. For the purposes of this discussion, this is a moot point. Whether social difficulties are an environmental consequence of a learning disability, or whether they are a biological symptom of a learning disability, the findings of these and related studies (e.g., Coleman & Minnett, 1993; Kavale & Forness, 1996; Vaugh, et al., 1993) indicated that students with learning disabilities experienced social difficulties and peer rejection and this
was a predictor of loneliness during adolescence (Carr & Schellenbach, 1993).

*Communication Difficulties*

Social interactions play a significant role in the academic achievement of students with learning disabilities (Parker & Asher, 1987) for a number of reasons. Because of their communication difficulties, classroom interactions can be more uncomfortable for students with learning disabilities (Pearl, 1992), which has implications for group work activities. Part of this communication difficulty is that students with learning disabilities tend to be less assertive in communications than their peers (Tur-Kaspa et al., 1998). However, research has found that there are significant social benefits, both to students with disabilities and their peers, from inclusion in mainstream classrooms as opposed to being withdrawn (Klingner, Vaughn, Schumm, Cohen, & Forgan, 1998) meaning that, even though interactions in these spaces can be uncomfortable, they are still to be preferred to the ‘withdrawal’ approach which restricts the availability of peers with diverse abilities. It has been said that peers in mainstream classes act as role models for students with disabilities, making them more socially skilled (Fryxell & Kennedy, 1995). However, it is doubtful whether this applies where social difficulty is a characteristic of that disability.

Having addressed the behavioural aspects of loneliness and learning disabilities including social skill difficulties and communication difficulties, the review now addresses the second domain of social cognitive theory: cognition. What follows is a thorough examination of the literature relating to aspects of social perception, non-verbal learning disabilities, attribution theory and Theory of Mind development.

*Cognitive Aspects*

It has been suggested that difficulties with cognitive processing could provide an explanation for the substantial relationship between learning disabilities
and social difficulties (Pearl, 1987). A number of studies have looked at the elements of cognitive processing in relation to loneliness, and in relation to students with learning disabilities. The following provides an overview of cognitive processing in terms of social perceptions, non-verbal learning difficulties, emotions, and attributions, and their relationship to children with learning disabilities and loneliness. Further, a discussion is provided of the relation of perception, attribution and emotion to Theory of Mind development amongst children with learning disabilities.

Social Perceptions

Problematic self-perception has been linked to the presence of a learning disability (Pearl, 1992) and self-perception can affect social interactions and academic achievement (Pearl, 1992). Galanaki and Kalantzi-Azizi (1999) discussed this in terms of social self-efficacy which is, “the child’s evaluation of his or her ability to persuade his or her peers so as to influence their behaviour and feelings in socially acceptable ways,” (p. 3) Research found that students with LD perceived themselves to be less academically (Pearl, 1992), cognitively (Hartner, Whitesell, & Junkin, 1998), and socially (Hartner et al., 1998; Margalit, 1994) skilled than their peers. Tur-Kaspa, Weisel and Segev (1998, p. 93) suggested, “this may indicate that adolescents with learning disabilities are quite aware of their social difficulties.”

Problematic social self-efficacy can influence the way in which students with LD interact with their peers (Pearl, 1992). It is argued that people who have a low self-perception are more likely to believe that others will also have a low perception of them (Margalit, 1994). This is related to feelings of emotional loneliness, even in situations where there is no social marginalisation, because the individual’s perception might be that they do not have a friend who values them. In fact, students with learning disabilities reported a lower quality of friendships than their peers (Margalit & Efrati, 1996) which generated feelings of loneliness.
It has been suggested that the relationship between self-perception and social and academic difficulties could be reciprocal. That is, self-perception could affect the way in which children socialise and engage with learning, just as social and academic difficulties could alter self-perception. This has not yet been tested with empirical research, but is alluded to in the literature (Pearl, 1992). In addition to problematic self-perceptions, research has found students with LD also experience problematic social perceptions. These social perceptions are often related to the ability to perceive non-verbal aspects of communication.

**Non-verbal Learning Disabilities**

Individuals with learning disabilities often demonstrate specific social skill difficulties that are related to their cognitive abilities and have been termed ‘non-verbal learning disabilities.’ These include inability to perceive and comprehend subtle social cues and environmental aspects of communication (Dimitrovsky et al., 1998; Myklebust, 1995; Pearl, 1992) including the ability to comprehend and select appropriate social strategies (Pearl, Bryan & Herzog, 1990, in Pearl, 1992).

Perception of social cues is essential for social skill development and the maintenance of friendships (Carr & Schellenbach, 1993). However, students with LD are often unable to interpret nonverbal information effectively in interactions with peers and others. For example, students with learning disabilities, “often misinterpret non-threatening interpersonal cues as being aggressive,” (Moisan, 1998, p. 11) and misinterpret verbal communication and the intent of the speaker (Schoenbrodt, Kumin, & Sloan, 1997). This contributes to problematic interactions with peers.

Research has found that students with LD commonly experience difficulty adapting to novel situations such as meeting new people or attending a new school and often cannot appreciate subtlety in humour or speech or understand the complex nature of pretending (Volkmar & Klin, 1998). Often
these students experience difficulty in interpreting facial expressions (Dimitrovsky et al., 1998) and tend to formulate quite primitive social strategies (Oliva & La Greca, 1987). This inability to perceive non-verbal aspects of communication includes difficulty judging the visual aspects of emotions.

The term ‘cognition’ also refers to emotional states and moods (Ellis & Hunt, 1989) as these are triggered by thought processes in reaction to a real or imagined event. As Bandura (1973) stated in his theory of aggression discussed earlier, anger is one of many reactions to a dangerous situation and is based on cognitive mediation. Loneliness, as has been discussed, is an affective reaction to a thought process; that is, the person contemplates their social relationships and finds them lacking. Conversely, emotions can also influence cognitive processes (Ellis & Hunt, 1989) such as learning, and have been linked to memory capabilities (Ellis & Hunt, 1989).

Oatley and Nundy (1996, p. 258) claimed that when children are anxious they, “do not attend to anything except the concerns of their anxiety.” With loneliness in the school setting then, students are more likely to divert their cognitive energy to improving their social life than improving their grades (Williams, 2001). Emotional states also affect perceptions of the environment (Ellis & Hunt, 1989). When this is paired with the fact that children with LD already experience difficulties in their perceptions of the environment this means that lonely students with LD are twice as likely to misinterpret their environment, which is crucial to developing healthy relationships in the classroom.

**Attributions**

Another aspect of cognition is attribution. Attribution theory suggests that attributions for success or failure have the potential to motivate or demotivate a person’s behaviour (Weiner, 2010). Persons who deem academic failure, for example, to be due to external factors that are stable and, therefore,
beyond their control, such as task difficulty, become de-motivated, which negatively affects their self-concept, making them less likely to attempt similar tasks in the future. The same applies to internal factors that are stable, such as characterological ‘flaws’. Conversely, if a person acknowledges that academic failure is due to internal, unstable (and therefore controllable) factors such as lack of effort, the person is empowered by the notion that success is within their locus of control, which positively influences their self concept, making them more likely to attempt similar tasks (Schunk, 2008).

As discussed earlier, Peplau, Miceli and Morasch (1982) considered that cognitive elements such as attributional style play a major role in determining the outcome of an episode of loneliness. Individuals who locate attributions for loneliness to either internal or external factors, over which they believe they have no control (for example a fundamental character flaw or a particularly harsh peer group), are more likely to suffer from extended periods of affective loneliness, which is related to their social self concept, thereby making them less likely to engage in effective social interaction.

Peplau, Miceli and Morasch (1982) considered self-blame to be a key component of attribution. They considered that self-blame falls into two categories, behavioural self blame, which is the more empowering in that individuals believe they can change their behaviour and the resultant situation, or characterological self-blame in which individuals find fault with their character. A characterological flaw is considered a stable factor that provides no hope of changing the situation.

People often seek to rationalize periods of loneliness by looking for a ‘precipitating event’ or a ‘maintaining cause’ (Cutrona, 1982). ‘Precipitating events’ usually refer to a change to the individual’s social structures for various reasons whereas ‘maintaining causes’ are situations that allow the loneliness to persist, such as social difficulties (Cutrona, 1982). Peplau, Miceli and Morasch (1982) discussed stability of loneliness in terms of
changes in personal standards. That is, individuals may be content with their social relationships at one point in time, but if something occurs to alter their standards, loneliness may ensue. They provided the example of a person entering mid-life, whose priorities have not previously included social relationships, suddenly being faced with the realization that those relationships are not immediately available.

Attributional style is an important consideration in education, and has been examined in relation to students with LD (Tur-Kaspa & Bryan, 1993; Tur-Kaspa et al., 1998). Research has revealed that students with LD tend to select internal, characterological attributions for difficulty such as low ability and external attributions for success such as ease of task (Jacobson et al., 1986). Ease of task relates to a variety of contexts, not merely the academic arena. Students with LD have also been found to experience problematic social attributions.

Tur-Kaspa, Weisel and Segev (1998) conducted a study designed to ascertain the social attributions for loneliness among early adolescents with learning disabilities compared with their peers. The study was conducted with 70 early adolescents with and without learning disabilities in Tel Aviv, using a Hebrew adaptation of the UCLA Loneliness Scale, an attribution interview, the Hebrew adaptation of the Causal Dimension Scale, a peer rating scale and a teacher rating scale. They found that students with learning disabilities had higher expectations for future loneliness and ascribed feelings of loneliness to an absence of friends, or due to moving to a new school whereas their peers reported that feelings of loneliness were due to relationship difficulties with members of the opposite sex.

This may have relevance for how these individuals interact socially as expectations for loneliness, as social ‘failure’, would have a demotivating influence as their self-efficacy for social interaction would be affected. However, the researchers claimed that,
No group differences were found on the locus, control, and stability dimensions of causality…Weiner argued, however, that people think in dichotomous constructs (e.g., either internal or external) rather than continuous (e.g., degree of internality-externality) terms…These reservations should be taken into consideration in future studies (Tur-Kaspa et al., 1998, p. 93).

The repercussions of this research indicate that attributional research should examine the context in which the attributions are made and clearly report the words used by the participants, rather than claiming dogmatically that a statement is, for example, internal and unchangeable and, therefore, demotivating.

Another study (Jacobson et al., 1986) found students with LD externalized their successes more than their peers, attributing success to luck or task ease which did not allow them to experience the heightened self-esteem associated with internal attributions for success. The students with LD in their study internalized their failures which, the researchers warned, could have negative consequences as blame is damaging to self-esteem. They suggested that this must be taken into account when considering attribution retraining as this process involves encouraging students to attribute failure to effort. However, another study indicated that attribution retraining which encourages internalizing causal attributions for failure could help children deal with failure more effectively (Shelton et al., 1985).

Students with LD in Shelton, Anastopoulos and Linden’s study (1985) reported internal attributions for success and implied lack of effort was responsible for their failures. Their participants experienced no improvement in self-esteem as a result of the attribution retraining, which could be due to the impact of increased internal attributions highlighted by Jacobson, Lowery and DuCette (1986). Another study (Tur-Kaspa & Bryan, 1993) looked at social attributions of students with LD and found that they had different attribution patterns to their low-achieving and average-achieving peers. They externalized social successes and failures, such as luck, third party intervention, and the mood of others, thereby gaining little positive affect for
the success which would not build their self-efficacy for social interaction, but they also gave internal attributions for success, which the researchers found contradictory. In fact, there were a few drawbacks of this study in that the researchers felt the students were unable to consider multiple pieces of information simultaneously, which is required in such attribution tests. They believed that they were asking the children for more sophisticated forms of attributional thinking than they were capable of and this could have affected the findings. It was claimed here (Tur-Kaspa & Bryan, 1993), and elsewhere (Jacobson et al., 1986), that students with LD are not sure why they succeed or fail and, therefore, would struggle to attribute an authentic reason.

The difficulty here is that there are so many differing results in reported studies looking at the relationship between attribution and LD. Firstly, there is the definitional problem. In one study (Jacobson et al., 1986) the researchers chose students, “as close to the usual definition [of LD] as possible,” (p. 60) because their state did not recognise the LD category. Their definition of LD, however, did not include several important factors in LD identification and, therefore, the findings must be read with this in mind. Secondly, the attributional scenarios usually used in such studies are hypothetical which, as a matter of conjecture which has not been identified in the literature, could reasonably be thought to require a certain level of comprehension and a number of language proficiencies which may evade students with LD. Jacobsen, Lowery and DuCette (1986) claimed that failure to use real-life scenarios as a basis for their attribution questioning was a limitation of their research.

It has been suggested elsewhere (Qualter & Munn, 2002, p. 241) that problematic attributional style such as this, “is likely to be accompanied by feelings of pessimism and hopelessness about the future.” Further, it has been suggested that external attributions for loneliness were related to feelings of hostility and anger whereas internal attributions were related to depression (Qualter & Munn, 2002). Attributions, perceptions and emotions
all form part of what has come to be known as ‘Theory of Mind’, which refers to the ability to ascertain the attributions, perceptions and emotions of others. This concept has special relevance in a discussion of the cognitive processing of individuals with learning disabilities.

Theory of Mind

Although results have not been conclusive, research has indicated that students with learning disabilities may perform at lower levels on Theory of Mind tasks than their peers (Charman & Campbell, 1997). However, very little research which examines the relationship between Theory of Mind and learning disabilities has been conducted (Dorfman, 2001) which is surprising considering the cognitive processing elements which are affected by LD are similar to those involved in Theory of Mind functions.

Theory of mind refers to the way young children develop a sense of perspective in relation to others (Lillard & Curenton, 1999). That is, the ability to anticipate how words or actions will make a person feel (Dunn, 1996) and the ability to predict how a person might behave, or their motives for this behaviour (Verbrugge & Mol, 2008). This ability is based on the individual’s capacity to take verbal and non-verbal cues from an interaction to be able to determine the thoughts and feelings of others (Lillard & Curenton, 1999).

Theory of Mind is broken down into four areas (Lillard & Curenton, 1999, p. 53),

- The relationship between information from the sense (perceptions) and what people know
- The emotions of others
- Others’ desires and,
- Others’ beliefs

Theory of Mind has been said to begin to develop around the age of four (Lillard & Curenton, 1999) although often even in adulthood Theory of Mind might not always be used effectively, even in typically-developing adults
(Verbrugge & Mol, 2008). The repercussions of this are significant. Studies have found that children who are able to recognise emotions in others at an early age are more likely to view their social relationships more positively (Dunn, 1996), which has relevance for understanding loneliness in adolescence, whereas complications in Theory of Mind development can lead to peer difficulties later in life (Lillard & Curenton, 1999).

In research with children, Theory of Mind is usually assessed using a variety of tasks such as showing the children cartoon faces with different emotions represented and ask them to identify the emotion (Greig & Taylor, 1999). The participants should be able to recognise emotions that they do not currently feel. Knowledge about the desires of others can be assessed using the ‘broccoli test’ (Repacholi & Gopnik, 1997), which involves the researcher putting a plate of broccoli and a plate of crackers in front of the children and asking them which they prefer (usually not the broccoli). The researcher indicates a preference for the broccoli and asks the participant to select one of the plates for the researcher to eat. Children who understand the desires of others are able to choose the preferred plate of broccoli for the researcher. Those who cannot understand that others have desires different to their own chose their own preference.

Methods for testing an awareness of others’ beliefs have been termed ‘false belief’ tests. These tests generally provide a scenario and related questions such as ‘Sally puts a ball in the basket and leaves the room. Jenny comes in and moves the ball from the basket to the box. Where will Sally look for the ball? Why?’ (Lillard & Curenton, 1999). Children who have developed Theory of Mind will be able to assign beliefs that differ from their own to another person. That is, they should be able to say that Sally will look for the ball in the basket, although they are aware that the ball was actually in the box.

The process of understanding false belief involves understanding the ‘default belief’ (that the ball is in the box) but using inhibition to change that belief to
one shared by another person (Sally believes the ball is in the basket) (German & Leslie, 2000). False belief tasks have been tested to ensure that language usage within the test and language ability of the child are not responsible for the test results (Lillard & Curenton, 1999).

It is pertinent to consider that Theory of Mind development is a process of acquiring skills and, therefore, differs in different populations for different reasons (Charman & Campbell, 1997). What is known is that Theory of Mind development is essential in the formation and maintenance of good peer relations (Leekham, 1993, in Lillard & Curenton, 1999). This is because it is important to be able to gain insight into the thoughts and feelings of others to be able, for example, to empathise and comfort (Dunn, 1996).

Effective peer interaction means being able to joke, tease, and pretend; to be able to anticipate how words or actions will make a person feel; and to appreciate different tastes and desires, all of which are concepts involved in Theory of Mind acquisition (Dunn, 1996). If Theory of Mind is not developing normally, children will have more peer relationship problems (Lillard & Curenton, 1999), which means they are less likely to gain, “knowledge of peer views and norms regarding helpful social behaviours,” (Ladd & Oden, 1979, p. 403).

Dunn (1996) suggested that to conduct Theory of Mind tasks is to ignore the context in which Theory of Mind development occurs. He suggested that observations of children at play can be analyzed in order to ascertain Theory of Mind development more contextually. Various aspects of the social interaction of students provide evidence of an ability to ‘read minds’. For example, when people tease each other, they must have an understanding of what to tease about (Dunn, 1996). This involves a process of observation and assessment of the feelings of the other person.

Dunn (1996) also suggested that joking involves an understanding of what others consider humorous, and the act of comforting another suggests that
the person understands what will comfort. These examples suggest that observations could be beneficial in ascertaining Theory of Mind development. This contention was supported by Charman and Campbell (1997). Their study of thirty-six English children, adolescents and young adults with learning disabilities used a variety of Theory of Mind tasks to ascertain the reliability of Theory of Mind task performance for this population. They found that individuals with learning disabilities performed moderately on the tasks. They considered that results may have been affected by language comprehension and memory abilities, whereas Lillard and Curenton (1999) contended that the tasks were tested to rule out the effect of differing levels of language abilities. Charman and Campbell (1997) suggested that future Theory of Mind research should compare results obtained from the decontextualised tasks with those obtained by observation to ascertain differences in the two approaches.

The literature relating to the cognitive aspects of loneliness and learning disabilities has been discussed in terms of social perception, non-verbal learning disabilities, attribution theory and Theory of Mind. Discussion will now turn to the third and final domain of social cognitive theory: the environment. Discussion of the environmental influences in this phenomenon includes topics relating to the influence of others such as peer rejection and bullying, including the short- and long-term consequences of these experiences. However, such a conception of environment should not ignore the wider political and culture context that frames any discussion of education. A review of strategies to manage peer difficulties is presented in addition to a discussion of the issue of school belongingness and attrition and the influence of teachers.

**Environmental Aspects**

In order to provide a more comprehensive notion of loneliness and classroom participation, it is not only necessary to look at the individual, that is the child with the learning disability, but also to look at external factors that interact
with the child’s behaviours and thought processes. It is how the child operates within a given environment and how receptive that environment is to the needs of the child that leads to a deeper understanding of the nature of loneliness and classroom participation from a social cognitive perspective.

Within the model of triadic reciprocality, environment plays an equal role to behaviour and cognition in the formulation of human experience. As discussed earlier, individuals are not just a product of either their biological makeup or their environment, but a combination of both influences (Bandura, 1977). Thanks to the likes of Bronfenbrenner (1979a, 1979b, 1998), we are now aware that studies of students should be conducted within the school context as we know that a child is a product of their environment in addition to their genetic makeup. From the microsystem of the classroom, replete with opportunities for interaction with countless others, to the macrosystems of the socio-cultural and political context, such as governmental policies and normalising discourses, many factors contribute significantly to student development. Therefore a study into the experiences of school children should look to the contribution of peers, teachers and other staff and their attitudes and perceptions, and the more ethereal climate of the school and the classroom in addition to the wider educational climate. These environmental features influence the way students feel about themselves and affect their social behaviours (Spratt, Shucksmith, Philip, & Watson, 2006). One environmental consideration within the school context which is seen to impact significantly on a child’s experience is the behaviours of their peers.

**Bullying and Peer Rejection**

Bullying includes physical assaults, name calling, exclusion and gossip and differs according to the gender of the bully and victim (Demaray & Malecki, 2003; Prinstein, Boergers, & Vernberg, 2001) whereas rejection is a sociometric category which relates to a majority of negative nominations by peers (Ochoa & Olivarez Jnr, 1995), but does not necessarily indicate relational or overt aggression. Research has differentiated between
relational aggression, which is using strategies to alienate an individual from their peers, such as gossiping and isolation which is primarily associated with girls, and overt aggression, which is the physical acts of violence mainly perpetuated by boys (Demaray & Malecki, 2003; Prinstein et al., 2001). These issues are discussed in further detail and consideration is given to their contribution to feelings of loneliness and classroom participation.

As could be expected, there is a relationship between LD, peer rejection and bullying (Mishna, 2003). Surprisingly, there is a distinct lack of research involving bullying and LD (Mishna, 2003); surprising because bullying has a clear relationship to peer rejection, which has been substantially represented in the LD literature. In what becomes an ever-more complicated situation, students with LD who are rejected by their peers as the consequence of social difficulties are more likely to come to the attention of bullies because they have no significant friend to protect them (Hodges & Perry, 1999), even if it is just the illusion of protection. Aggressors have no fear of retaliation if they target those who do not have supportive allies (Hodges & Perry, 1999).

This lack of friends as a risk factor in bullying has also been examined in terms of self-concept. Children who perceive that they do not have social support are more likely to have a lower self-concept in relation to their social abilities (Demaray & Elliott, 2001) and be less socially confident (Malecki & Elliott, 1999). Perhaps most relevant for the present study is that low levels of perceived support have been identified as a key factor for students at risk of school failure (Richman, Rosenfeld, & Bowen, 1998).

In their American study of 808 students at risk of school failure, Richman, Rosenfeld and Bowen (1998) asked participants to complete the school success profile (SSP) which is used to assess perceptions of the social environment including neighbourhood, school, friends and family in addition to perceptions of health and well-being including social support. Social support was assessed from four sources including parents/guardians, teachers, friends and neighbours. School performance was measured in
terms of attendance, problem behaviours, grades, pro-social behaviours, school satisfaction and school self-efficacy, school sense of coherence and time spent studying. The middle school students reported friends to be their primary source of support whereas high school students reported their parents’ support was most important. The results showed that grades were affected by listening support, which is the perception that someone will listen without judgement or advice, and was provided solely by friends. In general terms, the researchers found perception of social support to be related to positive school outcomes.

Of note is that it is the perception of support, not necessarily the reality of support that provides the protective factor from bullying. It is interesting because students with LD are less likely to have this support, from their peers at least, in reality but also their problematic cognitions (see Cognitive Aspects in this chapter) could mean that their perception is that the support is not there at home or school when, in reality, it is. Bullied children who perceive that there is little support available to them are more likely to consider suicide (Demaray & Malecki, 2003) in addition to a number of other negative consequences which are now discussed.

Sociometric Nominations

Peer rejection is often assessed using sociometric tests to map out social structures within a group of people. Individuals are asked to nominate their most and least favourite peers and the resultant data classifies the individuals as either accepted, rejected or neglected by their peers (Ochoa & Olivarez Jnr, 1995). Studies using sociometric tests have revealed that peer rejection is significant amongst students with learning disabilities (Coleman & Minnett, 1993; Ochoa & Olivarez Jnr, 1995; Tur-Kaspa et al., 1998) and that this sociometric rating is related to feelings of loneliness (Tur-Kaspa et al., 1998). Ochoa and Olivarez (1995) conducted a meta-analysis of seventeen existing studies that used sociometric tests. They found that students with learning disabilities score substantially lower on sociometric tests than their
peers. They established that, “moderator variables of ratee gender, grade level, research design, and sociometric scale type did not have a moderating influence of the effect size for peer ratings,” (Ochoa & Olivarez Jnr, 1995, p. 9).

In a study comparing 73 children with learning disabilities to 73 of their peers, Coleman and Minnett (1993) used sociometric tests to group children according to their sociometric status, then compared social competence within the groups. The researchers tentatively suggested that children with learning disabilities, regardless of scores on the sociometric tests, have problematic social skills. Although students with learning disabilities register lower sociometric status than their peers (Ochoa & Olivarez Jnr, 1995), studies conducted by both Coleman and Minnett (1993) and Kavale and Forness (1996) suggested that these social difficulties might not be a direct result of the learning disability, but coexist with LD. This is because no convincing cause and effect relationship has yet been established.

Consequences of Bullying

The present study focuses on students with LD and this group have been found less likely to be the perpetrators of bullying and more likely to have been the victims of bullying (Whitney, Nabuzoka, & Smith, 1992). Victims of peer rejection and bullying are at risk of serious consequences for future life.

Recent research (Buhs, Ladd, & Herald, 2006) has found that significant peer rejection from an early age was related to decreasing levels of classroom engagement, resulting in decreased levels of achievement, whereas students who were chronically bullied (physical violence) were more likely to avoid school altogether. The longitudinal study conducted by Buhs and colleagues was carried out with 380 girls and boys from kindergarten to grade 5. Measures included a sociometric test, teacher’s ratings on four items from the Excluded by Peers (EP) subscale of the Child Behavior Scale (CBS), and four self-report measures to identify chronic peer abuse. Classroom
engagement was measured using six items from the Cooperative and Autonomous Participation subscales of the Teacher Rating Scale of School Adjustment (TRSSA) and results from grade 5 were regressed to grade 3 to measure changes. School avoidance was measured using five items from the TRSSA which addressed the child’s desire to avoid school or attempts to avoid school and changes over time were calculated using the regression of the results from grade 5 to grade 3. Changes in achievement were measured using reading, spelling, and maths subtests of the Wide Range Achievement Test (WRAT) and changes were measured using the same strategy as classroom engagement and school avoidance.

Alarmingly, the study found that students who were victimized in kindergarten were more likely to experience academic underachievement much later in their school career (Buhs et al., 2006). It is suggested that victimization by a peer marks the victim as rejected and is communicated to the other students. This leads to rejection by the other students in peer activities in the classroom, but also, “rejected children disengage from classroom activities as a way of avoiding further abuse,” (Buhs et al., 2006, p. 2). This is related to lower achievement. However, the researchers did not identify whether any of their participants had LDs which would provide a different relationship between social difficulties and underachievement in that social and academic difficulties are a consequence of the LD. This highlights that students with LD are doubly disadvantaged in terms of their academic success because their inherent social difficulties could lead to peer rejection which is related to classroom disengagement and lower achievement. This is in addition to their existing academic difficulties.

In addition to being linked to academic failure (Buhs et al., 2006) there is a significant correlation between peer rejection and ‘dropping out’ (Parker & Asher, 1987). There are also consequences for the physical (Demaray & Malecki, 2003; Rigby, 2000) and mental (Parker & Asher, 1987) health of the victims of bullying and peer rejection, such as suicide ideation (Demaray &
Malecki, 2003) and loneliness (Hawker & Boulton, 2000) and even future criminal activity (Parker & Asher, 1987) which can continue into adulthood (Mishna, 2003).

It is not hard to imagine how peers influence a period of social loneliness. In the confined environment of a school, where opportunities for peer interaction are limited to a finite group of people within the restricted boundaries of the school, it is likely that some students will be isolated. However, as has been discussed, there is a difference between being isolated and feeling isolated.

Students with LD have demonstrated confusion between being lonely and being alone (Pavri & Monda-Amaya, 2000) and have reported that they did not feel lonely when they were in the company of others. Weiss (1982) supported this contention when he said that people might not be consciously aware of being lonely. Other studies have had similar and contrasting findings (see Pavri & Monda-Amaya, 2000 for review of these studies). Rather than being a signifier of problematic cognition, however, the authors decided that the contradictory findings of these studies could have been due to the differences in wording in the interview protocols. The wording differed between ‘did feel lonely’ and ‘could feel lonely’ which would be interpreted differently.

The role of peers in the social satisfaction of adolescents with learning disabilities is not restricted to incidences of social rejection such as bullying or teasing, although that certainly is a key issue that has been raised in the research. In fact, Pavri and Monda-Amaya’s (2000) interviews with 11-year old students with learning disabilities, as discussed previously, found that the lonely children were more likely to refer to occasions when they were without a play-mate or when they had nothing to entertain themselves as reasons for their loneliness rather than bullying. The researchers suggested that this was because the children were unable to differentiate between cognitive and affective aspects of loneliness (the perception of their social interaction as opposed to feelings of sadness and boredom). The study revealed students
with LD were most lonely during lesson time and before and after school (Pavri & Monda-Amaya, 2000). The researchers conjectured that the academic times were a source of loneliness, not because of frustration with learning, but more likely because of boredom, possibly from working individually. This has relevance for the present study in that a subtle, but clear, connection between loneliness and classroom participation is established.

Bullying is often the result of biases and prejudices within a school culture, not because of the behaviour of the victim (Pearl & Bay, 1999). However, often the behaviours of the individual first bring them to the attention of the bully. Unfortunately it does not seem to be a situation easily remedied; because of cognitive difficulties, children with LD are disabled by a system that relies so heavily on the understanding and use of unspoken social rules and expectations. However, there are a number of remedies which have had some success in managing the peer rejection of students, mainly in the primary school setting.

Managing Peer Difficulties

In a review of the peer rejection intervention literature, Margolin (2001) found that there are a range of strategies available from an individual to a macro focus. The individual focus, by definition, focused on the individual social deficits of the child, which ignores the influence of the child’s peers and the school culture but some of the strategies had modest success in improving the social status of these students (see Margolin, 2001 for full discussion). In addition, problem-solving training was moderately effective.

The approaches that seemed to receive the most compelling results were the counselling or advocate approaches which provide the student with someone to talk to who could support and encourage appropriate behaviours. Margolin (2001) discussed peer-focused approaches such as engaging the help of a socially valuable peer in reducing bullying incidents, pair (bully and
victim) therapy, or increasing the number of non-academic group activities involving the bully and victim. Peer-focused approaches consider intervention to be appropriate for both parties, but whole-school approaches are preferable.

Adult support groups have been very successful in normalizing and validating painful feelings (Hymel, Bowker, & Woody, 1993) but research has yet to assess the utility of this approach with rejected students. Implementation of such a strategy might provide the student with a mentor or advocate to model positive social skills. Other whole-school approaches could also be helpful such as the introduction of a wider range of extra-curricular activities or inviting the student to take on responsibilities at unstructured times to give them somewhere to be and something to do (Hymel, Comfort, Schonert-Reichl, & McDougall, 1996). Such approaches could, perhaps, mediate the incidence and effects of peer rejection in adolescents with learning disabilities.

Pavri and Monda-Amaya (2000) provided an interesting point regarding the influence of peers when they found that students with disabilities often looked to their nondisabled peers as social role models to help improve their social proficiency. As children learn this social proficiency from their peers based on observations and trial and error (Galanaki & Kalantzi-Azizi, 1999), peer group belonging is an essential factor for healthy social development. However, students who are rejected by their peers, meaning merely disliked, not overtly bullied,

Are deprived of social support and protection, emotional security, the opportunity to develop basic social skills, and the shared experiences and intimate conversations whereby peer-group norms are established (Margolin, 2001, p. 143).

Therefore, peer rejection has significant repercussions for students, in terms of social learning which is related to their sense of belongingness in the school context.
Belongingness

When students first start school they quickly begin to learn the rules and procedures of the classroom, some aspects will be articulated whilst others are learned by observation. If the student internalizes these expectations and adheres to them then they are more likely to gain social approval (Juvonen, 1996), which is related to feelings of belongingness and participation in school activities (Juvonen, 1996). However, when a student is prevented from learning these social expectations the reverse could be said.

Children with LD have identified those times at which they felt most lonely. A recent study in America sought to assess the self-perceptions, coping strategies and preferred interventions of 20 children with LD aged between 9 and 11 years in inclusive classrooms (Pavri & Monda-Amaya, 2000). They were interviewed regarding their experience of school-related loneliness and their perceptions of support and intervention and the Children’s Loneliness and Social Dissatisfaction Rating Scale (CLSDRS) was administered. They found that lonely students often do not feel a sense of belonging in the school setting and experience social dissatisfaction. The children reported issues relating to exclusion and separation from friends and reported they felt most lonely when they were bored or when they were in need of a companion, but none was available. They also felt lonely when they needed help with their schoolwork but there was no peer available. The participants felt more comfortable with self-initiated strategies for coping with these feelings of loneliness, such as attempting to join a group activity or engaging in solitary play. These studies suggest that elements of both social and emotional loneliness have relevance for this population in that they felt excluded and in need of a valued friend.

As a matter of conjecture, it is possible that children with LD first experience social loneliness because of the communication difficulties discussed earlier. Perhaps this social isolation begins a cycle that prevents vicarious social
learning of essential social skills. Instead the child could revert to learning by trial and error, which can be socially costly when the socializing attempts fail.

The literature suggests that reactions to loneliness are motivated by fear of rejection and can include self-imposed isolation to avoid social rejection or over-enthusiasm, which alienates the peer and further marginalizes the individual (Jones, 1982). Considering that those feelings influence levels of emotional or cognitive energy that the student has available for their study (Ramsey, 1991) and considering students with LD already have academic difficulties, their engagement with learning is even more likely to be compromised.

It has been said that students with LD do not possess the skills necessary to participate effectively at school (Myklebust, 1995) and this leads to school failure. However, research (Hymel et al., 1996) has shown that a significant number of students feel that a negative social climate (associated with feelings of not belonging and insecurity) of the school significantly contributed to their decision to leave early, which has been overlooked in the literature. It has been claimed that students who have been previously labelled ‘dropouts’ should be more aptly conceived as ‘pushouts’ (Fine, 1991) as the school system did little to support their continued involvement. Students with LD reflected a considerable proportion of these ‘dropouts’ each year (Deshler et al., 2001; Putnam, 1995). In the past, this dropout was thought to be related to ‘individual deficits’ such as academic ability or familial concerns (Hymel et al., 1996). However, a broader range of factors need to be taken into consideration (Hymel et al., 1996), such as the contribution of teachers.

**Influence of Teachers**

It has been found that teacher perception can have a significant impact on how children with special needs are received within the school (Pavri & Monda-Amaya, 2001). Students with LD have been found to be more distractible and more regularly off-task than their peers (Bender, 1985). This
could, perhaps, be related to why teachers have higher expectations of behaviour problems with these students than their non-disabled peers (Tur-Kaspa et al., 1998).

In a study by Christenson and Anderson (2002) students reported that a poor relationship with their teacher was a factor in their decision to leave early as it contributed to their feelings of alienation. However, a study of 76 boys with LD, 31 of whom dropped out, revealed that they found their teachers to be caring, concerned and fair and no difference in relationships with teachers was found between those who dropped out and those that completed (Bear et al., 2006). The authors posited that this could be because this group of teachers were more compassionate than those in other studies.

Lonely students have also reported that teacher acceptance played a significant role in their perception of school (Dobson et al., 1987) and considered that the teacher contributed to a poor classroom environment and did not consider that they had a good relationship with the teacher (Dobson et al., 1987). In this way perception of teachers can contribute significantly to feelings of school belongingness and resultant classroom participation and academic success.

Clearly teacher influence is a significant factor in students’ academic development. However, many teachers feel ill-prepared to ‘deal’ with the diversity of abilities and skills in their classrooms, including the difficulties of teaching students with LD (Busch et al., 2001; Kataoka et al., 2004). Many teachers have reported that their pre-service preparation provided little assistance in the challenge of catering for diversity in the classroom and complained that they had, “insufficient knowledge of and support for learning disabilities,” (Kataoka et al., 2004, p. 161). This included, but was not restricted to, early career teachers who wished they had had the, “opportunity to learn more strategies and techniques for inclusion of students with
disabilities,” (Busch et al., 2001, p. 96). However, Slee (2001, p. 168) provided the following argument.

State education departments across Australia have mandated that initial teacher education programmes establish compulsory units in special education in order to prepare neophyte teachers for student diversity and inclusive education. For this observer, such a strategy is the antithesis of the inclusive education project and guarantees continuing educational disablement.

Slee’s argument for a focus on assessment of individual learning needs as opposed to presumption of learning needs of labelled children generally clearly has merit. This is not the forum for a debate on the effectiveness of pre-service teacher programmes but, regardless of good intentions, teachers are inadvertently contributing to the creation of difference between children with special needs and their peers because they have a preconceived notion about ‘what’ these children are, rather than ‘who’ they are. This distinction is conveyed to the other classmates in subtle and unsubtle ways.

The creation of difference in the classroom has been studied in terms of the degree of interaction that teachers have with children with LD compared with their peers (Chapman, Larsen, & Parker, 1988). Chapman and colleagues observed teacher-child interactions in four classrooms over a period of 13 weeks and conducted interviews with the teachers after the observations were complete. Their findings are relevant to the present study as they found that the teachers in the study were more inclined towards both more positive and negative interactions with the children with learning disabilities than they were with their peers. The interactions took the form of both teacher-initiated and student initiated. The teacher-initiated interactions took the form of praise; process feedback; product feedback; criticism; and procedural feedback, whereas the student initiated interactions referred to issues such as initiation of comments; initiation of comments that resulted in praise and criticism; and procedural contacts that resulted in criticism. They found that children with learning disabilities received more praise and more criticism; more process feedback; more product feedback; and more repeated
questioning when there was no response. Results did not reach significance in respect to their two hypotheses: ‘students with learning disabilities received fewer opportunities to respond to open questions than their peers’, and ‘(students with learning disabilities) received less than half the opportunities to read in reading groups.’ There was no difference in the level of teacher questioning.

Studies such as those discussed indicate some important issues for the present study. If teachers treat children with learning disabilities differently to their peers, expect more behaviour problems and expect less of them academically, then perhaps this attitude would be communicated to their peers. If peer interaction is already problematic due to social skill difficulty, then perhaps teacher perception could create more tension and lead to the construction of negative perceptions in the peer group. It has been suggested that such issues should be examined to discover why students with LD drop out and what exactly is so unappealing about school (Hymel et al., 1996).

**Conclusion and significance of the study**

The relationship between loneliness and classroom participation in adolescents with learning disabilities is a very complicated one. It is no longer appropriate, or sufficient, to think that loneliness and peer rejection in this group is caused by social skill deficits as has been suggested in the past. By viewing disability as socially constructed it is possible to see that peer difficulties, loneliness and difficulties participating in the classroom are the result of societal, not individual deficits (Christensen, 1996). In order to understand the complexity of the situation, an approach is needed that focuses on the behavioural, cognitive and environmental influences, such as social cognitive theory. Loneliness is the result of peer rejection (Asher et al., 1990) and bullying (Hawker & Boulton, 2000), lack of belonging in the school (Pavri & Monda-Amaya, 2000), and problematic perceptions (Pavri & Monda-Amaya, 2000) and can occur with or without friends (Perlman & Peplau,
These feelings of loneliness have been related to feelings of anger, restlessness, impatience, uneasiness and inability to concentrate (Cotterell, 1996) and memory capabilities (Ellis & Hunt, 1989) which is considered particularly relevant to adolescents in the classroom. Other potential repercussions of loneliness are debilitating sadness (Rotenberg, 1999), social anxiety (Storch et al., 2003), depression (Valas, 1999), school drop-out (Seidel & Vaughn, 1991), compromised immunity (Cole et al., 2007), earlier death (Olds & Schwartz, 2000), and hard drug use (Rokach & Orzech, 2002).

Students with LD experience significant loneliness (Margalit, 1994; Margalit & Al-Yagon, 2002) in addition to less peer acceptance (Margalit & Ben-Dov, 1995); they are more likely to be teased (Martlew & Hodson, 1991) and bullied (Morrison et al., 1994), which is linked to loneliness (Hawker & Boulton, 2000), academic failure (Buhs et al., 2006), school drop-out (Parker & Asher, 1987), anxiety, depression, low self-esteem (Parker & Asher, 1987), suicide ideation (Demaray & Malecki, 2003) and criminal activity (Parker & Asher, 1987). This means that they experience decreased classroom engagement (Buhs et al., 2006) and reduced opportunities for social learning (Asher et al., 1990) of the prerequisite skills for effective social interaction, which, again, causes social difficulties (Lewis, 1996). In addition, because of problematic cognitions, these students may have communication difficulties (Dimitrovsky et al., 1998; Myklebust, 1995), problematic attributional style (Tur-Kaspa et al., 1998), (which is related to feelings of pessimism and hopelessness) (Qualter & Munn, 2002), non-verbal learning difficulties (Dimitrovsky et al., 1998), are less assertive than their peers (Tur-Kaspa et al., 1998) and fail to perform appropriate social behaviours (Tur-Kaspa et al., 1998). Further, teachers have higher expectations of behaviour problems with these students (Tur-Kaspa et al., 1998) and emphasise their difference by initiating more positive and negative interactions with them (Chapman et al., 1988).
There has been very little Australian research conducted into loneliness and, of the research that exists, very little focused on adolescents with no research relating to loneliness and LD. Limited research exists that explores the relationship between negative emotions generally and learning issues, but not loneliness and the aspects of learning that prevent students thriving in the classroom. Further, very few studies look at the social interactions of students with LD in the classroom and few look at bullying in children with LD. Research is also needed to investigate attributions for success and failure in real life events (Jacobson et al., 1986), as opposed to hypothetical scenarios and examine Theory of Mind mastery using observations of interactions (Charman & Campbell, 1997). It is also suggested that fine-grained, qualitative research is needed on the experience of loneliness (Flanders, 1982).

Students with LD face significant social challenges which, combined with problematic cognitions and a challenging learning environment, may prevent them from thriving in the classroom. This presents a far less linear model of learning difficulty in these students. Much more research is needed to untangle the issues and provide comprehensive solutions.

This study addressed the need for research into this issue using a social cognitive perspective. Consideration was given to the contribution of behavioural, cognitive and environmental factors at work in the relationship between loneliness and classroom participation with students with LD. The study also addressed the concerns raised in the literature about the nature of investigation in to some of these issues. The following chapter provides a detailed discussion of the research methodology selected to most effectively address the research question.
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<th><strong>Author’s Note</strong></th>
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<td>So now you know why I felt that this project needed to happen. There's clearly a gap in the research; several gaps, actually. But what is most obviously missing from the research is the voices. I wanted to find out what it was like to be in school when school is a perplexing and lonely place to be. Who better to tell me than the students themselves?</td>
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CHAPTER THREE: RESEARCH METHODOLOGY & METHODS

This chapter provides a description of, and rationale for, the chosen methodology and research design. The first section concerns the aims and objectives of the research and restates the research question. The subsequent sections address the epistemological beliefs and paradigm of inquiry that informed the overall study, before discussion continues to the choice of methodology. The subsequent section focuses on elements of the research design including a rationale and discussion of the data collection, management and analysis methods which were employed. Finally, issues of trustworthiness and ethics will be examined.

Aims, Objectives and Research Question

The overall aim of this study was to describe and interpret the nature of loneliness and classroom participation in a selection of adolescents with learning disabilities using social cognitive theory. This study supports a social model of disability, as opposed to an individual deficit model, in that learning challenges in these individuals are considered a result of many interacting determinants, including the school environment which does not adequately support these individuals with academic and social difficulties.

Using social cognitive theory, the study examined the interaction of cognitive processes such as perceptions and attributions; behavioural features such as social skill and communication difficulties; and environmental factors such as peer rejection, bullying and belongingness. These topics are interacting determinants of loneliness and classroom participation. Because of the social nature of schooling and disability, the social cognitive approach was considered the most effective way to address the research question:

*What is the relationship between loneliness and classroom participation in adolescents with learning disabilities?*
Rationale

The following section provides a rationale for the study. The study was grounded in a constructionist epistemology and was located within the paradigm of naturalistic inquiry. Within this, a case study methodology with elements of ethnography and narrative inquiry was used. These elements are now discussed in more detail, beginning with the foundation on which the study rests: constructionism.

Constructionism

Using a social cognitive framework, this study sought to discover the relationship between two constructs ‘loneliness’ and ‘classroom participation’ which are necessarily socially-bound. This research focus reflects a constructionist epistemology which claims knowledge is constructed through social activities and interactions and is specific to a time and place (Young & Collin, 2004). In the constructionist paradigm, the focus is on the interactions and social practices of the participants rather than on the individual (Young & Collin, 2004); an understanding that is the keystone of a social model of disability (Danforth, 2008).

Constructionism underpins interpretive approaches to research (Glesne & Peshkin, 1992). This is because the process of interpretation is necessarily a subjective approach, that is, interpretation involves seeing something a certain way based on tacit knowledge. The resultant interpretation is only one of a plethora of interpretations available. This approach was chosen based on the phenomenon which was examined (Silverman, 2001). Loneliness is a subjective experience; both the participant and the researcher come to the setting with knowledge of what loneliness is, but it is reasonable to assume that their notions of loneliness would be very different, based on the life-experiences of the two. The data, therefore, are a negotiation between the two sets of ideas, a construction based on the tension between the two perspectives (Crotty, 2003).
The same could be said of research projects in general. The participant comes to the interview with some notion about what the research is about, what the researcher wants, what they do, and do not, want to tell the researcher about their experience. Perhaps this is on a subconscious level or perhaps it is more explicit. The researcher often comes to the interview armed with knowledge about the world in general and a wealth of observational data about the participant plus knowledge gained by other researchers studying similar phenomena in similar (or different) contexts. The participant has an agenda – to tell their story, their way, or to tell their story the way they would like the researcher to see it. The researcher has an agenda – to understand the participant’s experience and discover patterns and relationships in the data that might explain something that the participant might not know (Silverman, 2001).

The positivist would see this form of bias as a ‘problem’ (Silverman, 2001). However, the constructionist acknowledges this bias as a valuable aspect of the data as long as it is articulated, as the researcher is considered an active participant in the creation of meaning and, therefore, forms part of the data (Crotty, 2003). The participant then relates information about their loneliness and about their school experiences in their own, necessarily subjective voice and the researcher asks further questions and listens, not objectively, but using a variety of filters based on culture and knowledge. In this way the researcher and researched are both participants in the creation of meaning.

The aim is not to discover the truth about a phenomenon, but to construct an understanding that would probably differ from that constructed by different participants and researchers trying to understand the same phenomenon. In order to gain knowledge about the phenomenon, first it must be acknowledged that the ‘truth’ is not known, but must be constructed using an appropriate framework. The framework for this study is provided by the paradigm of naturalistic inquiry.
Naturalistic Inquiry

In keeping with this belief about the construction of knowledge, and based on the phenomenon under investigation, the present study was framed by the paradigm of naturalistic inquiry. Naturalistic inquiry is not a methodology, as a methodology concerns the practices and regulations of a specific approach to research. Rather, it is a paradigm of inquiry - a larger framework that supports the research (Schwandt et al., 2007). Naturalistic inquiry is considered an appropriate framework when the research is designed to investigate social or behavioural phenomena (Guba, 1981).

A key tenet of naturalistic inquiry is that research must occur in the ‘real world’ as opposed to clinical settings (Guba & Lincoln, 1982). The main reason for this supports a social cognitive perspective in that naturalistic inquiry contends that human behaviour cannot be separated from context (Silverman, 2001). As Tesch (1990, pp. 37-38) suggested, Laboratory research studies phenomena in an artificial environment. Therefore, all conclusions drawn are valid only in artificial environments...If we want to know about human beings in their natural 'habitat', we have to study them in their normal surroundings.

This approach means that the researcher does not consider that the project is a controlled experiment (Okely, 1994), but an inquiry that invites, “whatever interference the real world can provide,” (Guba, 1981, p. 79). This means that an investigation of the school experiences of students with learning disabilities must occur within the school, focusing on the activities of the school participants.

Naturalistic inquiry is characterised by a, “reluctance to impose meaning,” (Silverman, 2001, p. 38) but, instead, to observe the subject of inquiry first-hand and to let it 'speak for itself’. To this end, research in this paradigm must be emergent rather than imposed, that is, the theory must be grounded (Guba, 1981). What this means is that naturalistic researchers should approach the project without any preconceived ideas about what they expect
to find – the naturalist approach is an acknowledgement of, “not knowing what is not known,” (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, p. 235) as opposed to having expectations about what will be found. However, as previously discussed, qualitative research is a subjective experience. This means that whilst the researcher is open to what is to be found within the boundaries of ‘what is not known’, the meaning of the resultant data is necessarily a negotiated one. The naturalist allows for this by including segments of raw data in the research report to allow readers to make their own interpretations (see the topic Consistency in the later section on trustworthiness).

However, emergent designs should not be interpreted as, “a license to engage in undisciplined and haphazard ‘poking around,'” (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, p. 250). It is not possible to conduct a research project without knowing what the focus of the study will be (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). As Silverman (2001, p. 72) put it, “without some conceptual orientation, one would not recognise the ‘field’ one was studying.” He claimed that the conceptual orientation of research within this paradigm is often not articulated. Lincoln and Guba (1985) argued for the explicit articulation of those elements of the design that are possible, such as the participants and the setting, but argued that a detailed research design is impossible to articulate prior to the data collection phase. Instead, the research must remain flexible to enable the design to, “emerge, develop, (and) unfold,” (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, p. 225).

Naturalistic inquiry demands that data occur naturally rather than being researcher provoked. However, Silverman (2001) contended that this is not feasible. Naturally occurring data is collected when the researcher utilises phenomena that would occur without the researcher’s intervention, such as social interactions, whereas researcher provoked data emanates from the deliberate act of inducing behaviour, namely the interview. Usually data is a product of both naturally occurring and researcher provoked activities, as
even the process of observing interactions involves the conscious recording of events. Silverman (2001, p. 111) contended that,

Naturalism…unwittingly agrees with positivism that the best kinds of data are somehow ‘untouched by human hands’ – neutral, unbiased and representative…(however)...everything depends on the status which we accord to the data gathered.

In such an approach the researcher is explicit about which data are naturally occurring or research provoked and acknowledges that the participants might have been subconsciously influenced by the presence of the researcher or something they have seen or heard. As a result, the data is considered a negotiation between the researcher and the participant, as discussed earlier. The researcher is the primary data collection instrument and, therefore, forms part of the data (Silverman, 2001).

The notion of ‘human as instrument’ is a key element of naturalistic inquiry (Guba, 1981; Tesch, 1990). That is, the researcher becomes the scientific instrument by which data is gathered or, rather, the notion of ‘scientific’ measurement with all its connotations is dismissed in favour of a more personal, intuitive relationship with the data (Silverman, 2001). Lincoln and Guba (1985, p. 224) have described the ‘human as instrument’ as, “a sensitive homing device that sorts out salient elements and targets in on them.” Implicit in this idea is the notion of calibration, through activities such as pilot-testing interviews and observation strategies, for example, to ensure reliable data collection (Silverman, 2001). Pilot testing subverts the nature of emergent inquiry as, within emergent designs, interview questions cannot be prepared prior to commencement of the study. However, it is possible to pilot interview skills.

The aim of research within the paradigm of naturalistic inquiry is to provide ‘tentative application’ of the emergent theories, but not to generalise (Tesch, 1990). The nature of the inquiry is such that it is not possible to generalise from the data and this should not be attempted (Guba, 1981). This is due to the key understanding within naturalistic inquiry, and constructionism, that
there is no one reality that is relevant or applicable to everyone, but that there are multiple realities (Guba, 1981). The data, therefore, must be a ‘negotiated outcome’ of the interaction between the participant and the researcher (Tesch, 1990) and be context specific (Young & Collin, 2004).

Because the aim of naturalistic inquiry is not to generalise, the participants do not have to be representative of the population. Instead, designs within this paradigm use ‘purposive/theoretical sampling’, which is the deliberate selection of participants for a specific purpose, based on emerging theory.

For the purposes of the present study, participants were selected based on the theoretical issues that emerged from the initial observation stage of data collection and their compatibility within a set of specific criteria (see Appendix 1: *Learning Disability Indicator Chart*) which is informed by the literature. This process enabled the selection of participants deemed most able to provide the necessary data to address the research question.

Designs of this nature are necessarily flexible and, therefore, open to criticism. Naturalistic inquiry provides clear criteria for trustworthiness to avoid the accusations of ‘undisciplined and haphazard poking around’ discussed earlier. Trustworthiness refers to the extent to which data is credible, transferable, dependable and confirmable, in contrast with the more rationalistic notions of validity, reliability, generalizability and objectivity. Trustworthiness is discussed in more detail later in the chapter (see later section devoted to Trustworthiness) in relation to the chosen methodology: case studies.

*Case Studies*

Case study methodology has been developed by two main proponents, Robert Yin and Robert Stake. Researchers usually refer to one of these when designing case study research. There is a contention that the two represent very different approaches to case study design and implementation. The argument primarily rests on the issue of applicability, or
how the study can be applied in other contexts. Stake’s focus is on individual case studies which are designed to understand the case at hand with no thought to generalizability (Stake, 1995), whereas Yin’s (2004) approach to generalizability supports a multiple case study approach where the study holds value for others in a similar context (referred to as ‘replication logic’ - see section on Trustworthiness: Applicability). Having established there are differences in the approaches advocated by the two authors, there are a wealth of similarities and contemporary researchers use aspects of both approaches to support their designs (e.g., Luck, Jackson & Usher, 2005; McGloin, 2008). This study used those aspects of each approach that were deemed to strengthen the design in various ways. A discussion of case studies is now presented.

Yin (1989) suggested that in order to answer an exploratory ‘what’ type of research question, such as ‘what is the relationship between loneliness and classroom participation in adolescents with learning disabilities?’ a number of research strategies are available such as experiment, survey, archival analysis, history and case study. The case study, investigations a contemporary phenomenon within its real-life context; when the boundaries between phenomenon and context are not clearly evident; and in which multiple sources of evidence are used,” (Yin, 1989, p. 23).

Case study was considered a suitable approach for the present study which examined contemporary issues regarding adolescents with learning disabilities within their school context. The phenomenon – loneliness and classroom participation in adolescents with learning disabilities – was considered to be inextricable from the context. Indeed, the context is considered major part of the phenomenon (see the following section on Ethnography). As per traditional case study designs, the present study utilised multiple sources of data (Merriam, 1998; Stake, 1995; Yin, 1989) including interviews (student and teacher), observations (participant and environment), analysis of relevant documentation and archival records
(including academic and clinical records and parental questionnaires) in addition to physical artefacts (Cresswell, 1998).

In a case study design these methods are used concurrently (Merriam, 1998) each building on the previous and providing new avenues for exploration in subsequent strategies,

Emerging insights, hunches, and tentative hypotheses direct the next phase of data collection, which in turn leads to the refinement or reformulation of questions, and so on, (Merriam, 1998, p. 151).

This process has been poetically compared to an eagle soaring up towards abstraction and speculation then swooping back down to collect another morsel (Miles & Huberman, 1994) whilst others accept that this speculation, which is the basis of theory development (Merriam, 1998), can occur whilst the data is being collected (e.g., reflections noted in the margins or a field journal) and should be used to direct subsequent data collection (Stake, 1995).

Case study researchers must select cases based on their ability to provide the most relevant and useable information (Stake, 1995) and the case must be identifiable. For this reason a case study must be described and bounded in time and place (Cresswell, 1998; Merriam, 1998). In the present study a selection of cases were identified (four students with learning disabilities and their experiences of loneliness and classroom participation), which had clear boundaries of time (limitations of Doctoral project) and place (one urban high school). A case could be an event or program, an individual or a site (Cresswell, 1998) and, in the present project, the cases were individuals but the site was also the focus of attention (see Ethnography in the next section). Whilst four cases were selected this was not, primarily, to enable cross-case analysis, as the first concern must be to understand the case at hand (Stake, 1995). It was hoped that additional cases might be illuminating on the phenomenon of interest in their ability to add detail and perspective.
Cresswell (1998) holds that four cases (as in the present study) is an ideal number as any more would dilute the quality of the individual cases; the more cases, the less information can be collected for each. This quality versus quantity issue relates to the concept of generalisability; if you have a large pool of participants you are better able to generalise. However, Cresswell offers that this really is not the aim of qualitative research (see Transferability in the Trustworthiness section).

Clearly case study is an appropriate approach for describing and interpreting the experiences of individuals. However, the study also examined these individuals in their ‘natural habitat’ which was considered inextricably linked to the phenomenon in that the behaviours, language and interactions between the students, their peers and teachers and the school itself contributed to the phenomenon in a variety of ways. For this reason an ethnographical approach also informed the study.

**Ethnography**

An ethnography is designed to describe and interpret the behaviours of a group of people with a common ‘culture’ (Cresswell, 1998), for example the students with learning disabilities in this study who attend the same school. The researcher acts as “storyteller” (Wolcott, 1994, p. 109) for the narratives making the data heavily descriptive and almost literary (Cresswell, 1998). To enable the voices of the characters (or participants) to be heard clearly, such an approach is desirable.

In ethnographical approaches emphasis is on, "cultural interpretation rather than cultural explanation,” (Wolcott, 1990, p. 50) which fits with a constructionist perspective in that the result is a negotiation between what is observed and who is observing. In fact, Wolcott (1990) saw a clear link between constructionism and ethnography. An ethnographer aims to gather together observations and findings and construct them into a comprehensive set of rules for that culture at that time,
weaving the descriptive strands together to speculate how the members of some particular group organize their lives to manage everyday routines, communicate what they know and what they expect of others, and cope with forces within and beyond their control, (Wolcott, 1990, p. 51).

In this way culture is imposed or constructed by the researcher. In Wolcott’s words, “culture ...gets there because the ethnographer puts it there,” (Wolcott, 1990, p. 50).

As with case study research, ethnography utilizes prolonged participant observation where the researcher, “is immersed in the day-to-day lives of the people or through one-on-one interviews with members of the group,” (Cresswell, 1998, p. 58). Where ethnography differs is in the focus. Whilst case study research is concerned with individuals, ethnography concerns the interactions between the actors in the culture and the meanings of their behaviours (Cresswell, 1998). The present study was interested in both: the individuals provided insight into their behaviours, thoughts and feelings, whilst observation of the classroom and school and the behaviours of the other students and teachers provided information on the social world within which these individuals operate.. For this reason both methodologies were used to address the research question.

Within ethnography a researcher identifies the members of a group by observing the words and actions that indicate they share cultural similarities and also, “some tension between what they really do and what they ought to do,” (Cresswell, 1998, p. 59). As with case study research, the ethnographer locates key informants such as teachers and parents who can provide useful information on the individuals as well as the group dynamics (Cresswell, 1998).

A key belief in ethnographic research is that participation will be reciprocated by the researcher (Cresswell, 1998) which, in the present study, took the form of classroom assistance when required and the researcher’s provision of a friendly space for the participants to enjoy (Thursday Lunch Club). In
this way both the participants and the school were rewarded for their participation. In addition, the researcher was aware of reactivity, or her impact on the participants’ behavior, as a result of prolonged engagement and acknowledged this in the analysis of the memos and judgements about behaviours.

A word of warning was provided by Cresswell (1998) in terms of the use of ethnography outside of the field of anthropology. He asserts that knowledge of cultural anthropology is required to conduct ethnography, though he accepts that the tradition has been used successfully in a number of disciplines including education (e.g., Allen, 1996; Emihovich, 1999; Gmelch & Gmelch, 1999; Jodry, Robles-Piña, & Nichter, 2004) and a few studies have been conducted focusing on inclusion, primarily ethnicity (e.g., Deering, 1996; Xu, 2006) but also learning difficulty (Lee, 1999) or disability generally (Abrams & Ridley, 1994) which utilize ethnographic methods.

As a, "self appointed guardian of ethnography in education," Wolcott (1988, p. 230) warned that studies that use ethnographic influences should not claim to be ethnographic. It is acceptable to talk of, "borrowing and adapting ethnographical techniques," (Wolcott, 1988, p. 229) without completely assuming the mantle of an ethnographical researcher as long as this is articulated within the design. Also, the focus of the ethnographical element should be cultural interpretation, such as in the present study the aim was to interpret what was happening in the classroom interactions between individuals that contributed to lack of effective classroom participation.

Even though the researcher can legitimately claim that the present study had ethnographic elements which made the design much more interesting and revealing, criticisms might still be levelled. However, Wolcott (1990, pp. 45-46) suggested,

Faulting a study because of an unwarranted claim to be ethnographic may overshadow the fact that, labelling error aside, the research is
thorough, informative, and insightful...What we don't label, others will...we are better off to supply labels of our own."

Therefore, the methodology for the present study was case study, with ethnographic influences. In addition, the design possesses some elements of narrative inquiry which, as previously mentioned, is often located within ethnographic research.

**Narrative Inquiry**

The research design for this study was influenced by narrative inquiry methodology, particularly in terms of reporting of the data. Narrative inquiry is, “the study of experience as story,” (Connelly & Clandinin, 2006, p. 477). That is, individuals telling stories about themselves and their experiences as the focus of critical research. It has been said that humans, “organise our experiences into narratives and assign meaning to them through storytelling,” (Smith & Sparkes, 2008, p. 18). Stories are personal, but also social and cultural (Smith & Sparkes, 2008) in that they not only give insight into how people view themselves, but also how they create the world around them (Kenway & Fitzclarence, 1997). For this reason it was considered a highly appropriate methodology for examining the experiences of students within a classroom environment. In addition, a narrative approach should allow opportunities for the participants to demonstrate different selves in different contexts at different times (Bamberg, 2004), as this study did, to allow these stories to develop texture and substance.

Developing these stories necessitates, “intimate involvement, engagement and embodied participation with [the] stories,” (Smith & Sparkes, 2008, p. 21) and, as a result, the researcher becomes part of the story. For this reason, explicit articulation of the researcher’s own story is provided in the narratives chapter. In addition, the researcher must engage the audience with a style which makes the story, "palpable and comprehensible...compelling," (Barone, 1992, p. 146) in order to effect educational reform.
Because of the accessible nature of stories, narrative inquiry is considered a highly effective strategy to engage diverse audiences rather than the usual, "expert' readers of academic journals," (Smith & Sparkes, 2008, p. 25). Reaching these alternative audiences, particularly when the research concerns them, and providing them with provocative, inspirational insights is a worthy goal.

There are three commonplaces, or areas of focus in narrative inquiry and all of these commonplaces must be addressed concurrently for a project to be deemed narrative inquiry (Connelly & Clandinin, 2006). Commonplace one, temporality, is the assumption that events, people and places are always in transition, always changing (Connelly & Clandinin, 2006). The present study took a snapshot of life at a specific Queensland high school with the understanding that past experience dictated much of the story. The story would probably have been different had the snapshot been taken at any other time or in any other place, meaning transferability relied very much on the thick description of the context and the participants.

Commonplace two, sociality, refers to the personal and social conditions that form the context for the stories (Connelly & Clandinin, 2006). This means the, "feelings, hopes, desires, aesthetic reactions, and moral dispositions," (Connelly & Clandinin, 2006, p. 480) that the researcher and participants bring to the event and the factors that form the context. In the present study these aspects were clearly articulated as a conscious attempt to understand how the construction of meaning was formed between the researcher and the participant and the context that influenced the actions, thoughts, and feelings of all involved.

Commonplace three, place, refers to the physical environment from which the stories emerge (Connelly & Clandinin, 2006). Understanding of the place is crucial to understanding the activities and behaviours of those who dwell there. As the present study was conducted in a school, this idea of place
becomes particularly relevant. In fact, it is difficult to conceive a school project that does not take into account the myriad of consequences of the place. More so than a workplace, for example, because the students usually have less choice about being there and the resultant resignation and lack of control, amongst other things, surely impacts on their stories. All these influences fit together harmoniously with the present design as narrative inquiry can be located within a constructionist epistemology as the story is created by the individuals participating in the making of meaning. A narrative inquiry methodological approach fits in with the paradigm of naturalistic inquiry as the story is one that occurs naturally (and unnaturally) in the field and emerges over time. Case studies can be stories of the interactions of individuals as singular cases or within a culture, as with ethnography. Each of the aspects described here were used to construct a research design that emphasized the relationship between the participant and researcher and used real events in the construction of a story about a group of individuals within a shared culture, within the boundaries of time and place. Elements of this design were piloted and an overview is provided here.

Research Design

Pilot Study

The present research design used piloted methods which identified areas for improvement in the design. The data were used formatively to strengthen the present design. Therefore, a brief overview of the pilot study is provided here.

The participants were three students from the same Queensland high school. They had access to a learning support centre and all were ascertained as having a significant learning disability, as reported by the learning support officer, who had also identified the three students as socially isolated. One participant was male and two were female. The male student was in grade 8 and the females were in grade 9.
The participants’ classrooms were observed over a period of four weeks. The researcher recorded comments on the social activities and peer interactions of the participants in addition to classroom behaviours of the students and their peers. Observations were also taken of the playground interaction, focusing on social groupings and social behaviours. Further, each participant attended a single interview that included questions relating to school experiences, social status, feelings of loneliness, learning contexts, plus a series of Theory of Mind tasks were administered.

A number of important themes were gleaned from the data, both anticipated and unanticipated. Some conclusions can also be drawn from what the data did not reveal. These themes can be summarised as:

- One of the female participants appeared to be neglected by her peers, the other was rejected and the male participant appeared to be accepted
- Participants admitted to significant periods of loneliness at some point during previous two weeks
- Participants admitted to significant bullying, particularly at their primary schools
- Participants were all the victims of classroom taunts, for one female participant this was aggressive and incessant
- Playground observations were very difficult due to the absentee rate among the participants and the difficulty in locating their chosen recreation area (e.g., one participant was found under the stair-well during break)
- Participants engaged in attention seeking behaviours with their peers and were off-task in class for a significant proportion of the observation period
• Participants appeared to crave approval of their more popular peers

Whilst the design was considered successful in bringing forth these issues, there were a number of limitations in the original design, which lead to several lessons learned for future research. These can be summarised as:

• Playground observations are impractical and do not provide sufficient relevant data to make this technique worthwhile

• A series of participant interviews would be beneficial in that they would assist in the development of rapport and allow reflection on previous data

• Valuable data could be gleaned by interviewing classroom teachers

• A school facilitator, or ‘informant’, would be useful in providing valuable information on the school environment and activities, not to mention the participants and their activities

• Participants’ records should be accessed to provide background on the nature of the learning disability and related scholastic information

• A more effective method for constructing interview questions would be to use information gleaned from the previous stages of data collection as stimulants, or ‘irritants’ (Glesne & Peshkin, 1992).

Further, the method of assessing the presence of LD (asking the support teacher) was deemed unsatisfactory. As it is such a crucial aspect of the study, identification needs to be achieved in a more accurate manner. These aspects of the pilot study have been addressed to provide a more robust research design for the present study. The following section provides a description of the setting and participants for the present study in addition to an explanation of how the issue of identification was addressed.
**Setting and Characters**

**Setting**

In order to decide on a setting for the present study, the researcher engaged in a period of reflection, as suggested by Glesne and Peshkin (1992), to ascertain the most desirable location considering the aims of the study and the target participants. Two key issues for consideration when choosing a site are: whether the school supports research; and whether the researcher would be comfortable conducting a project within this setting (Glesne & Peshkin, 1992). To this end, the present study was confined to one Queensland urban high school. The school was selected for its proven commitment to research; the perceived helpfulness and efficiency of the administration and staff; the presence of a special needs services unit from which to coordinate the study; and its convenient geographical location. Prior to selecting the school, the researcher sought advice from the University's DET School Liaison Officer and visited the school and the staff to consider the compatibility of the school and the researcher.

As will be discussed (see Trustworthiness: Applicability), detailed articulation of the context of the study is necessary to enable the reader to make decisions about the applicability of the study elsewhere (Guba, 1981). To this end, a detailed account of the school is provided in the Narratives chapter. For now, suffice to say that the school is located in a semi-industrial and commercial zone on a major train line and the students originate from vastly diverse cultural and ethnic backgrounds, including a large African refugee contingent.

The school has a learning support unit which caters for students from years 8-12 who are struggling with literacy or numeracy. The learning support room was the base of operations during data collection and provided a wealth of observation data on the participants and their peer interactions. A description of the student participants is now provided.
Participating Students

In order that the study can be replicated in similar contexts using similar participants, thick descriptive data on the participants and the context has been included. ‘Participant’ refers to those students who have been identified as experiencing a learning disability and who each form a ‘case’ in the multiple case-study design. As a key tenet of naturalistic inquiry is the theoretical sampling of participants, the present study used a set of criteria to identify the most appropriate candidates for the study: four met all the criteria detailed in the Learning Disabilities Indicator Chart (see Appendix 1)

The Learning Disabilities Indicator Chart was designed as part of the participant selection process for the current study. The chart provides a set of characteristics typically associated with students with learning disabilities. These characteristics include:

- A family history of learning difficulties
- Difficulties have been long-term
- Difficulties were specific to one or more areas of the curriculum, not across the board
- Difficulties persisted despite intervention
- Difficulties were unexpected considering the student’s perceived cognitive potential

Other potential causes of learning difficulty were ruled out such as:

- The student’s first language was English
- The student possessed at least average intelligence (if tests had been administered)
- The student did not have auditory or visual discrimination problems
- The student did not have any health problems affecting concentration
- The student had received adequate teaching and resources in the past and had been in regular attendance.
The final element, as it applied to attendance, was problematic as truancy has been associated with the presence of learning disabilities in existing research (Putnam, 1995).

Four students were selected due to the recommendation that it is advisable, in order to develop a richer understanding of a phenomenon, that there should be a small sample of participants (Glesne & Peshkin, 1992) and because the criteria were particularly rigorous.

All of the participants were:

- Assessed as likely to be experiencing learning disabilities using the Learning Disabilities Indicator Chart (see Appendix 1: Learning Disabilities Indicator Chart);
- Attending a selected Queensland urban high school;
- Considered (by the researcher and the informant) likely to respond to an invitation to participate in the study.
- Participating in a modified education program for literacy and/or numeracy in the learning support room.

Students were selected as the study progressed, based on the emerging data. The method for selecting teacher participants was quite different.

**Participating Teachers**

Eighteen classroom teachers participated in the study. They were invited to participate if they taught one or more of the potential student participants (see Procedures: Recruitment later in this section for a detailed account of the recruitment of the teachers). Their involvement included allowing the researcher to conduct classroom observations, and furnishing the researcher with any relevant information or clarifying issues when they had the time or
incline. The majority of peripheral information about the students, however, was provided by the ‘informant’.

**Informant**

The special needs teacher was recruited as an ‘informant’ (Glesne & Peshkin, 1992). His interest in participating was a significant factor in the decision to conduct the study at this school site. The role of the informant was to act as a facilitator within the institution. The informant assisted the researcher by mediating between the researcher and other staff; by providing details on the participants and indicating areas or topics that might warrant investigation within the setting; and providing a source of clarification of the data. The extent to which the informant engaged with this role was dependent on negotiation between the two parties.

Having described the setting and participants the discussion now moves to a description of the data collection methods utilised for this study.

**Narrative Collection Methods**

The choice of data collection techniques was dictated by the research focus under examination. The methods needed to provide information to answer the research question and be time efficient (Glesne & Peshkin, 1992). In order to answer the present research question, ‘what is the relationship between loneliness and classroom participation in adolescents with learning disabilities?’ the study examined the interaction of the triadic factors relating to the participants’ school environment, their social behaviours and their cognitive processes in regard to loneliness and classroom participation. These data were collected using, primarily, a combination of observations and participant interviews. These techniques are the most common methods used in qualitative research (Glesne & Peshkin, 1992) and the preferred methods for naturalistic inquiry (Silverman, 2001). In addition, the present study used analysis of relevant documentation and archival records (including academic and clinical records and parental questionnaires) in
addition to physical artefacts (Cresswell, 1998). Each of these data collection methods is now discussed.

**Interviews**

Interviews were used in the present study as they were considered the most appropriate research strategy for collecting data on things that cannot be observed (Merriam, 1988). In order to gain access to the, ―inner world of our research participants: the world of thoughts, feelings, attitudes and opinions,‖ (Greig & Taylor, 1999, p. 125) it is necessary to ask them, to have the participants tell their story.

Often, in educational research, ―informants with learning difficulties have been regarded mainly as sources of data for researchers’ narratives rather than people with their own stories to tell,‖ (Booth & Booth, 1996, p. 56). It is considered that the former approach belongs to the interview method whereas the latter belongs in narrative approaches (Booth & Booth, 1996). However, such a belief is problematic: narrative designs use interview methods. It is the strong commitment to listening that identifies a narrative approach (Nind, 2008) and an understanding that the participants are not merely sources of data, but are “expert witnesses” to their own life experiences (Atkinson, 2004). The current study utilised students’ stories to construct narratives about the lives of these youths to provide insight into the nature of learning disabilities.

Narrative methods are used in interview designs to engage diverse audiences (Smith & Sparkes, 2008). For the current study, narrative methods were used to draw the reader into the story and encourage emotional investment in the ‘characters’.

An important thing to remember in interviewing is that the respondents’ words cannot be taken as facts, even if they are relating information about their own experience. As Wolcott (1994) creatively states, “There is no such thing as immaculate perception, and there is no immaculate description, either,”
The respondent might knowingly give a false response to protect their self-image, or because they are trying to give the ‘right’ answer or their responses might be a result of their own misinterpretation of a situation or action (Cresswell, 1998), or lack of perception. Perhaps it is more helpful to consider the utility of the individual’s responses rather than their truthfulness (Neimeyer & Neimeyer, 1993). In this way we are able to see the world from their perspective, whilst mediating this view with the researcher’s own view of the situation, which is a constructionist perspective.

It has been suggested that students with learning difficulties pose a ‘problem’ for qualitative researchers (Booth & Booth, 1996). Inherent in such a view is the belief that the problem lies in the individual’s inability to articulate and provide quotable data, rather than, as suggested by Booth and Booth (1996) that research methods are ineffective in capturing the available data. Interviews can, however, provide this information if the researcher is willing to adopt more responsive interview techniques (Booth & Booth, 1996). Such an approach allows marginalised individuals to have their stories heard.

Weiss (1982) has suggested that, in order to ascertain whether a person is lonely, the most appropriate strategy is to ask them. He suggested unstructured, but detailed, interviews about their lives in which the researcher uses the information provided to make a judgement about the presence of loneliness. Sometimes this would involve the participant admitting to those feelings; other times it might be inferred from what was said. This form of interpretation has been advocated in narrative inquiry (Booth & Booth, 1996). That is, during the semi-structured interviews, the present study allowed for opportunities for the participants to freely discuss any topic of interest to them including family interactions and relationships, boyfriend/girlfriend conflicts, past and present schools and teachers, and general talk about the event of the week: anything that would help understand the students’ stories.

Another effective way of understanding the behaviours of children, secondary to talking to them, is to ask those who know them best – their parents,
teachers and peers (Greig & Taylor, 1999). To this end, the design allowed for a parental questionnaire (see Appendix 7: Parent Questionnaire) to gather information about the learning difficulties experienced by their children, family history and some elements of academic history. Also included were informal teacher interviews, when the teachers had the time and inclination to participate, and information provided by other student participants about their friends. However, aside from the interviews, observations produced a great deal of information about the students and their peers.

*Observation*

Naturalistic inquiry is founded on the notion of ‘human as instrument’ where the researcher operates as the, “major form of data collection device,” (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, p. 251) in an emergent study. When engaged in participant observation, the researcher must, “rely on their senses,” (Glesne & Peshkin, 1992, p. 24) and, “be open and flexible to changing (their) point of view,” (Glesne & Peshkin, 1992, p. 42). To assist in the development of the human as instrument, the literature suggests that it is advisable to engage in a period of participant observation prior to undertaking the study to become acquainted with the site, the participants and the culture (Glesne & Peshkin, 1992). It is suggested that this groundwork can improve the quality of the study (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) and establishes to the satisfaction of the participants that the research represents a good understanding of the context (Glesne & Peshkin, 1992).

Participant observation refers to the degree of engagement with the participants. In participant observation the researcher has enough interaction with the participants to develop rapport and to reassure anxieties, but not so much as to interfere to a significant degree with the actions of the participants (Glesne & Peshkin, 1992). The present study used participant observation as a strategy to understand the activities of the participants and the place and as a strategy to select participants.
Pearl (1992) has suggested that there are very few studies focusing on the social interactions of children with learning disabilities that use classroom observation as a strategy. Of the few studies conducted in this manner, she suggests that their observational strategies may not have had the degree of sensitivity required to provide accurate data. For this reason observations in the present study included reflections on the more ethereal climate and cultural activities of the classroom, thoughts and feelings of the researcher and preliminary analysis notes.

Observation data can assist in the formulation of interview questions (Glesne & Peshkin, 1992) and in identifying the degree to which participants’ actions are consistent with the interview data (Glesne & Peshkin, 1992). They also allow the researcher to identify patterns in interactions (Glesne & Peshkin, 1992). Observations include elements of naturally occurring talk in the classroom. Talk such as this assists the researcher in understanding how participants construct their social world (Silverman, 2001), which is particularly relevant to ethnography. In addition to the interview and observation data, some insight was provided by documents and comments on physical artefacts found at the site.

*Document Collection and Physical Artefacts*

There are many written sources of information available in school that assist in developing an understanding of the school environment (Greig & Taylor, 1999) and the participants involved. The present design allowed for data from a wide variety of document sources which were also considered physical artefacts in some cases. Advertising literature relating to the school, its population and history was collected and was used in conjunction with the informant’s comments and the researchers observations to gain a rich understanding of the school context prior to classroom observations. Other sources including school policies for bullying and behaviour management; recruitment literature that illustrated aspects of the school that were promoted and those that were not; special needs programs; school newsletters; and
posters and plaques displayed for viewing were all utilised. A valuable qualitative research project is one that uses whatever information is available to provide the richest data available on the phenomenon under investigation (Bazeley, 2007). The researcher examined documents relating to the participant’s school experience, such as formalised testing results; attendance reports; special needs files relating to academic development of individual participants; academic records from previous schools; and any other documents indicated by the informant as being pertinent to the study. However, these documents were rarely present in the students’ files and what information was available was often out-dated.

Interviews, observations, documents and physical artefacts were utilised to inform the narratives of the participants, their peers and the school environment. The sequence of data collection, however, was far from linear. An overview is now provided of the sequence of data collection, including the focus of these activities.

Procedures

Sequence

The following section provides an overview of the sequence of data collection procedures from initial engagement on site through recruitment to the complicated process of observation, interview and analysis. The sequence is illustrated in figure 1.

Initial Engagement on Site

In October 2007 initial engagement on site began (see fig. 1). The researcher’s immersion in the school culture took the form of attending staff meetings, attending morning tea celebrations, helping out on playground duty, playing golf with the students, tending the students’ vegetable garden with them, chatting to various members of staff, taking the students grocery shopping, attending school play rehearsals and performance, attending the
lunch-time Christian rock concert, and talking to the students and their friends in the playground. The aim was to gain an understanding of the culture of the place and the activities of those who dwelt there. During this time the researcher conducted forty 70-minute general observations of interactions in the learning support unit, looking for potential participants in negotiation with the learning support teacher and the informant.
Initial Engagement on site

- Immersion in school culture
- General observations of learning support room
- Potential participant selection

Recruitment

- Pitching project to students
- Leaflet drop and presentation to staff
- Procuring consent

Classroom Observations

Student Interview 1

Teacher Conversations

Classroom Observations

Student Interview 2

Teacher Conversations

Classroom Observations

Student Interview 3

Teacher Conversations

Figure 1: Sequence of Narrative Collection
Recruitment

As the observations continued, the researcher came to know the students who participated in lessons the learning support room and was able to make judgements about their suitability for the study in conjunction with the learning support teacher (see fig. 1). Individual students were approached and the focus of the project was explained approximately in the following terms, ‘the project is about friends and school and I want to know what school is like for you.’ The information and consent pamphlet (see Appendix 9: Information & Consent: Student) was discussed in terms appropriate to the student and they were asked to sign if they wanted to participate. The pamphlet was sent home with the student with the instruction that they were to use the magnet on the back to stick the form to the fridge to prevent loss. As a result all the forms from consenting parents were returned.

A questionnaire was also sent home (See Appendix 7: Parent Questionnaire) for the parents to provide information about their child’s family and school background. This information was used in conjunction with the scant academic records on file to complete the Learning Disabilities Indicator Chart and identify seven adolescent students (four girls and three boys, one in year 12, one in year 11, two in year 10 and three in year 9) who were identified as experiencing significant learning difficulties in the absence of any generalised intellectual or sensory impairments.

The students’ teachers were approached via a leaflet drop of the consent pamphlet (see Appendix 10: Information & Consent: Teacher). The return rate was 4 out of 24 teachers. The researcher spoke to the teachers and asked them what was preventing the others from consenting. The general consensus was that the teachers were worried about being judged and that they were less likely to consent if they could not put a face to the name. One male teacher said, “oh, that guy from QUT?” (I’m female) which is how little attention they paid to the leaflet drop.
Permission was sought to present the topic to the staff meeting to enable the researcher to be introduced. This was in order that the teachers might see the project had the support of the administration and so they could be reassured that the children were the focus of observation, not the teachers. Following this meeting consent was received from all but one of the 24 teachers approached.

**Observation**

Within the present study, observation was used both as a data collection device and a method for the selection of participants. Direct observation is deemed necessary in answering the research question ‘what is the relationship between loneliness and classroom participation in adolescents with learning disabilities’ as the participant would not be expected to be able to articulate a relationship if questioned. To answer the question it was necessary to observe the social and academic behaviours of the participants and draw conclusions based on the findings.

Time and financial constraints dictate that it is not feasible to observe an entire setting for a research project (Glesne & Peshkin, 1992). Therefore it is advisable to formulate a strategy to select the most appropriate sites and times of observation. The most appropriate sites were the learning support room and the classrooms of the participating teachers as this is where the students spent the majority of their time and engaged in activities central to understanding the culture of the school. The playground was also considered an important site but, due to the difficulties set out in the pilot study summary, it was not considered an appropriate site for this study. The observation times were based on a timetable constructed to enable the researcher to observe a variety of lessons taught by the participating teachers, whilst achieving a balance between all the student participants. The data was collected over a period of eight months using between seven and nine 70-minute focused classroom observations per student.
The literature supports such persistent engagement with the site (Glesne & Peshkin, 1992) and agrees that the researcher should remain open to change of the duration of the period of observation (Glesne & Peshkin, 1992) to allow for sufficient data to be gathered. The researcher, as participant observer, was sometimes introduced to the class and sometimes not, depending on the wishes of the teacher. The aim was to be as unobtrusive as possible as supported by Glesne and Peshkin (1992). However, a few teachers felt the need to include the researcher in the lesson. The aim was to become familiar with the classroom climate and to observe the behaviours, conversations and gestures of the students and general comments pertinent to the study. These aspects were all recorded on the observation protocol (see Appendix 5: Observation Protocol).

Initial observations (see fig. 1) were wide in focus, including aspects which have been identified in the literature, such as:

- social status and peer-group inclusion (Coleman & Minnett, 1993);
- behaviours relating to loneliness such as social over-compensation or avoiding social contact (Jones, 1982);
- use of social skills (e.g., Haager & Vaughn, 1995);
- ability to work in groups including teacher-imposed groups (ability to adapt to novel situations (Volkmar & Klin, 1998);
- responsiveness to nonverbal language (Volkmar & Klin, 1998) and facial expressions (Dimitrovsky et al., 1998);
- use of social strategies (Oliva & La Greca, 1987);
- assertiveness in communication (Tur-Kaspa et al., 1998);
- distractibility and off-task behaviour (Bender, 1985);
Observations also included conversations and task-related speech, which revealed data on cognitive elements such as attitudes, attribution and perceptions. There is a contention that cognitive processes such as those involved in Theory of Mind development are better observed than tested (Dunn, 1996). Therefore observations focused on the researcher’s perception of the participant’s Theory of Mind abilities (see Lillard & Curenton, 1999) such as whether the participant demonstrates knowledge of:

- others’ knowledge
- others’ emotions
- others’ desires and
- others’ beliefs

The process of observation requires the strategic surveillance and recording of all aspects of the setting and the participants including speech, actions, mood and appearance (Glesne & Peshkin, 1992). The researcher used a field log (see Glesne & Peshkin, 1992) to record observations on behaviours, conversations, descriptions of the setting and the participants, but also reflections, ideas and notes on emerging themes or patterns sparked by the observations. As illustrated in figure 1, analysis began during the observations (see next section on Analysis) using this process of reflection and idea generation. The notes were expanded following a period of incubation (Glesne & Peshkin, 1992). The data was then transferred to computer files for further analysis (see next section on Data Analysis).

The researcher transcribed the observation notes herself which had two benefits. The first benefit was that the researcher became even more familiar with the data, which made analysis more efficient, and the second
was that the researcher was able to use the opportunity to annotate the data based on a holistic perspective. The same held true for the interview data.

Teacher Conversations

Due to time constraints, few teachers agreed to participate in even casual discussions about the participants or their classes. However, the few that did revealed information that would become crucial later in the data analysis and interpretation. These discussions occurred either during class when the students were preoccupied or after the lesson as and when appropriate.

Student Interviews

Students attended between two and three 30-to 40-minute semi-structured interviews over the course of a ten week period. The interviews took place on the school site, during school hours, in a private area to enable open communication. The interviews followed a timetable which allowed for classroom observations between interviews and students were taken out of the classes of participating teachers. The interviews were audio-taped and transcribed by the researcher. The researcher endeavored to ensure that the interview process was perceived by the child as a pleasant experience (Greig & Taylor, 1999). To accomplish this, the interviews were organized in a manner that took into account the students’ levels of comfort and ability in communication by the use of familiar settings (Greig & Taylor, 1999). The students’ level of comfort was assessed by asking, ‘are you ok about everything we talked about today?’ and ‘would you like to come and talk to me again?’ All the students indicated they were comfortable with the process and would come again, which they did.

The first interview was semi-structured (see Appendix 4: Interview Protocol) using questions about the child’s social network (‘who do you like and why?’). This interview was, essentially, to build rapport with the participant, to develop an understanding of the social network, and to clarify data collected in the observation stage (see fig. 1) in regard to participant behaviour. The
interviews began in quite a free-form manner, encouraging the participant to ‘tell their story’ (Greig & Taylor, 1999). The interview then moved to more structured questions relating to the participant’s social network.

Glesne and Peshkin (1992) suggested that in order to construct interview questions, observations can provide ‘irritants’ that seek satisfaction. That is, using observations the researcher can identify issues that warrant explanation or exploration. Irritants were identified during observations and annotated on the observation protocol. These were then addressed in subsequent interviews (see fig. 1). In addition, interview data that was found to contradict observation data was addressed in subsequent interviews.

The second interview (see fig. 1) was also unstructured, usually starting with a question such as, ‘what did you do over the weekend?’ or similar. The second interview addressed more classroom issues than the first but, as the students differed in the length of their answers, there were differences in the number of questions addressed in each interview. That is, some students gave longer answers or chatted for longer meaning fewer questions were attempted in the first interview and were addressed in the subsequent interviews. The questions in the second interviews were also based on the observations and, as such, ascertained participants’ perceptions and attributions for their school experiences informed by the literature and using real-life examples of behaviours (as per Glesne & Peshkin, 1992).

The third interview used questions formulated from previous interviews and observations (see fig. 1) and asked for clarification or expansion on issues raised during analysis. This interview was much less structured and allowed the students to talk freely about their recent school experiences. The interview also allowed the researcher to ensure the students were comfortable with their participation in the project.

As per the interview protocol (see Appendix 4: Interview Protocol), students were asked about their friendships, feelings of loneliness, bullying, their
relationships with teachers, favourite and least favourite subjects, what they did at the weekend, and their families. They were also asked specifically to report the benefits of having a friend in the classroom.

This form of data collection provides a valuable perspective in that it allows the children to contribute to the researcher’s understanding of the phenomenon. Although the students were not expected to be able to answer the question ‘what is the relationship between loneliness and classroom participation in adolescents with learning disabilities?’, their contribution is considered significant in that they were able to provide valuable insight into the issues. The researcher did not find, as has been suggested elsewhere (Booth & Booth, 1996), that the participants were unable to articulate their experiences. In fact, the majority of the participants were relaxed, talkative and demonstrated a willingness to discuss their experiences, but perhaps this is due to the differences in participant pools in the two studies.

Although initial analysis of the data occurred concurrently with data collection, the majority of the analysis occurred once the data had been collected, transcribed and imported into the qualitative data management tool, NVivo. This process is now discussed.

Analysis

As the overall design of the present study utilised elements of both descriptive and interpretive studies (Yin, 1989), the data analysis, logically, was descriptive/interpretive in nature. The descriptive/interpretive approach is designed to describe and interpret social behaviour (Raghurum, Madge, & Skelton, 1998) for the purpose of study. The approach recognizes and exploits the relationship between the researcher and the participant (Tolman & Brydon-Miller, 1997) by an explicit acknowledgement that the resultant data from the study will be a negotiation between how the participants perceive and report their experiences, and how the researcher engages with this material.
Tesch (1990, p. 4) stated, “No one has ‘codified’ the procedures for qualitative analysis, and it is not likely that anyone ever will.” This means that there are a variety of approaches for analysing data qualitatively that have not been classified and organised in the way that quantitative analysis has. The understanding with qualitative analysis is that the procedures are defined by the requirements of the study, being tailor made for each project.

This reluctance to restrict qualitative analysis is supported by Bryman and Burgess (1994) who suggest codifying qualitative data analysis should not be attempted, even if it were possible. This is because the research design in qualitative research has to be flexible enough to allow the researcher to explore the phenomenon under investigation using whatever methods are deemed appropriate, regardless of their status within a particular set of conventions.

It is suggested that data analysis within a qualitative research design is not a distinct process (Bryman & Burgess, 1994; Richards & Richards, 1994) that occurs after the data has been collected, as is the case with quantitative research. The analysis necessarily occurs throughout the entire study (Merriam, 1998; Stake, 1995) to the extent that, “the fieldworker cannot separate the act of gathering material from that of its continuing interpretation,” (Okely, 1994, pp. 20-21). This can be achieved by annotating the data during collection if a pertinent thought occurs at that time.

As Bogdan and Biklen (1992, p. 158) suggested, “The idea is to stimulate critical thinking about what you see and to become more than a recording machine.” However, this is only possible when the same person is responsible for both the gathering and interpretation, as was the case in this study. Conducting the data collection/analysis in this manner allowed themes to emerge throughout the duration of the study. For this reason the fieldwork journal and observation sheets were punctuated with notations about a variety of aspects of the study, including emerging themes. These themes or codes can be generated by the researcher, come from the
participant’s words (envivo codes) or be based on the informing literature (Merriam, 1998).

The typical approach to the analysis and dissemination of findings of a case study, which was utilized in the current study, follows the following structure,

The investigator narrates the study through techniques such as chronology of a major events followed up by an up-close or a detailed perspective about a few incidents. When multiple cases are chosen, a typical format is to first provide a detailed description of each case and themes within the case, called a within-case analysis, followed by a thematic analysis across the cases, called a cross-case analysis, as well as assertions or an interpretation of the meaning of the case” followed by lessons learned,” (Cresswell, 1998, p. 63).

However, for the present study the following suggestions put forward by Merriam (1998) were adopted.

Merriam (1998, p. 193) suggested that the data may be, “disparate, incompatible, even apparently contradictory,” across the cases. The reason for including multiple cases is to provide more information, or different perspectives, not to support the findings of the other cases. Guba (1981) agreed, claiming that variance should not be seen as an error, but another chance to learn. It has also been said that an atypical case might provide more insight into data found in other cases (Stake, 1995).

The suggestion has been made that a researcher should examine the data, selecting units for coding that are representative of the theme they stand for (Merriam, 1998). This process should produce an overabundance of codes which can be reduced later to form concise explanations for the patterns found.

Bryman and Burgess (1994, p. 218) expressed the contention that,

The extent to which conceptualization involves either the application of a priori categories or the derivation of emergent concepts may condition the juncture at which analysis takes place.
Considering the emergent nature of the present study, the application of categories from prior research would have been inappropriate. The themes needed to emerge from the data without the disadvantage of a set of preconceived notions of what these themes should be. In this way the assignment of codes and categories could only begin once data collection had begun.

Effective qualitative researchers understand that in order to prevent data being omitted, it is necessary to avoid using a restrictive framework (Okely, 1994). During the data-collection stage of the pilot study, the need for an open approach became evident when a valuable piece of information was omitted from the observations because its relevance could not be perceived at the time. For this reason, data for the present study was gathered using a flexible framework (see Observation in the previous section) that both guided the observation and allowed freedom to gather information that did not, at first, seem relevant. This process gives the freedom to reflect on the data as a whole and add detail that, “may not, cannot, be cerebrally written down at the time. It is recorded in memory, body and all the senses,” (Okely, 1994, p. 21).

An approach such as this allows for the use of intuition based on knowledge of the setting and its participants. The use of intuition should not be underestimated, particularly in research using narrative inquiry. As Wolcott has admitted, "Some eminent qualitative researchers work on a highly intuitive basis, and all research depends on intuition to a greater extent that anyone ever seems to acknowledge," (Wolcott, 1990, p. 60) From being a participant in the school culture for an extended period of time, the researcher was be able to, “judge the authenticity of his or her conclusions and interpretations in terms of (the) total experience,” (Okely, 1994, p. 31) but this was also verified by dialogic reliability (as discussed in Trustworthiness: Neutrality). This process was made more methodical through the use of the qualitative data analysis program NVivo.
In order to manage the data, the researcher used the qualitative data analysis package, NVivo. The program developers Richards and Richards (1994) suggest that the traditional method of coding qualitative data, what they call the 'code-and-retrieve' system, was very limiting for analyzing the data. Using this traditional method for a large qualitative research project the authors discovered, "the data had become 'stuff', physical stuff that must be put somewhere, not ideas to be explored," (Richards & Richards, 1994, p. 150). In common with many other qualitative researchers this lead to haphazard coding practices that prevented the full potential of the data being reached as it de-contextualised the data as chunks.

In contrast, the computerized organization and analysis of data allows the researcher to code the data electronically using a number of features, retrieve the data in chunks or as whole documents, and also to ascertain relationships between categories, which might have been missed using the former system. This was considered highly relevant in maintaining the integrity of the narratives.

Silverman (2001) claimed that the use of computer programs in analyzing research data makes the analysis more reliable as the researcher is able to ascertain whether, “the patterns reported actually existed throughout the data rather than in favorable examples,” (p. 228). Clearly, then, the use of computerized aids in research analysis not only makes the task more manageable, but also improves the quality of the end product.

NVivo has two databases that run concurrently. One is for the data documents and includes online and offline documents and notes within the documents, the other is the node system that includes emerging concepts and ideas. The two databases are used in conjunction to code the data and interrogate the emerging theories within the original context of the data. Richards and Richards (1994, p. 153) claimed that,
It should encourage the creation of new categories for thinking about the data, rethinking and reordering of old ones, the recording of emerging ideas and exploration of their relationships and their links with the data.

The program allows qualitative researchers to develop an unlimited index system that is far less onerous to use than a card file system. This makes analysis a far less time-consuming exercise, which provides more time and effort to contemplate the emerging relationships and theories. Another benefit is that the index system does not have to be in place before analysis begins, but can emerge as the data reveals relevant issues and themes. In naturalistic inquiry this is essential, as the categories must emerge from the data. The hierarchical structure that develops can also be changed at any point if ideas emerge that challenge the original structure.

Social cognitive theory was used throughout the data collection and analysis to organise and assist in the interpretation and reporting of the data. This was achieved by the conscious examination of factors relating to the three realms: behaviour, environment and cognition. To this end, emergent data was categorised into a variety of tree nodes relating to the parent nodes bullying, social skills, loneliness, social cognition, classroom participation and problematic social relationships which related to environment, personal/cognitive and behavioural factors (see Appendix 12: Tree Codes). These codes came from the data (often envivo codes) and were organised into tree nodes as patterns emerged.

However, a data segment could relate to a number of themes and different domains within SCT, therefore, this data segment was repeatedly coded to expunge as much meaning from the segment as possible.

It is considered that the use of NVivo in the present study significantly assisted in the assurance of trustworthiness of the data and findings. This issue is addressed in the following section on establishing rigor.
Trustworthiness (Establishing Rigor)

Researchers within the rationalistic paradigm of inquiry refer to ‘validity’, ‘generalizability’, ‘reliability’, and ‘objectivity’ when assessing the ‘rigor’ of a research design. In naturalistic inquiry it is a question of ‘trustworthiness’ that is addressed, by contemplating issues of ‘credibility’, ‘transferability’, ‘dependability’, and ‘confirmability’ (Guba, 1981). Although there are certainly similarities between the two sets of criteria, as per Table 1, there are subtle, but significant, differences based on the paradigm of inquiry to which the criteria belong. The similarities are that these terms all refer to aspects of ‘truth value’, ‘applicability’, ‘consistency’, and ‘neutrality’ (Guba, 1981).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Aspect</th>
<th>Scientific Term</th>
<th>Naturalistic Term</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Truth Value</td>
<td>Internal Validity</td>
<td>Credibility</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Applicability</td>
<td>External Validity</td>
<td>Transferability</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Consistency</td>
<td>Generalizability</td>
<td>Confirmability</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Neutrality</td>
<td>Reliability</td>
<td>Dependability</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Objectivity</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 1: Scientific and Naturalistic Terms Appropriate to the Four Aspects of Trustworthiness. Source: Guba, 1981, p. 80.

Arguments have been made for the use of terminology which is common to both qualitative and quantitative paradigms of inquiry, rather than using separate terms as per table 1. The suggestion was made that using separate terms encourages researchers to view the two realms differently with the consequence that qualitative research is seen as less ‘scientific’ than the rationalistic mode of inquiry (Morse, Barrett, Mayan, Olson, & Spiers, 2002). However, rationalists and naturalists differ in many ways. This is not the forum for a detailed account of these differences. Suffice to say that both are concerned with ensuring their designs are robust and rigorous and that they stand up to scrutiny, but this is achieved in very different ways within the two paradigms (Guba & Lincoln, 1982; Morse et al., 2002). These key differences mean that issues of trustworthiness may relate to the same aspects, but are fundamentally different. For this reason the present study...
adopted the criteria provided for qualitative inquiry but acknowledged that not all of the criteria were appropriate. Having said this, the criteria were conceived as guidelines for qualitative research rather than naturalistic dogma (Guba & Lincoln, 1982).

**Truth Value**

This criterion refers to the extent to which methods are consistent with the research question (Kvale, 1992) or the extent to which results represent the phenomenon under study (Silverman, 2001). That is, does the design do what it is supposed to do? Rationalists refer to truth value as ‘internal validity’ and are concerned with ensuring the findings are not contaminated by erroneous factors (Guba, 1981). Because they are unable to measure the ‘truth’ of a given situation, they test out all other alternatives until they arrive at a highly probably explanation (Guba, 1981). Naturalists, on the other hand, refer to truth value as credibility and are concerned with ensuring that findings are plausible.

Naturalists believe that a phenomenon cannot be explored by an examination of its parts, as the rationalists do. Therefore, to ensure their findings are credible, they adopt methods that, “preserve the holistic situation,” (Guba, 1981, p. 84), such as prolonged engagement on a site, persistent observations, peer debriefing, triangulation, establishing referential adequacy, member checks, and establishing structural corroboration (Guba, 1981). In this study prolonged and persistent engagement and peer debriefing were used to establish credibility. Each of these is now discussed (for a discussion of peer debriefing see Neutrality: Peer Debriefing within this section on Trustworthiness.)

Prolonged engagement is literally an extended period of time on site which allows the researcher to observe the participants and the site at different periods over the course of time. Attending site regularly also allows the participants begin to settle down to their normal routines (Glesne, 2006) in
that they become more accustomed to the researcher’s presence. Prolonged observation justifies to the reader and the participants that the researcher knows the site well enough to make claims about it (Glesne & Peshkin, 1992).

Lincoln and Guba (1985) stated, “if prolonged engagement provides scope, persistent observation provides depth,” (p.304). With persistent observation, the researcher consciously focuses on those elements most helpful to the study with the aim of not only gathering the most suitable data, but also to compare the same aspects at different times and in different circumstances. In emergent designs, however, it is not possible to decide which elements are most useful in the initial periods of observation (Wolcott, 1994). It is suggested, instead, that a ‘wide angle’ focus is required initially, moving in and out to focus on different aspects as necessary (Wolcott, 1994). This process was adopted for the present project in that early observations were extremely wide in focus, commenting on activities, speech, attitudes and the more ethereal classroom climate. Decisions were made later about the relevance and utility of each comment.

An aspect of trustworthiness that has been exposed to criticism is the use of member checks to provide evidence of credibility. Member checking involves going back to the participants and asking them to confirm the credibility of the data and interpretations (Guba, 1981). It has been said that the participants might not understand what they are confirming, or might not be capable of the degree of reflection necessary (Silverman, 2001). Abrams (1984, cited in Silverman, 2001, p. 236) warned that, “overt respondent validation is only possible if the results of the analysis are compatible with the self-image of the respondents.” It has also been argued that the participants might not necessarily be the right people to judge whether the interpretations of the data are accurate (Morse et al., 2002) and that to do so would hinder, not ensure, credibility of the research. Considering the participants for the present study were adolescents, not only were there ethical implications
regarding such a process, it was considered that member checks, as Guba and Lincoln conceived the process, would have held no value within the present design. However, it was considered that returning to the participants (students and key informants in addition to participating teachers) to report basic, unidentifiable findings and asking the participants to comment on, illustrate or expand on concepts, provided another source of data worthy of inclusion in the corpus. As Cresswell (1998) claimed,

[Participants] may have access to specific knowledge of the context of events, motives, and times, although this knowledge may be false, misinterpreted, misdescribed, or influenced by their social position or their perceptions of the research process (p.211).

Regardless of its truth value, this type of contribution has value and is worthy of inclusion nonetheless.

**Applicability**

Applicability refers to the extent to which the study provides findings that are able to be used in other contexts (Guba, 1981; Silverman, 2001). That is, is the reader able to use the findings, in a real sense, elsewhere? Rationalists refer to applicability as ‘external validity’ or ‘generalizability’ and are concerned with the reproduction value of the study (Guba, 1981). Naturalists refer to applicability as transferability. The difference is significant. Naturalists are not concerned with reproducing the study in any other context, but with determining whether the study has value for others in a similar context. Yin (1989) calls this ‘replication logic’. Criticisms have been made about the nature of qualitative research generally,

I do not think qualitative researchers should be satisfied with producing explanations which are idiosyncratic or particular to the limited empirical parameters of their study…Qualitative research should (therefore) produce explanations which are generalizable in some way, or which have a wider resonance, (Silverman, 2001, p. 249).
Qualitative studies do have wider resonance, but only as far as they are able to match up to another context. Silverman (2001) would suggest that the findings of the present study should provide explanations for the behaviour of adolescents with learning disabilities. However, this does not take into account that these students are individuals with vastly different experiences and backgrounds. What has been achieved here is the provision of some insight into the phenomenon of loneliness and classroom participation amongst adolescents with learning disabilities, which can be used by practitioners and guide further research.

To establish generalizability, in the positivist sense, Silverman (2001) advocates the use of purposive or theoretical sampling, which is the deliberate selection of participants for a specific purpose, based on emerging theory. Incidentally, these are also the methods used by naturalists to establish transferability. The naturalist uses theoretical/purposive sampling, collects thick descriptive data and provides thick descriptions of the setting and the participants (Guba, 1981). In terms of transferability, explicitly articulated theoretical/purposive sampling and description of the research site assists the reader in identifying the ‘best fit’ between the context under investigation and the prospective context for future research.

The present study used theoretical (see Appendix 1: Learning Disabilities Indicator Chart) and purposive (see Setting and Participant: Student Participants in earlier section) sampling to ensure that the students were of various ages, gender, ability levels and, most importantly, that they experienced learning disabilities. Stake (1995) suggested that the primary condition in participant selection is the degree to which the case will help us learn. The participants were not meant to be representative of the larger school population, but were invited to participate because they had the necessary attributes to provide data. It has been said, “sampling in qualitative research is neither statistical nor purely personal; it is, or should be, theoretically grounded,” (Silverman, 2001, p. 251).
The collection and reporting of thick descriptive data about the setting and the participants (see Setting and Participants in earlier section) assists the reader in assessing the similarities between this context and another to determine a ‘best fit’ (Guba, 1981). This is based on the assumption that “phenomena are intimately tied to the times and the contexts in which they are found,” (Guba, 1981, p. 80). The present study utilised thick descriptions about the setting and the participants, acknowledging that the findings were typical of these individuals, at this place, at this time. However, other might locate similarities which would help gain insight into other contexts and other individuals.

Consistency

Consistency refers to the extent to which methods will produce consistently stable results (Guba, 1981). Within the rationalistic paradigm the term reliability refers to the ability of the instrument to produce consistently accurate results. In the naturalistic paradigm consistency is referred to as dependability, which means that any variance in the results is allowable as long as it is trackable variance. This change in meaning is important as naturalism is not merely concerned with similarities, but also with differences. Therefore variance is an important part of the data, not an error. This variance can be due to instrumental error, that is, the researcher might suffer from fatigue, but variance can also be a result of the researcher new insights or growing competence as an instrument (Guba, 1981).

Dependability is established when the researcher uses overlapping methods, stepwise replication or establishes an audit trail and arranges dependability audits. Overlap methods are used in unison to offset the inadequacies of each method. As discussed earlier, this approach is not appropriate (see earlier section on Truth Value within this section on Trustworthiness). Although different methods are used, they are used to provide more data, not to supplement weaker data collection methods (Silverman, 2001). Stepwise replication is conducted when there is a team of researchers who examine
the data separately and come to the same conclusions. The study did provide for dialogic replication checks (see next section *Neutrality*) to ensure consensus was reached on analysis and interpretation but it has been said that, in reality, the most practical way of ensuring dependability is to provide a clear audit trail (Zach, 2006). An audit trail was formed in this study by explicit acknowledgement of sources, conscientious record keeping, including accurate dates, making clear distinctions between data and reflection and by recording reflections and analytical choices in annotations and memos throughout the data. However, Morse, and colleagues (Morse et al., 2002) contended,

Audit trails may be kept as proof of the decisions made throughout the project, but they do little to identify the quality of those decisions, the rationale behind those decisions, or the responsiveness and sensitivity of the investigator to data…they can neither be used to guide the research process nor to ensure an excellent product, but only to document the course of development of the completed analysis.” (pp. 6-7).

For the present study an audit trail was established using dates or markers on all documentation from pre-engagement on site, to initial engagement, to first round of observation and comments to second stage observation and interviews.

Silverman (2001) stated consistency in qualitative research can be assured if the researcher uses tried and tested methods. When undertaking observations this means the researcher uses a fieldwork journal (see *Observation* within earlier *Procedures* section). When interviewing participants, reliability is generally ensured by piloting interview questions and procedures. However, as discussed, piloting interview questions was not suitable for the present study. Further reliability is ensured by using ‘low-inference descriptors,’ which means using unbiased, objective language that allow the reader to ascertain meaning within a segment of speech and including lengthy examples of speech when reporting the results to enable the reader to ascertain the as much of the meaning as possible. This must
include details of how the researcher provoked this response. However, this approach has also been met with criticism.

Wolcott (1994) suggests that including raw data does not make it ‘fact’. Raw data is merely what one person has said, done, saw, heard or thought. It is the analysis and interpretation that give it meaning which is a constructionist perspective. Selections of raw data can still be used, not because they hold an objective truth, but to illustrate a point. Therefore, for the present study the students’ words were used verbatim to illustrate the point at hand, but these words were interpreted and reported in ways deemed appropriate by the researcher. For this reason as much context and provocation as possible was included to allow for different interpretations and the entire document was appended to allow for greater scrutiny.

**Neutrality**

Neutrality refers to the level of objectivity of the researcher (Guba, 1981). Rationalists attempt to remove any subjectivity from a research project, keeping themselves at a distance by the use of instruments. Within the naturalistic paradigm, the researcher *is* the instrument. Therefore subjectivity is not only unavoidable, it is desirable (Guba, 1981). This relates to the nature of knowledge discussed earlier. The belief that there are multiple realities, and that truth is a construction of reality by participants engaged in the activity under examination, implies a necessarily subjective perspective.

Researchers within this paradigm refer to confirmability and aim to “shift the burden of neutrality from the investigator to the data,” (Guba, 1981, pp. 81-82). This means that the data must be able to speak for itself to allow others to make judgements about it. This concept, too, has met with criticism.

Contemporary researchers contend that trustworthiness should be embedded in each facet of the research process to act as, “act as a self-correcting mechanism,” instead of being relegated to the post hoc judgement of the reader or an audit team (Morse et al., 2002). There is concern that
when judgement is made at the end of the project it is too late to correct anything which could jeopardise the trustworthiness of the study (Morse et al., 2002). Instead, strategies should be used to shape decisions made throughout the process to ensure trustworthiness,

While strategies of trustworthiness may be useful in attempting to evaluate rigor, they do not in themselves ensure rigor. While standards are useful for evaluating relevance and utility, they do not in themselves ensure that the research will be relevant and useful (Morse et al., 2002, p. 9).

Ensuring research is relevant and useful should be the aim of researchers from conception to dissemination. This can be achieved with Investigator responsiveness, in which (as previously discussed in data analysis) the researcher remains vigilant to subtle emerging aspects of the study and,

Moves back and forth between design and implementation to ensure congruence among question formulation, literature, recruitment, data collection strategies, and analysis (Morse et al., 2002, p. 10).

Such an approach sustains neutrality and is one favoured in quality naturalistic inquiry designs when the researcher is the primary instrument of data collection.

It is the researcher's skill in using the strategies that ensures trustworthiness in a project which is not addressed using the post hoc strategies proposed by Guba and Lincoln (Morse et al., 2002). The other aspects of verification suggested by Morse and colleagues (Morse et al., 2002) are methodological coherence which means that all aspects of the design must be congruent; the sample must be appropriate or purposively selected to address the research question and provide the most useful data; collecting and analysing data concurrently which was discussed in investigator responsiveness; and thinking theoretically and theory development by careful, robust and comprehensive theory building. A consideration of these aspects should ensure,
The rigor of qualitative inquiry [will be] beyond question, beyond challenge, and provide pragmatic scientific evidence that must be integrated into our developing knowledge base. (Morse et al., 2002, p. 13).

These approaches have been utilised in the current study as a consequence of the methodologies employed.

Often peer debriefing involves a process of checking interpretations of the data with a peer to ensure finding are representative of the data. This often involves processes such as blind coding in which the data is coded by another individual who then compares their coding to that conducted by the researcher. The aim is for a high degree of similarity. In the present study another type of peer debriefing, dialogic reliability, was used. Dialogic reliability involves discussing and critiquing the coding decisions made by the researcher (Åkerlind, 2005). The aim is to reach a consensus (Brownlee, Berthelsen, Dunbar, Boulton-Lewis, & McGahey, 2008), rather than reaching the same conclusions independently. This form of peer debriefing was used in this study to ensure that the researcher did not make any unsubstantiated claims.

The process of dialogic reliability checks in this study followed the following structure. Initially, discussion of coding choices was conducted with a colleague who had little knowledge of the literature. This resulted in a less biased, commonsense interpretation of the data based on the words on the page with an individual with no prior knowledge of the participants. Outcomes from the discussion were annotated on the raw data using NVivo. Later, the researcher utilised the knowledge and experience of her supervisors in discussions about the coding choices and interpretations and deliberation of code descriptions. Subsequently, the coded data was discussed to ensure all data segments addressed the issues described in the codes. These meetings supplemented regular supervisory meetings to discuss progress and other matters, such as the ethical issues involved in a study of this kind.
Ethical Issues

There are a number of ethical issues relating to the field of human research. The issues of adherence to an ethical code, support of an ethics committee, risks, benefits and confidentiality are now discussed. Further discussion is provided on the special issues relating to conducting research with children and with people with disabilities in addition to conducting research with marginalised youth.

The principal concern when conducting research with humans is adherence to a strict ethical code when conducting all aspects of research. Glesne and Peshkin (1992, p. 109) warned that, “ethics is not something that you forget once you satisfy the demands of human subjects review boards.” Ethical considerations are relevant to the entire process of design, implementation, analysis and the treatment of the resultant body of work. Researchers should primarily strive to empower the participants (Glesne & Peshkin, 1992) by a dedication to conduct themselves according to a personal ethical code (Glesne & Peshkin, 1992).

It is suggested that the researcher should not merely ‘self-regulate’ in such matters but also defer to an independent and, therefore, objective set of ethical guidelines (Greig & Taylor, 1999). In order to ensure the study was ethically sound, consideration was given to the underlying principals of the entire project before expedited ethical review was sought through QUT’s Human Research Ethics Committee prior to the implementation of the study. The application contained the principal’s consent and information and consent packages written in language appropriate to the participants, their parents, and participating teachers. Following approval, individuals were invited to participate in the study and parental consent was sought once the risks, benefits and issues of confidentiality had been emphasised.
Risks

The risks entailed in a study of this nature relate primarily to psychological distress. Asking students to reflect on their feelings of loneliness and their attributions for this loneliness, for example, may cause the student a certain amount of emotional discomfort. To minimise this emotional discomfort, the researcher framed the questions in the least threatening manner possible. Due to the interview room allocation it was not possible for the learning support teacher to have visual contact with the student throughout the interview as anticipated but he was available by telephone and the students were aware where he and the guidance officer were during the interviews in case they needed support. This was to enable the participant to feel secure but free to express their feelings.

The students were made aware of the nature of the study and was assured that they had the right to terminate their participation at any phase of the study without comment. The risks were assessed with an objective third party (the informant) and it was agreed that they were minimal and easily managed.

The guidance officer was available to support the students during data collection and the researcher advised two of the participants to seek help from the guidance officer during the interviews. The learning support teacher gave assurance he would be vigilant in identifying any negative reactions after the study was completed and would provide counselling for students if necessary. It was considered that the risks of participation were outweighed by the benefits, which are now discussed.

Benefits

The participants benefited from the study directly in that they were given a voice and a forum to discuss issues relating to their school experiences in a safe environment away from peers and classroom teachers. It was hoped that a positive consequence of the study was that the participants would
benefit from the process of reflecting on their beliefs and behaviour in a confidential forum.

Confidentiality

Issues of confidentiality were outlined in the information and consent pamphlet and were discussed with the students. Neither the school nor the students would be referred to directly in the thesis or any related publications. Finally, the data was handled and stored with sensitivity and care so as not to compromise the privacy of the participants during data collection and in the future, including the publication of related materials. This has special significance when the participants are children.

Conducting research with children

A valuable method for accessing information relating to children is simply to ask them. It is empowering for children to tell their stories to enable them to retain ownership of the information and feel they have something valuable to say about their lives (Greig & Taylor, 1999). As participants in their own lives, they are capable of participating effectively in research about them (Farrell, 2005). Children should be acknowledged as willing and able participants in research and designs should, where possible, include semi-structured interviews to allow the child to expand on their answers (Alderson, 2005) instead of giving de-contextualised responses that could be misinterpreted by an adult. However, there are a number of inherent dangers with this process of asking children about their lives that need to be addressed with sensitivity.

Research in schools is often negative in perspective because researchers seek to make school better by concentrating on what is wrong, not what is right. However, it has been said that research involving children should also include the positive aspects of their lives (Alderson, 2005), so the child feels they have given a balanced view of their experience and is not encouraged to dwell merely on the negative aspects.
Research that involves children has its own set of ethical considerations and, “undertaking research work with children should embrace and adhere to the strictest of ethical codes,” (Greig & Taylor, 1999, p. 145). In regard to informed consent, it was necessary not only to seek consent from the principal, teachers and parents, but also the children consented to participate with a comprehensive understanding of what was required of them, what would have happened if they chose not to participate and what was done with the resultant data. This understanding was established and documented prior to data collection. This is based on the Declaration of Helsinki, which states that children have a right to make decisions regarding matters that affect them (Greig & Taylor, 1999).

The risks involved in research with children could, potentially, be quite significant in terms of psychological distress and changes to the child’s self-image. To counter this, children must be made aware of the risks and made aware of the strategies to deal with these risks should they occur.

The child-researcher relationship is very different to the professional-researcher relationship. There is a mutual understanding in the former relationship that there is an unequal power balance (Greig & Taylor, 1999). This must be acknowledged and care must be taken not to abuse this power. As the participants were children it was necessary to meticulously plan for ethical challenges prior to invitation to participate (Greig & Taylor, 1999). The same might also be said of children with special needs. A brief discussion of the issue of taking a ‘special needs’ approach follows.

**Conducting research with students with learning disabilities**

The argument could be made that the researcher should have used specific strategies from the literature to communicate with children with learning disabilities to ensure the most effective communication. Such an approach would require identifying the child’s needs and developing strategies to address this need. However, researchers in the field of special education
have suggested that such an approach is unsuitable (Ainscow, 1998). This was applied to teaching students with learning disabilities, but could also apply to research with these students.

Educators are encouraged to use, “strategies that personalise learning rather than individualise,” (Ainscow, 1998, p. 6) which means avoiding strategies that isolate or marginalise the students. This is done by developing ‘idiosyncratic’ strategies based on knowledge about the students. The same could be said of undertaking research with students with LD. Although the student interviews focused on a specific set of issues (as detailed in Procedures: student interviews), the interviews were conducted differently depending on the level of communications achieved and a series of other, more intuitive concerns such as the participant’s mood at the time of the interview, the evaluation of interview strategies during the interview, and so on. It is considered that this emphasis rendered a ‘special needs’ approach unnecessary. The interviews were, therefore, participant-focused rather than disability-focused which is appropriate in constructionist approaches to research with people with disabilities.

**Research with marginalised youth**

Having established that a ‘special needs’ approach is rendered redundant by a sensitive, participant-focused approach, careful consideration needs to be given to the discourses surrounding communicating with marginalised adolescents, such as those with disabilities. The aim is to enhance communication between the researcher and researched and to conduct the research in an inclusive manner (Nind, 2008).

Students with learning disabilities can provide valuable information to, potentially, help shape their life experiences (Nind, 2008). Instead of being considered sources of data, they should be considered “expert witnesses” to their lives (Atkinson, 2004, p. 694). For this reason methods need to be
employed to allow the participant the opportunity to fully engage with the research process.

In research projects such as this, the participant does not have the opportunity to dictate the form or substance of the research project and cannot control what happens to the subsequent data (Nind, 2008). They do not have the power of redress if they are misrepresented. For this reason it is essential that researchers identify whose voice is represented in the research findings. In the present study, although the words belong to the participant, the researcher constructed the narratives from beginning to end with very little input from the students. For that reason the voice the reader ‘hears’ is that of the researcher but the stories provide insight into the school experiences of the students and, therefore, are very powerful agents for change.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Author’s Note</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>At this point I felt like an early anthropologist: I knew where</td>
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<tr>
<td>I was going, but not what I would find and that sense of the</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>unknown was both liberating and intimidating. The study</td>
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<tr>
<td>was, at once, naturalism (in that I was going to see what I</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>could find) and ethnography (in that I was going ‘native’,</td>
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<tr>
<td>living with the subjects of my interest and learning their</td>
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<tr>
<td>customs and beliefs). Underlying the journey is the</td>
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<tr>
<td>constructionist belief that we are all participants in the</td>
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<td>making of meaning and there is no one inherent truth that</td>
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<tr>
<td>I’m trying to find. I chose to gather information about four</td>
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<tr>
<td>individuals and use this information to paint an illuminating</td>
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<tr>
<td>picture about the place, its inhabitants and practices. The</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>tools I used were provided by naturalism, ethnography and</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>case study methodologies.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Now come with me and I’ll introduce everybody...</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
## Author’s Note

Humour me here with a change of style. Assuming the storyteller role I will now introduce you to the characters and events that helped me address my research question. Let me borrow from Barone (1992, p. 144) for justification of such an approach,

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Let me tell his story. Through my efforts...the world will hear the beating of his heart. And only later, as my honest efforts turned critical, would I implicate the world in the production of his heartache.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Not to say the following is fiction. Frankly, fiction would have been much easier to write. Fiction would allow me to develop the characters and write a beginning, middle and end to the story but, instead, I had to relate simply what I saw, heart or was told within the boundaries of time and place as is appropriate for a case study.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
What the reader will find is a meticulously faithful reporting
of the interview and observation data and field notes, woven
into a story. All character and place names have been changed
and the images used are not of the participants. All dialogue
is quoted verbatim (allowing for changes in punctuation or
omissions that do not detract from the sense of the quote but
greatly improve the clarity). Each event is transferred directly
from the observation data, paraphrasing where appropriate.
Any interpretations, thoughts or reflections from the field
notes or analysis are stated as such and are the result of the
tension between the perspectives of the participants and my-
self. Each extract from the data (quoted or paraphrased) is
annotated with an endnote number which guides the reader
to the precise line in the data document from whence the ex-
tact was drawn.

The language and style used throughout this chapter is not academically conventional, but it is used
for a purpose: to engage the reader and to encourage affinity with the characters (Barone, 1992;
Smith & Sparkes, 2008).
Ms Bennett, the principal of Southside State High School, has the unenviable task of striking harmony amongst her students who hail from vastly different backgrounds. After a brief reception at an intensive English language preparation centre, refugee students are dropped in her school and join the large refugee population from the Sudan and Egypt, primarily, but also from Bosnia and Afghanistan. These students join the already volatile mix of Chinese, Japanese and Taiwanese students as they rub shoulders with students from Maori and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures and the minority Caucasian students.¹

A proactive leader, Ms Bennett has introduced a number of initiatives to make Southside a more harmonious and productive place of education. During an impromptu classroom inspection she gave me her pitch on why she introduced compulsory philosophy lessons for the younger grades.

‘This is a very exciting program. I introduced it this year to encourage deeper thinking and co-operative discussions in class. Hopefully it will also foster tolerance and respect too,’ she said. She is clearly very proud of the scheme."²

Situated within five kilometres of the CBD in a largely industrial and commercial zone, the school rests in spacious, leafy grounds embraced on three sides by a meandering river. The location provides two crucial aspects of school life: the community is a commercial, not residential, one; and the river provides the school with a valuable learning resource, that is, marine education."³
Ms Bennett developed a vision statement that stressed ‘Creativity, Partnerships and Environment as the key to ‘Creating Tomorrow Together’.14

‘Creativity’ speaks to her desire to institute cutting edge programs, such as philosophy and a ‘Get Set for Work’ scheme which diverts the ESL students into an on-site vocation-based unit. ‘Partnerships’ and ‘Environment’ refer to Ms Bennett’s thrifty use of what is to hand - local industry and the natural environment. She doesn’t merely pay lip-service to environmental causes, though, as she has instituted a school-wide marine program to develop an appreciation of the value of the natural environment.5 Her focus on developing partnerships led to a musical performance supported not just by the music, dance and drama departments, but also featuring props and sets designed by art students and manufactured by the construction students. It was a magical performance, not particularly because of the talented students (though there were many), but more because of the impressive collaboration between the departments as a testament to Ms Bennett’s vision.6

The Learning Support Room

An interesting aspect of Ms Bennett’s vision is the learning support unit (which isn’t a learning support unit) and the learning support teacher who doesn’t think of himself as such.7 A relaxed and airy room overlooking the sprawling, verdant grounds, the room has no official name, but everyone knows what it is. It is where you go for support with English or maths8...or unofficial careers guidance9...or where you’re sent if you’re too disruptive10...or to do a make-up test11...or, touchingly, where you go if you haven’t any lunch12. The learning support teacher (that isn’t), Tom Grade, has a background in special needs schooling13 and, with a penchant for golf,14 is a very interesting character study. Overworked, under-resourced and frequently grumpy he still has the time and energy to run ‘Tom’s Cafe’ with his trusty side-kick, Barbera the T.A. (Teacher's Aide). Comprising a
table and two chairs placed outside his classroom, hungry students know they can go there and Tom will have something for them to eat.

In addition to his unofficial pastoral role, Tom withdraws students in year eight for maths and English and usually they stay with him until they leave school,\textsuperscript{15} which is more continuity than the average student receives and helps build very caring and respectful relationships between Tom and his troubled charges.\textsuperscript{16} Occasionally he shuts up shop and marches the bunch across the oval to play golf\textsuperscript{17} or tend the veggie patch\textsuperscript{18} or sets the boys to work mowing and edging the grounds.\textsuperscript{19} He teaches students with a mind-boggling array of special needs including autism, intellectual impairment, general learning difficulties, speech and language impairment, attention deficit with hyperactivity disorder, languages other than English, and severe behaviour disorders,\textsuperscript{20} from all different year levels, all at the same time and without (for the most part) a TA. Last year he had a junior teacher and an almost full-time TA, this year - no junior teacher (even though junior and senior students inhabit the same room at the same time) and very little TA support.\textsuperscript{21} Funding!

My Story

It is from this diverse mix of cultures, special needs and ages that I select the characters for this tome. But, before I introduce you to the participants perhaps I should tell you a little about myself. A ‘difficult’ child who shrugged off any form of authority, I wasn’t a pleasure to teach. My teacher once told me, ‘You’re a waste of space and you’ll never amount to anything,’ which reinforced what I was already feeling. I failed maths and received average grades for everything except English in which I usually did quite well. No-one ever mentioned university to me. I left school, joined Thatcher’s Youth Training Scheme and, for a 37½ hour week, I received £35 and a light preparation for life as an office worker.
When I moved to Australia I found a job doing the books for an architect who didn’t believe me when I told him he was broke. He was bankrupt before the year was out. I thought, ‘if I had qualifications he would have believed me.’ The office was across the road from a high school and I used to watch the kids coming and going thinking, ‘I wish I could start again.’ My cousin told me he was going back to school, aged nineteen, and I realised I could do the same. So, at twenty-four I went to see the principal, bought the uniform and went back to high school. Just like that. I had to sit cross-legged on the floor for assemblies, write my own notes and I even got ‘busted’ going to McDonalds in my uniform. Despite having two tutors for maths I failed again. My tutor told me that I have a significant mathematical learning difficulty so my dreams of being an accountant were dashed (thank goodness!) Even though I came top in English and received an A for the QCS\textsuperscript{6} test I was awarded a mediocre OP score so I went into teaching, which was about my fifth preference, because QUT\textsuperscript{7} accepted me. This is a very common story in teaching, I’m told.

Every tutorial for the first year I couldn’t bring myself to speak up. I was so scared that opening my mouth would show me up as a fraud, that someone would tap me on the shoulder and say, ‘Ok, you know you don’t belong here.’ Surprisingly, I did very well and pursued an interest in learning disabilities, largely due to my own mathematical learning difficulties, but also because my nephew and niece were experiencing similar problems at school. The problem with undergraduate study is that you never get to sink your teeth into anything, it’s always just enough to whet your appetite then it’s time to move on to the next unit. I wanted to have a proper look at something substantial so, in my final year, I conducted an independent study that forms the basis of this doctoral study. I still can’t believe I’ve made it this far. Perhaps I’m not such a waste of space after all.

\textsuperscript{6} Queensland Core Skills test
\textsuperscript{7} Queensland University of Technology
So here I am, a mother, teacher, and researcher with an unusual experience of school, a shared frustration with learning and an earnest desire to see the innate value of students who struggle at school. I want to tell their stories and hope that by understanding the experience better we can minimise their social barriers to learning.

The Narrative Process

To uncover the complicated relationship between loneliness and classroom participation, I set out to find my students, armed with a list of characteristics. I was looking for capable students with a significant difficulty in one area of the curriculum and the concomitant social difficulties.

Initially, the guidance officer (let’s say ‘Barry’ although there were actually three guidance officers during the eight month data collection period) suggested Brittany and Danni would be ideal candidates because of the problematic relationship they share, their overt sexual acting out, and difficulties with their peers. He also suggested: Brittany’s brother, Lenny; Clark, a very troubled youth with ADHD who was in support for his behaviour, not a learning difficulty; and Joe, a very timid, committed Christian who rarely spoke in class. I added Danni’s brother, Richard, and Derek, Jamie, and Katie. I later added Jane who started at Southside part way through the project but piqued my interest so I invited her to participate even though I’d already completed the initial support room observations without her. Tom had said that Richard wasn’t appropriate because he was very popular with his group of friends. I persevered and found that Richard had many social difficulties, but his truancy and suspected drug use made interviewing the child virtually impossible. Jamie consented, but his parents wouldn’t give their consent; Joe wouldn’t participate because it conflicted with his religious beliefs; Clark consented, as did his parents, but he wasn’t suitable as he didn’t comply with item 2:4 on the Indicator Chart, and was continually on suspension anyway, before abruptly leaving school. Derek declined.
This left Danni, Brittany, Lenny, Nathan, Katie and Jane. These students were all involved in the interview process, but I had to eliminate Katie because she didn’t convincingly meet the criteria for item 1:5 on the Indicator Chart and because of a gut feeling that she just didn’t fit in with the rest of the group - she was shy, but not socially unskilled, and her interviews, on review, seemed a lot more lucid than the others. I went through the whole interview and observation process with Danni, feeling that she met the criteria, but on reflection, couldn’t in good conscience include her because she had missed a significant amount of school due to truancy. Therefore I couldn’t rule out that her difficulties stemmed from the missed schooling rather than the learning disability.

Going from the front of the classroom to sitting at the back with a clipboard felt a little awkward at first. I tried to become invisible, but that didn’t work; I was dragged into the mix, helping out in support and chatting to the students. At every opportunity I ran to my bag to scribble down notes about conversations I’d had or things I’d overheard or seen. Remember, this is not supposed to be a controlled experiment. I’m supposed to be studying real people in real contexts and embracing, “whatever interference the real world can provide,” (Guba, 1981, p.79). Within reason I trusted my intuition in my role as ‘human as instrument’. I don’t think for a minute that me sitting at the back of the class would have made the students act any more naturally than if I was sitting next to them struggling to help them with their maths problems.

I invited Nathan, Lenny, Brittany, Danni, Helen, and Katie to attend the weekly informal group meetings that I called the Thursday Lunch Club. The purpose was to get them to talk amongst each other about the issues they were facing. I put up some posters, bought a couple of jigsaw puzzles and a jar of jelly beans and waited for the participants to arrive. The first couple of
Thursdays I sat alone so I started doing the jigsaw puzzle myself, when I suddenly realised that not only was it far too difficult for the students I had in mind, but the message across the bottom said, ‘Trying is the first step towards failure!’ which I thought perhaps wasn’t all that appropriate. Then I started to notice each time I came back to the puzzle a little bit more had been done in my absence. So I asked Tom and he told me that a few of the learning support boys had been hanging around there when I wasn’t there. So I started staying in on the other days and talking to them as we completed the puzzle. Lenny was the first of my participants to show any interest in coming. Brittany and Danni came occasionally, but never Helen or Nathan. Then other students would come along and sit with us, on the periphery at first then settling in to help. Then the supply teachers and student teachers started to join us. Pretty soon the table was getting so crowded that the three most ardent members, which included Lenny, started to literally run to the room every break of every day. They’d come thundering down the hall, crash through the door and sit down in silence concentrating for the entire break on doing this almost impossible mosaic puzzle. It was Lenny who came to me proudly one day to tell me he’d finished it so I took a picture and promised to bring more puzzles so they could keep the club going when I’d gone. It had morphed into something completely different to what I planned but it was so much a richer experience for that. I got to know the participants and their companions; I got to hear all the gossip; and I found it easier to interview the participants as a result.25

I really threw myself into school life, taking care not to ‘turn native’ and be unable to see the wood for the trees. I attended staff meetings, morning tea celebrations, helped out on playground duty, played golf with the students, tended the students’ vegetable garden with them and chatted to anyone who would stop and talk to me. I took the students grocery shopping, attended school play rehearsals and a performance, went to the lunch-time Christian rock concert and talked to the students and their friends in the playground. I set up camp in the small office Tom and Barbera shared with a
few other teachers and managed to observe a wide range of subjects taught by the majority of the teachers.  

I found it really hard to leave the site at the end. I’d collected more data than I could handle, but I thought it better that I gradually cut down my site visits rather than just leave abruptly so I went and helped out in the support room for a while before I finally left. I felt a real gratitude to the students and teachers who made me so welcome so, to say thank you and goodbye, I made up some ‘Tom’s Cafe’ stickers and put them on a set of drawers I bought which I filled with a selection of lunch items for Tom’s Cafe. I also bought some seeds for the vegetable garden and a few jigsaw puzzles for the Thursday Lunch Club kids in the hope that they would keep it going.

So who are these youngsters that inspired so much affection in me? Let’s meet them.
Nathan
Age: 16
friends with
Lenny
Age: 17
Brittany
Age: 15
siblings
Aleen
Age: 14
new girl
Case Studies

Nathan’s Story

First impressions of Nathan would make you think he needed a good wash and a hug. And you’d be right. He walks awkwardly with his head down and rarely meets your eye except when he knows you well and is excited about what he’s talking about or engaged in the conversation. He is very untidy. His one greying school shirt is worn everyday even if he gets it dirty (or someone draws rude pictures on it). He has quite bad acne which is usually bleeding from the habitual picking. He mumbles and whines quite a bit when he talks and, overall, you get the impression that this is a very timid boy. A day-dreamer, he’s quiet and looks like he’s perpetually confused.

Raised by his single mother until the age of seven, Nathan was sent to live with his father after his mother had to be institutionalised for severe depression. His dad has a new fiancé but Nathan never talks of her. He admits his dad isn’t very patient and gets angry at him. His mother had another child, a daughter, who is now five and Nathan enjoyed a relationship with her until his mother ‘got sick’ again and lost custody of the girl to her father. Nathan hasn't seen her since and, although he doesn't mention her often you can tell that he is upset not to be part of her life. His mother disappears regularly, changing her address and phone number and not telling anyone (including Nathan) where she is or how to contact her. She seems to think he will suffer from depression and he admits to feelings of despair.

‘Like certain times I said things to my mum like stupid things I was going to do,’ he admitted, implying he felt suicidal. He says this is largely due to his social difficulties.

Bullying

Nathan told me he’s been the target of bullies since he started in primary school.

‘Name calling, pushing around, that sort of thing,’ he said with characteristic underplay of the issue.
This bullying continued when he started at Southside.

‘When I was in year eight there were a lot of people that was bullying me and that, and continues through year nine and some of year ten.’

Now, in year eleven, he continues to be bullied in a variety of cruel and violent ways but he doesn't seem to know why. The boys in his year have made a game of bullying Nathan. It's the new tradition that if you see Nathan coming you slap him in the crotch. So he walks around the school site being slapped in the testicles by late-teenage boys who are often much bigger and stronger than him.

‘I actually did watch a show about it,’ said Nathan. ‘It's a true story that someone got whacked there so much that he wouldn't be able to produce anymore. That was a true case.’

‘Oh, yeah. Sure,’ I replied, ‘you've got to stop them doing that. How are you going to stop them doing that?’

‘You can't! They just do it out of the blue. They just come up beside you and they'll just go whack! There's no way of stopping it cos they just do it too quick.’

There's a lot of this ‘violence for laughs’ behaviour, probably a legacy of Jackass and Sanchez type shows, like when they are all standing around outside work ed. and Kaida slaps Nathan in the face and laughs, all the other boys start to laugh too. Then, in the classroom, out of the blue Martin yells, ‘Slap him!’ to one of the girls to which Nathan replies, ‘She's already slapped me three times.’

They also kick him and his friend Malachi in the behind for fun. We'll deal with his relationship with Malachi later, but Malachi has joined in the now popular pastime of drawing penises on Nathan’s shirt, knowing it won't be washed for the rest of the week.

‘Ricky decided to do it. He thought it was funny,’ said Nathan. ‘Well, he did it but then the other ones did it.’

He admits he has tried to make new friends, to fit in.
‘Sometimes if a new person comes along I can, like, start to be friendly with them but then other people will be like, “Oh, don’t hang around with him.” That’s what makes me angry. Like, I try be friendly. We’ll be good friends at the start and whatnot and then they’ll go, “Oh, don’t hang around him,” and all that,’ he said, glumly.

And the new kids are frighteningly quick to pick up on his ranking in the social order. Here he tells us about a new girl stealing his drink. She’d obviously picked up on some element that told her Nathan was the sort of kid you could do that to.

‘We were just like sitting around and, like, cos I had a drink so she just took it.’

‘Did she ask?’

‘No! She just took it! Just started drinking it!’

‘She took your drink?’

‘Yeah!’

‘Why would she do that?’ Here Nathan paused, unable to provide an answer so I asked him, ‘What did you say?’

‘I just said, “Give it back,” and she…then she, yeah, she just ripped it and just started drinking it.’

Then in construction one day Nathan was trying to join in, helping to lift the materials, incorrectly as it happens, but it wasn’t the end of the world.

‘Nathan! Get off!’ shouts a boy impatiently. So Nathan goes off to sit by himself and doesn’t try to join in again. The boys are all paired up to carry the materials correctly and no-one pairs up with Nathan so he just glumly walks alongside and no-one speaks to him. They are building a new concrete path at the front of the school and they’ve already constructed a wooden frame for the concrete to be poured into, but there is a gap so the teacher asks Nathan go and get a piece of wood and cut it to fit. The other boys are just lazing about waiting for instruction.
Nathan is struggling to hold and saw the wood so the teacher tells another boy to go and help. Of course, the boy cuts the wood himself, but then gives it to Nathan to fit into place. As he tries to force the ill-fitting wood into the gap another boy, who was just standing around doing nothing, shouts, ‘Hurry up Nathan.’ When it becomes obvious the piece isn’t going to fit the boys groan and chastise him. He just leans the wood against the structure and slouches off to find something else to do. He uses his initiative by grabbing a spade and starts to clear some of the debris from the path. Yet another boy who is sitting on the wall watching events but not joining in, suddenly shouts, ‘You’re doing it wrong!’ And another boy again chases him off yelling, ‘Move!’

I wonder where this attitude is coming from so I pay close attention to the teacher’s interactions with Nathan in woodwork lessons.

‘Nathan did a good job,’ says the teacher. The other boys laugh and look around in disbelief. ‘Little’ Brendan takes the toolbox out of Nathan’s hands, turning it over.

‘Twenty-two?’ he says, shaking his head in disgust at the mark. ‘There’s a huge hole here and here. Burn here. Doesn’t fit. No stain. Really rough. Oh, I don’t give a shit,’ and with that he angrily pushes the piece back at Nathan who smiles awkwardly.

I think that this teacher is well-meaning but causing more problems for Nathan by overcompensating for his difficulties by being overly generous in his grading of Nathan’s work, thereby giving the other students a clear message that Nathan is a ‘charity case’ and needs to be treated differently.

One day Nathan told me about his iPod being stolen by one of the other boys.

‘So I put it in my bag and it came to lunch and everything was there except my iPod. The reason why I thought it was Chad is because I saw my bag...’

‘Did he have hold of your bag?’ I asked.

‘Hmm.’
'What did he say about it?'

'He said he didn't even touch my bag and he hasn't got my iPod,' Nathan replied.

'But you saw him with your bag?'

'Yeah.'

But he's had problems with Chad before, 'Yeah, just during classes he'll just do these stupid things like he'll just come up and like shoulder-blade me and stuff.'

'Like bang into you on purpose?'

'Yeah.'

They also kick footballs at Nathan for target practice then demand that he returns their ball, which he does. He's been knocked unconscious twice within a year.

'Well, I did have a couple of bumps last year,' he said. 'They said there was no sign of concussion but with all the faintings and all that. Tiredness. That's a lot of things to lead to a concussion.' The second time was by his friend Malachi.

Problematic Friendships

As Nathan's friend Malachi arrives he frowns, surveying the room, searching for someone to sit with, overlooking Nathan. You'd be forgiven for thinking that they didn't know each other but they are friends. Of a sort. He drags a chair aside and yells for Kaida to come and sit with him but is ignored. He looks around to a sea of glares and storms off to sit with Nathan. This boy is universally disliked with a passion.

Soon Nathan and Malachi are acting out, being very loud and silly, making rude noises, shouting out random words and generally annoying everyone else in the room. The teacher tells them to be quiet but is ignored.

'Shit the fuck up!' yells a female student, silencing them temporarily.
They are looking at photos of sports cars on the internet. Suddenly Malachi shuts down his page and yells, ‘Miss! Nathan’s on the wrong site!’ Nathan looks shocked as the teacher comes over to reprimand him. He obviously didn’t expect his friend to tell on him, particularly because they were both doing it. Briefly back on task Nathan is distracted by Malachi changing the settings on his computer. He follows suit. Malachi shouts to an African boy who tells him to, ‘Shut the fuck up!’ Nathan joins in, shouting out and making noises, looking over to Malachi for approval. The others are getting irritated and glare over at him.

‘Miss, can you take him to the day-care centre?’ Nathan says about Malachi. It’s a fundamental error, perhaps to curry favour with the others or perhaps a misguided attempt at playful taunting. But you don’t provoke a lion, no matter how playful your intentions.

‘Yeah, get rid of him,’ shouts another boy.

‘Fuck off Nathan, you Sped!’ retorts Malachi viciously, but he doesn’t shout at the boy who says to get rid of him.

Malachi suddenly becomes intensely interested in Nathan’s work as the others start talking about him saying, ‘Malachi pisses everyone off.’

‘Yeah, he’s a freak and an idiot.’

Malachi retorts, ‘I don’t have to take that fucking shit.’

Nathan leans over Malachi to look at his work and Malachi yells, ‘Get off my – do you think I’m fucking gay or something?’ Malachi’s feelings of anger are not really directed at Nathan but he’s just in the wrong place at the wrong time and makes a safer target.

Their relationship is littered with misplaced violence towards Nathan as he illustrates in this other example.

‘Well, anyway, he was kicking Malachi and everyone thought it was funny and I just laughed and...’

‘What do you mean he was kicking him?’ I asked.
‘Oh, just like kicking him in the butt and that sort of stuff.’ There’s that underplay again.

‘Hurting him?’

‘Not really hurting him,’ he said, ‘just kicking him and everyone thought it was funny cos it was Malachi.’

‘Did Malachi think it was funny?’

‘No, he was getting pretty agro,’ he admitted.

‘So people thought it was funny because...?’

‘That’s just him. Everyone just laughs at him.’

‘Ok,’ I mused, ‘why do they do that?’

‘I don’t know, but then I just started laughing and then he just tackled me and hit my head on the side of the brick wall and I got a concussion and had to be sent to hospital and they thought I had broke my neck cos I had my head tilted and so he got...apparently what I heard he got suspended for three weeks.’ An interesting result of this attack is that one of the other students, ‘Little’ Brendan Marsden, beat up Malachi on Nathan’s behalf and was suspended in-house for a few days. I saw him whilst he was on suspension and asked him why he did it. He said, ‘Well, what would you have done?’ It’s interesting because when I asked Nathan about the previous attack by a younger student, no-one retaliated that time.

‘Who was the person that bashed your head last year?’ I asked, curious about this concept of retaliation from ‘Little’ Brendan, a student who had shown no interest in protecting Nathan for the last four years and had, in fact, treated him with disdain during their construction lessons.

‘Jack in year ten.’

‘And did anyone bash him for what he did to you then?’

‘No.’
‘So why do you think they bashed Malachi for what he did to you?’

‘Because it’s Malachi,’ he shrugged. That’s actually quite perceptive. He can see there’s a difference between Malachi and Jack, namely popularity, and that this popularity has consequences: Jack has friends to protect him and Malachi doesn’t. I’m pretty sure that this is not happening on a conscious level. I doubt that ‘Little’ Brendan, for example, would be worried about the repercussions of beating up a boy two years younger, but Malachi has reached such a monumental level of unpopularity that it’s open season. I doubt Nathan would be able to articulate this concept, but he definitely shows some awareness of it.

Malachi can be quite helpful when he wants. He pairs up with Nathan in construction and holds Nathan’s toolbox whilst he drills it, but now Malachi has left I wonder how Nathan will cope so I ask him.

‘Who do you sit with in each of your lessons?’

‘I used to sit with Malachi, but…’

‘So in Marine…?’

‘Malachi. We were in the same classes for everything.’

‘And you sat with him for everything?’

‘Hmm.’

‘And who do you sit with now?’

‘No-one really.’ So although he was a bully and a thug, he still gave Nathan the opportunity to participate which he no longer has. Even though Malachi drew some unwelcome attention for his classroom antics, it can be equally problematic having no-one in the classroom because you are suddenly more vulnerable. This is demonstrated when Nathan was punched in the arm for behaving strangely in construction or work ed. when he was slapped for the others’ amusement. Both times he was in the classroom without a friend.
I remember watching Nathan in class on his first day back at school after Malachi put Nathan in hospital. Malachi had been suspended leaving Nathan alone and vulnerable in the classroom. He looked scared and anxious even though Kaida, who had slapped him in the face outside the classroom, asked him to sit next to him, if I’m to be generous I’d say out of remorse for slapping him. Donovan was telling another boy, with some delight, about Malachi beating Nathan up. When he’d finished telling the story, Donovan and his friends started to laugh sickeningly loud and hard. What is it that makes them despise this timid boy to such a degree? Trying to get Nathan’s attention Donovan shouted his name over twenty times, but Nathan had his head down, looking at his fingers, trying to be invisible. So here he was, friendless and insecure and now he was supposed to engage with the lesson? I wondered whether he was wishing Malachi was there because maybe Malachi being there deflected that negative attention away from him and gave him some level of protection. Mind you, Nathan probably needed more protection from Malachi.

Another time Nathan and Malachi were arguing and Malachi erupted, shoving Nathan so hard he fell to the floor.

‘He pushed you to the floor?’ I asked.

‘On the concrete.’

‘Oh, now why did he do that?’ I asked, exasperated at both Malachi’s violence and Nathan’s acceptance of it.

‘I don’t know what he said to me, but I told him to, “f-off” and he just came at me and that.’

‘Oh, right,’ I responded, with a slight smile as it was totally out of character for Nathan, ‘why did you say that to him?’

‘Because I was getting really annoyed. I didn’t like what he was doing at the time,’ he said. ‘There was another occurrence…just a couple of days ago at …just out there actually, out near the tuckshop.’

‘What happened?’ I asked.
‘Well, there’s this new girl,’ he said, ‘and she took my drink. And Malachi made a smart remark like oh, you know, “Ha, ha, she took your drink,” and cos I thought he liked her I just said, “At least I didn’t get rejected,” and he just pushed me and hurt my shoulder.’

‘What did you say to him?’

‘I said, “At least I didn’t get rejected,”’ he replied.

‘Oh.’

‘And then he just pushed me into the ground. He actually just tackled me, more or less.’

‘Yeah.’

‘Held me down then, yeah, I hurt my shoulder,’ he complained. So he does make some effort to be assertive, but only with Malachi. Unfortunately these efforts result in violence because Nathan doesn’t seem to understand the consequences of his actions.

In construction one day the teacher was going to put the pair together, but then changed his mind, ‘Oh, I don’t want you working with Nathan – you bully him,’ to which Malachi replied, ‘Only if he pisses me off.’ When Nathan talked to me about the incident, he didn’t know what it was that made Malachi angry at him.

Nathan has another friend, Lenny, who seems to be equally problematic for different reasons. But I’m getting ahead of myself. To explain the dynamic between Lenny and Nathan I need to go back a little, to before Nathan started high school.

When Lenny started at Southside he had already been bullied all through primary school and looked set to be rejected throughout high school. Another rejected child, Liam, started at the same time and the two became friends. Liam caught the same train as Nathan who was still in primary school so the following year when Nathan started at Southside he was introduced to Lenny by Liam. The three soon became notorious. Liam taught the boys a way to get the attention of the other students, particularly the girls, but in a manner that would have disastrous social consequences. On playground duty one day Barbera, the TA, told me the
three boys, lead by Liam, used to follow girls around the playground making smutty remarks about what they’d like to do to them, lifting up their skirts and things of that nature. The male students responded with violence which continues even now. But it wasn’t just the sexual harassment. Liam convinced the boys to break into and vandalise the school hall. They were playing with the lighting equipment in the control room at first then Lenny and Liam started taking turns kicking the mirror ball and trashing the place. As a result the school disco had to be cancelled making the boys even more unpopular with the student body. They used to throw chairs off the balcony and generally cause havoc. In the face of bitter rejection by the rest of the student body the trio started to crack.

‘Cos I was friends with [Liam] and Lenny at the same time and there was all this jealousy and tension and all that. And um, Liam used to come to our house a lot before school cos we lived, like very close to each other, like he was the next station to me.’

‘Oh yeah.’

‘So he came to…he used to come to my house a lot and he’d just do everything – he’d eat my place out and do whatever.’

‘Eat your place out?’

‘Yeah, he’d just eat all my food and whatnot and cos I told Lenny about it he said, “Oh, I’m going to tell him off about this,” and there was nearly, like, a big fight during lunch time and Lenny goes, “Stop going over my friend’s place and eating at his house,” and all this kind of stuff. Yeah, it was a pretty big fight.’

Then there was the time Liam threatened to bash Nathan, ‘I got off the train, walked up the steps, I was just about to cross the road and he came across, grabbed my arm, and cos there was a pole there, so he put my pole…he put my hand on the pole and he just said, “Next time...” I don’t know what the reason was, but he said, “Next time you do this I’m going to break your arm.”’

The tensions reached a point where the three could no longer spend time together.
‘I had to figure out when I was going to spend my morning teas and lunch times with Lenny or morning teas and lunch times with Liam. So I had to...it was like a daily plan for me,’ complained Nathan.

‘So you couldn’t hang out with both?’ I asked.

‘If I hanged around with Lenny, Liam would get jealous. If I hanged around with Liam, Lenny would get jealous.’

Eventually Liam turned on them both and abruptly left the school. This left Lenny and Nathan with no leader in enemy territory. They both have lingering feelings of animosity towards Liam for leaving them in this mess.

Since Liam left the boys claim that things have changed. And they have, but things have improved slightly more for Lenny than Nathan. In my opinion this is because Lenny looks quite physically intimidating these days whereas Nathan is still smaller and weaker than the other boys. Lenny appears to have caught on to this. He realises he is a target by association with Nathan and has started to distance himself from Nathan when it is convenient, but still uses his friendship in the absence of a better offer.

‘And how’s things going with Lenny?’ I asked.

‘Good, but he doesn’t really seem to be paying much attention to me. He’s always hanging around under [the music] block. Like he doesn’t really...he doesn’t wanna really hang around me any more. Not saying we’re not friends any more,’ he said quickly, lest I get the wrong idea, ‘he just doesn’t want to hang around me any more,’ he admitted with a hint of melancholy.

Lenny won’t sit with him at lunch, preferring to play hand-ball with the year eights and year twelves. Nathan sometimes goes to watch his friend play with the other boys but doesn’t feel welcome there because, ‘I don’t really know the year twelves as well as him.’

But when Nathan has a date, suddenly Lenny wants to be friends again.

‘So you’re just going out with one girl and no-body else and Lenny wants to come too?’ I asked, confused about why Lenny would want to go on Nathan’s date.
‘Apparently.’

‘Is that what you want?’

‘Probably not.’

‘So what are you going to do?’

‘Just tell him that he can’t come.’

‘Do you feel comfortable doing that?’ I asked, already knowing the answer.

‘I did that with another girl that I used to like and he said if he could come with and I said, “No,” and he just got really moody and all that.’

It seems that Lenny has no trouble muscling in on Nathan’s girls.

‘There was another time where I organised a basket ball game with this girl and I don’t know how Lenny figured out where we were but I said, “Look, you can come but I don’t know where you’re going to find us,” and he said, “I’ll find you,” and yeah, we were just playing basket ball and he just came and I thought, ‘cos, like, I had...Lenny has done things to, you know, like, to try and,’ he paused again, ‘like if I bring him he’ll start like clinging on to her.’

‘Oh, ok,’ I replied. ‘So what do you think he’s trying to do?’

‘Not sure. But I don’t have a good feeling, like, if I bring him he might do something, you know?’

‘What might he do?’ I asked, intrigued.

He pauses for a long time, ‘just like...like you know...like cling with her sort of thing.’

These problems with his friends and the severe rejection at school make Nathan a very lonely boy; something he doesn’t attempt to deny.

Loneliness and Social Dissatisfaction

‘Have you ever felt lonely at school?’ I asked Nathan. He nodded. ‘When?’
'Most of year eight and year nine.'

'Yeah,' I muttered, sadly nodding. I found his vulnerability difficult to bear at times. ‘Just when you were being bullied and stuff?’ He responded with a nod. ‘And how did it feel to be in school when you were feeling like that?’ I asked, clumsily bringing it back to the research question.

‘Pretty sad. Like certain times I said things to my mum like stupid things I was going to do.’ It’s bound to play on his mind. One day I asked him what it’s like to be in the classroom when he’s lonely, which I suspect is quite a lot of the time.

‘Like I couldn’t concentrate in school. It was like my mind was full of all these things and that.’

Nathan finds himself alone quite a lot at school. He even catches two buses to school and back every day on his own. My observations are littered with comments such as, ‘Nathan walks to class alone,’ ‘Nathan walks in and sits at the back, alone,’ and, ‘Doesn’t say a word to anyone all lesson.

‘Who do you sit with in each of your lessons?’ I asked him, following Malachi’s suspension.

‘I used to sit with Malachi, but...’

‘So in Marine...?’

‘Malachi. We were in the same classes for everything.’

‘And you sat with him for everything?’

‘Hmm.’

‘And who do you sit with now?’

‘No-one really.’

You have to remember that to be alone is also to be vulnerable, to leave himself open to attack by any number of students, such as Kaida slapping him in the
face or Martin goading the girl to slap him. So he'd rather be with someone, or hide himself away, rather than be seen alone.

Even though he has two friends, Malachi and Lenny, break times are quite uncomfortable for Nathan. He might go and watch his friend, Lenny, playing with his new friends or maybe find a place to hide.

‘There used to be a place up top of E block. I think it’s right down the very end, keep going down the stairs, there’s a place, sometimes I’d go there.’

‘What would you do?’

‘Just sit around.’

‘Why were you on your own?’

‘Cos maybe something happened and I wanted to be alone so I’d just go up there.’

Even at the weekend Nathan spends a lot of time alone or sometimes he hangs out with Lenny. I ask him about what he thinks the other kids get up to on the weekend.

‘What do you think the other kids in your grade do on weekends?’

‘Sometimes like I ask them, like, I go “what’re you doing,” and they go, “party,” or something, yeah.’

‘And how often do you think they go out with their friends?’

‘Oh, every weekend!’

‘Do you wish you were going out every weekend?’

‘Yeah.’

He now has three failed friendships under his belt: Liam, who threatened him and made him do ‘stupid things,’ then left the school; Malachi who gave
him concussion, was suspended then left school, and Lenny who rejected him in favour of more socially valuable friends, tried to steal his girlfriend and told Nathan not to leave school early even though he knew that he would be finished at the end of the year, leaving Nathan friendless and at the mercy of the bullies. He admits to wanting a relationship with Martin, the boy who slapped him for a laugh, but this doesn’t seem too likely so I asked him what is going to happen next year when he’s on his own.

‘So, let me think,’ I said. ‘Next year Lenny won’t be here and Malachi’s not here...’

‘Yeah.’

‘So how you going to go?’ I asked.

‘Well, I don’t know cos I’m starting to think about what I’m going to be doing by the end of this year. Well, if I should stay or if I should stay here.’

I wasn’t sure how to respond to this so I said nothing. I wanted to say, ‘run as fast as you can away from here,’ but I didn’t, because it’s not my place. On reflection I still can’t decide whether what he has to gain, in terms of skills and qualifications, is worth the cost to his self-esteem and physical self.

‘Are you going to try and make some more friends?’

‘I’ve definitely – I’ve got Angel to hang with,’ he said about a girl he sometimes sits with at lunch. He told me that when he was in year eight he was pushed to the ground and his knee was bleeding. Angel saw him, helped him up and took him to the school nurse. You can tell by the way he talks about her that he has a huge crush on her but it seems to be unrequited.

‘Do you hang out on weekends and stuff?’ I asked.

‘No, she said she’s really busy on the weekends and stuff. Cos she does like Scouts and all that. I was kind of hoping we could be in the same classes next year,’ he revealed.

‘You and Angel?’
‘Hmm. Cos I was in HPE class. We actually didn't pick HPE. We actually both picked Marine and they put us both in HPE.’

‘And you used to sit together in those lessons?’

‘Hmm,’ a noncommittal response. ‘We had to do our own coaching thing, where we had to be our own coach...’ and he went on to relate an incident that doesn’t involve Angel, making me think that even when they were in the same class, they weren’t together. She sounds like a lovely person but she’s yet another source of disparity between Nathan’s actual and desired social relationships. This difficulty with social relationships is due to a number of factors, including his problematic social skills.

_social_skills_

You would wonder how a person could make their way through life with as few social strategies in their armoury as Nathan.

‘How do you get someone to listen to you if they won’t listen to you?’

‘Complicated one. Cos I mean, like when I'm talking they'll sort of like cut me out half way through something.’

‘Does that happen a lot?’

‘Hmm,’ he nodded.

‘So how do you get someone to listen to you then?’

‘I think Lenny’s a great example cos I'll be telling him something and he'll just like cut me out and I'll tell him to “Listen!”, you know, sometimes I might have to shout.’

‘You shout? Is that the best way to get someone to listen to you?’

‘Probally not. Because then people...’ he drifted off.

‘What's the best way then?’
‘Well, sometimes I might tell them it’s really important. Cos if it’s really important and they’re a good friend to you, they’ll listen.’ He doesn’t seem able to get attention in an effective, positive way.

‘How do you get someone to do something your way?’

‘Um, I don’t know.’

He really doesn’t know how to get someone to do what he wants and his lack of assertiveness is pretty obvious both inside the classroom and out.

In metal engineering Martin goes up to Nathan and says, ‘I need the drill.’

‘I’m using it, but,’ Nathan replies.

‘No! I need the drill!’ Martin maintains, so Nathan gives him the drill.

Nathan goes to look at another student’s work.

‘Yeah? What?’ snaps the boy, making Nathan scuttle off back to his bench where he stands day-dreaming.

He doesn’t have the skills to be able to deal with these confrontations effectively. Like when the new girl came up to him and stole his drink, drinking it in front of him. He was powerless to do anything about it.

Remember I told you about Lenny and Nathan’s friend Liam who used to come to Nathan’s house and, ‘Eat all my food and whatnot,’ causing Lenny to become involved in a confrontation with Liam? There again he was unable to sort this out himself. Why couldn’t he say, ‘If you’re going to eat all my food you’re not coming over,’ or, ‘I don’t want you eating my food,’ or something like that? Is it possible he just didn’t know how to say it without causing offense? I believe that to be the case because in this interview extract he reveals that he can’t find the words to tell another student that he doesn’t need help making his toolbox.

‘Yeah, your toolbox. I think you wanted to do it yourself, didn’t you?’ I asked.

‘Yeah.’
'How could you have got him to leave it alone and let you do it?'

'I could have said, “I don’t need that help,” even though it sounds wrong,’ he said quickly.

'Why does it sound wrong?'

‘Cos it sounds like to them that you’re being rude like you’re not respecting them or something,' demonstrating a clear lack of understanding about what is respectful, or appropriate, classroom behaviour and how to assert himself to reach his goals.

Then there’s the incident where Lenny kept trying to ‘cling’ to Nathan’s girlfriends. Nathan tried to tell him he wasn’t invited and Lenny, ‘Just got really moody and all that,’ which had the desired effect because now Nathan doesn’t even try to tell him he’s not invited.

Somehow Nathan hasn’t learned the range of skills necessary to allow him to participate effectively in a school environment where these skills are essential, particularly in terms of effective help-seeking.

One lesson he arrives really late and stands unobserved for quite some time in the next room with his head against the wall. He then starts wandering around fidgeting with bits of equipment and following Malachi around the room. The teacher notices him then and tells him what to do. I notice that no-one else needs telling: they all just get on with it. He brings his project through to the workroom then disappears again, stopping to chat to Malachi in the next room. The teacher chases him back in the room. You can tell he’s not sure what to do so he asks Martin who shrugs him off so Nathan asks, ‘Well, what did you measure?’

‘I don’t know,’ the boy snaps.

The instructions are discarded on the floor but Nathan doesn’t look at them, he just keeps walking up and down the classroom, into the other room and back. He needs a metal rule to measure his project and, instead of going to get one and bringing back to his bench, he keeps taking his project over to where the rules are
kept, using one then returning to his bench. He's off again. Back again. He goes to watch Martin but the teacher catches up with him.

‘Are you waiting for something, Nathan?’ he asks.

‘Yeah, this,’ he replies indicating the drill he already has in his hand, instead of asking for the teacher’s help. Perhaps he doesn’t want this teacher knowing he doesn’t know what to do because the teacher clearly has preconceived ideas about Nathan that are none-too-flattering.

The teacher says, ‘see that material over there?’ but Nathan is daydreaming. He claps his hands twice to get Nathan’s attention. ‘See that material over there?’ he repeats, before giving Nathan more instructions. I wonder why Nathan doesn’t ask him for help.

So what’s going to happen when he leaves school and goes out into the wide world?

‘What will you do if someone treats you badly at work?’

‘Just do what you do at school – just go tell the boss or supervisor or whatever.’

‘What could you say to them to get them to stop?’

‘Can’t really,’ he mumbled.

‘They’re going to crucify him!’ I thought, with horror, imagining him telling tales on his workmates.

It’s even more worrying when Nathan admits to the tactics he’s used in the past to get some attention from the others.

‘I think it was like in year nine I used to do a lot of stupid things.’

‘What kind of stupid things?’
'Hmm. Just stupid things purposefully to see if I could cut my finger or something,' he said, talking about using the power tools. 'Like not wear any protection or anything.'

'Did you want to hurt yourself?'

'No.'

'What were you doing it for?'

'Just silly things. Messing about. Trying to get attention.' Either this is another glimpse of uncharacteristic awareness or maybe he's been told that's why he was doing it. I think the latter is more likely.

Then I observe Nathan participating in a woodwork class. One of the boys is using a soldering iron to decorate their wooden toolboxes with fancy writing. Nathan goes over with his project and stands next to the boy. The boy shouts, 'Fuck off!' So Nathan goes into the next room where there's another soldering iron. There's a shout.

'Nathan's burnt himself!' laughs a boy walking through from the other room.

The boys are all laughing now and saying, 'What happened?'

'Nathan burnt himself!' They are all laughing and shaking their heads.

'What a loser,' shouts one boy.

I wonder if these are related. It's only after you put them together that you think perhaps he hurt himself to get attention this time also. It's not a great leap from this to habitual self-harming, which, thankfully, hasn't occurred to him yet.

There's something about boys and manual arts. It's all about the tools and who has control of them that I find a little Freudian. In construction the teacher tells Albert to help catch Nathan up because he is falling behind. Nathan tries to do some of the project himself but Albert keeps snatching the tools out of Nathan's hands, telling him he is doing it wrong. Nathan has the glue and Albert snatches it from him to glue the project together. The other students are helping each other, one supporting the piece, whilst the other screws or nails it in place. Albert is doing
it all on his own. At one point Nathan just gives up and stares off into space. Eventually he finds something to do and is managing quite well until Albert comes and literally takes it out of Nathan’s hands. Nathan just acquiesces.

‘Do you reckon it’s good?’ Nathan asks Albert.

‘It’s whatever you think,’ the boy replies.

‘Yeah, but do you reckon it’s good?’

Albert just ignores him and continues working.

When Nathan realises the handle doesn’t fit properly he tries to force it and Albert shouts at him for doing it wrong.

‘It fits better like this,’ shouts Nathan and tries to show Albert but he just takes it and goes to fix it. Fired up, Nathan starts rushing around trying to find all the materials he needs before Albert comes back. In his rush he clumsily knocks into another boy.

‘Fuck off Nathan!’

He gets everything ready to be glued but Albert assembles it first and starts gluing it. Nathan tries to take it from him but Albert ignores him so they both end up holding it, looking a little ridiculous.

Towards the end of the lesson Nathan notices that Albert is pulling out every nail Nathan had hammered in. He wasn’t the only one to notice.

‘Why’s he doing it for you?’ asks ‘Big’ Brendan.

‘He’s just helping,’ replies Nathan.

‘Why, can’t you use a hammer?’ he scoffs.

Nathan just looks away.\textsuperscript{122}

When I talk to Nathan about the lesson, he doesn’t seem too concerned at first.
‘But yeah, Malachi said afterwards, “Did you really need his help to do all that? He may as well have done it all for you.” I was like, ‘No, you haven’t done anything.’

‘Yeah, Malachi can’t really talk,’ I said. ‘But it did look like Albert was doing it all and not letting you do any yourself.’

‘Yeah. He was like, “Leave it to me,” and I was like, “Ok,”’ he shrugged.

‘You were happy for him to do it?’

‘Yeah.’

‘How come?’

‘Cos, like, he does good jobs and all that. Doesn’t fool around. Cos like some people, like Malachi, if I was to leave it to him there’d be, like, screws out in place and all that stuff.’

‘Hmm. What if you’d have done it yourself?’

‘Might have taken me a longer time but I’d still have done it.’

‘Do you think you’d have done it as good as Albert?’

‘Depends.’

‘On what?’

He paused to consider for a while before answering, ‘He’s pretty good. Cos I had hurt my arm. I just said thank you to him afterwards,’ he finished weakly. He clearly wants to believe he’s just as good as Albert but his low self-efficacy creeps in and he has to make excuses for why he wouldn’t have done as good a job: because Albert’s very good and Nathan had a sore arm.

‘So how did you feel about him doing all that for you?’

‘Well, I was pretty happy cos that way I could get it all done. It was a similar case when we were doing our tool box and there was one part where we had
to cut a short bit of wood and yeah, I volunteered to do it and Malachi just goes, “Oh, I'll do, I'll do it,” and he just got real narky about it, you know?

‘Hmm. Why is that? Why do they do that?’

‘I don't know. I don't know whether it's, like, they think I'm going to do a bad job of it.’

‘How does it make you feel then, when they do that to you?’

‘It makes me feel like I'm worthless. Like they think, like, I just don't care or don't want to care.’

In another lesson all the boys are paired up to cut large sheets of plywood, but it is a three-person job meaning each pair needs a volunteer and everyone seems to be managing nicely, two holding whilst the other one cuts. Not only do Nathan and Malachi have to wait until last to cut their wood, but when they try to help another pair, they are snubbed and pushed out of the way. It’s no wonder Nathan has trouble keeping up if he always has to wait until last to use the equipment.

‘Who's cutting?’ asks the teacher.

‘Me!’ Nathan shouts.

Malachi says, ‘I'll do it,’ in an assertive tone and begins to cut.

Nathan grabs hold of one side, but with no-one helping the wood is splitting under its own weight. The teacher comes to help in the nick of time. Malachi finishes the cut and walks away to start the next activity, leaving Nathan to struggle under the weight of the wood.

I started to wonder where this attitude came from that Nathan shouldn’t be trusted with tools. Ok, it could be because Nathan has a worrying habit of deliberately hurting himself by his own admission, like when he burnt himself on the soldering iron, but I don’t think boys who frequently assault him would be too concerned about him deliberately hurting himself. Then I heard something that gave
me an inkling. The boys are all taking turns using the circular saw. When Nathan starts to walk towards it the teacher watches him carefully before shaking his head and approaching Nathan saying, ‘You worry me with the saw, Nathan,’ and he cuts the wood himself. Perhaps this overt demonstration of how little faith the teacher has in Nathan is communicated to the students, thereby giving them permission to treat him the same way.

Naturally, given this level of rejection, humiliation and aggression, Nathan would be the first to contribute to group activities, right?

‘Do you normally join in class discussions?’
‘Depends.’
‘On what?’
‘Depends on what the discussion is about.’
‘Ok. Can you think of the last time you joined in on a class discussion?’
‘No.’

But he used to do drama where class discussions were compulsory so he had no choice.

‘So how did it feel to join in class discussions?’
‘Nervous. I was very nervous. You know like how you start to sweat and all that?’
‘Yeah, really?’
‘Yeah.’
‘When was the last time you raised your hand in class?’
He paused, ‘Yesterday I think.’
‘Yeah, why was that?’
'In construction for theory cos we do theory on Wednesdays. So yeah, we were just going through and he was just going through a house plan and he asked us a question and I just put up my hand and suggested something.'

'What did you suggest?'

'Can't remember what the question was, but I said something like...if the face was sidewards or something. I can't remember quite the question.'

'Can you remember any other times?'

'No.'

Obviously problematic social skills contribute to his unwillingness to participate in the classroom but it's more complicated than that. His slightly unconventional way of looking at the world prevents him from learning those skills and also makes him stand out when all he wants is to fit in.

Social Perception and Awareness

Nathan isn't able to tell me that he looks at things differently to most of his peers or that he struggles to understand the motives of others, neither can the others. To come to that conclusion, I had to listen to what they said and compare that with what I had seen myself or had been told by someone else. That is, to establish that Nathan didn't quite have a fix on things around him I had to consider a number of viewpoints and then use my own knowledge of the world to interpret what I was seeing and hearing. Perhaps you will come to the same conclusions when the evidence is put before you, maybe you won't.

The world must be a pretty confusing place for Nathan. He really doesn't understand why people do the things they do, meaning he has a limited ability to anticipate or use intuition which, in turn, means that he isn’t able to predict how others will react to him in any given interaction. When the girl took his drink he wasn’t able to tell me why she did it even though I asked him twice. Then there was the incident in construction where the teacher was going to put the two boys together and doesn’t because, as he says, ‘Oh, I don’t want you working with
Nathan – you bully him,’ to which Malachi replies, ‘only if he pisses me off.' When Nathan spoke to me about it he was earnest in his desire to learn what it was he was doing wrong.

‘It’s like the other day we were in construction,’ he began, unprompted, ‘and he’s like, um, you were there I think, and sir told him to do something with me and he was like...he goes, “As long as he doesn’t piss me off,” and stuff.’

‘Yeah. Why would he say that?’

‘I don’t know.’

‘Do you think you do irritate him?’

He paused to consider, ‘Not really but I mean I think he just needs to work there and can’t go at someone.’

‘Sorry, say that again.’

‘He can’t um, he needs to learn to control his anger.’

‘Oh, absolutely. He does have a problem with anger,’ I reply, impressed at this judgement of Malachi, but suspecting that someone had said this to him. ‘So um, you don’t think you irritate him at all?’

‘Some teachers say that I do sometimes but I don’t think I do.’

‘How do they say you irritate him?’

‘Oh, by saying things to make him angry.’

‘Well you didn’t say anything at all to him in that lesson, did you? The teacher said he wanted him to work with you and then he said, “No, I won’t put you together because you always bully Nathan,” and Malachi said, “I only bully him when he pees me off.” That’s what he said. So do you think...when was the last time you think you peed him off?’

‘Well, what did he mean? Did he give an example of how I would?’

‘He didn’t say anything about how you would, no.’
‘See that’s what I’m trying to work out.’

I think that’s a very honest and plaintive desire to understand but I really don’t think he’s capable of understanding at this point. You might remember the altercation he had with Malachi where he really didn’t know what the consequences of his actions were going to be.

‘He pushed you on the floor?’ I asked.

‘On the concrete.’

‘Oh, now why did he do that?’

‘Oh, I don’t know what he said to me but I told him to, “f-off,” and he just came at me and that.’

‘Oh right. Why did you say that to him?’

‘Because I was getting really annoyed. I didn’t like what he was doing at the time.’

‘What did you expect him to do when you did that?

‘Just walk away.’

‘Did you expect him to walk away and he didn’t?’

‘No he just came fully at me.’

Now I don’t know about you but I’ve seen and heard enough about Malachi and his relationship with Nathan to know that Malachi was never going to walk away, having been told to f-off by Nathan.

It’s like when the boys were all kicking Malachi and laughing, when Nathan starts laughing, perhaps thinking that’s an appropriate response to his friend getting a kicking or maybe he was just enjoying Malachi being on the receiving end for a change, Malachi runs at him and knocks him unconscious. Nathan just wasn’t expecting it. Just as he doesn’t expect to be slapped in the crotch by all the boys in his year.
‘You’ve got to stop them doing that,’ I told him, genuinely concerned. ‘How are you going to stop them doing that?’

‘You can’t! They just do it out of the blue. They just come up beside you and they’ll just go whack! There’s no way of stopping it cos they just do it too quick.’

‘What could you say to them to get them to stop?’

‘Can’t really,’ he mumbled. ¹³⁹

I think, generally, he has a really hard time understanding peoples reasons for doing things like when I asked him about Albert helping finish his toolbox. The teacher had asked Albert to help Nathan because he was so far behind. The boy clearly didn’t want to ‘help’ and did it all himself, totally ignoring Nathan.

‘So why were you the only one getting any help?’

‘I don’t know, but Malachi was way behind - he hadn’t even glued his and yet he was at school.’

‘Yeah.’

‘So, that shows you he didn’t really do much.’

‘No. Why did he not get any help?’

‘Maybe cos a lot of people don’t like him cos of what he does to me and a lot of other people,’¹⁴⁰ he replied, making me shake my head in wonder. People don’t like Malachi, sure, but not because of his treatment of Nathan. Malachi didn’t get any help because he’s seen as more capable and no-one would dare to help him anyway, even if they could be convinced to try.

There’s loads of examples of his limited ability to understand peoples motives. Like when he said, ‘Everyone just laughs at him [Malachi].’

‘Ok. Why do they do that?’

‘I don’t know’¹⁴¹
There’s more: ‘Why is that? Why do they do that?’ I asked.

‘I don’t know,’ was his reply.

‘Why do you let these kids take over when you’re doing a good job already?’

‘I don’t know.’

Or when I asked, ‘Why did he do that?’

‘Don’t know,’ he replied. And, ‘Oh, Brendan’s just annoying. He’s like Chad. He just does things for no apparent reason.’

He’s used that expression before, ‘no apparent reason,’ when talking about Raymond hitting Lenny. I think that gets to the heart of this issue: the reason isn’t apparent to Nathan even if it’s blatantly obvious to everyone else. Like when he doesn’t understand about Lenny trying to ‘cling’ to his girlfriends. He just feels uneasy about it, but can’t really articulate what is bothering him about it, probably it’s his low self-efficacy for social interactions; he just assumes Lenny is more socially skilled and will win the girl.

I wonder about his perception of what goes on in the classroom.

‘Ok, what about in class,’ I asked. ‘Are they always nice to you in class?’

‘I know, um, you know that ‘Big’ Brendan?’

‘Yeah.’

‘He can be very annoying.’

‘I’ve seen that. Does he annoy you in class?’

‘Mostly in engineering and work ed.’

‘What does he do?’

‘Oh, makes noises and just different things.’

‘But he doesn’t say anything to you?’
'It's just what he does that's really annoying.'

And there are other boys that target him in the classroom.

'Do you have trouble with Chad usually?'

'Yeah, just during classes he'll just do these stupid things like he'll just come up and like shoulder-blade me and stuff.'

What's worse is that they won't help him. He gets told to fuck off more times than anyone else. I won't create a 'fuck off' collage here, but, trust me, they're there. For illustration, in construction he went over to ask another student a question.

'Fuck off!' says the boy.

'Oi, watch your language, there's a lady in the room,' says the teacher.

'Yeah, he came over here and was annoying me,' replies boy.

'No swearing,' repeats the teacher. So it's ok to treat Nathan like that as long as he doesn't swear in front of me. Nathan tries again and is told to, 'Fuck off' again. Not only won't they help him - they don't even want him watching them. Another student is on the next stage in his project so Nathan goes to watch what he's doing.

'Yeah? What?' says the boy. Nathan shuffles off to figure it out on his own.

I don't think Nathan wants to be popular. I think his social ambitions are far more modest than that. I think he wants to fit in and be left in peace with one good friend who, in his words, 'You have the same respect for as they do for you. That treats you like a friend...And friends, I don't know, just do stuff for each other.' He thinks he's achieved that now as he has Lenny and he feels he's starting to fit in. I think he's mistaken on both counts. Lenny has his own agenda and Nathan really doesn't fit in in this environment. Perhaps we should be thankful that he seems unaware of it because with that comes optimism.

'Do you still get people picking on you?'
He paused, ‘It’s calmed down. A lot.’

‘So is there any?’ He shook his head in response. ‘So they’re all really nice to you?’ He didn’t answer. I think he was resisting telling me an outright lie, but needed to believe it’s true. But it isn’t. Even his teacher knows.

‘I’m assuming Nathan will be working with Malachi on this project because no-one else will work with him,’ the teacher tells me.

‘Now they’ve started...like I was saying last time,’ Nathan told me, ‘now they’ve started to like me and respect me and all that and that’s good. Cos they feel sorry for me for how much bullying I’ve been through so they’re starting to like me now.’

‘Who are they? Who are the people who are starting to like and respect you?’

‘Like, Martin is, Du’ane is starting to get there, Douglas, yeah.’

‘Ok. So, how do you know they are starting to like and respect you?’

‘Talking to me.’

‘Didn’t you just say Du’ane just shouts at you when you try and talk to him?’

‘Yeah, but like...one second he will be like, you know like laughing and that and the next second he will be shouting and that. I don’t want to push that too far for fear of making him doubt this assertion that things have changed.

I watch Martin and Nathan outside the classroom one day - they don’t acknowledge each other and don’t sit together when they go in. In metal engineering when Nathan doesn’t know what to do he asks Martin what he’s supposed to measure. Martin shrugs him off so Nathan asks, ‘Well, what did you measure?’

Martin snaps, ‘I don’t know!’

When they were in work ed. together Martin is the one who told the girl to slap Nathan for fun. Yet when he speaks of Martin he says, ‘we’re becoming really good friends now, we’re talking to each other.’
I think he’s misinterpreting their actions. I know that I’ve seen little to suggest he is liked and respected by anyone. I think it’s more about his perceptions. For example he said, ‘People would think I was doing funny things – not stupid funny things, just normal funny things and I think people just started to like it and people would be like, “Nathan, do this,” and then everyone would laugh and I was really happy cos I was getting more appreciated.’ You could listen to that and think, ‘Great, he’s found his niche as class clown,’ but that’s not the case. Consider that comment in conjunction with the following anecdote. In construction a few boys are gathered around the soldering iron waiting for their turn. Nathan’s with them. He’s playing with the buffing wheel on the lathe when it comes off in his hands. He holds it above another boy’s head, like it’s a joke, but it’s not funny. When the boy turns around Nathan quickly moves it away. His hand is shaking visibly. This happens a couple of times then another boy sees him doing it from the other side of the room and shouts out, ‘Oh, yeah. Good one, Nathan,’ sarcastically, alerting the boy at the lathe who turns around and glares at Nathan and walks away. When you consider the two elements together I think it’s more likely that the boys were laughing at him, not with him, but perhaps it doesn’t matter to Nathan as long as they are not ignoring him or shouting at him.

The situation wasn’t always quite so bleak as Nathan did seem to enjoy some level of acceptance in the support room, but now he’s moved back into the mainstream (after a spurious decision at the beginning of the year that he no longer required assistance) that source of belongingness has gone. I’ll give you a couple of examples. One time Francis, a lively year ten boy, was trying to avoid doing his work by play-fighting with Nathan which he was clearly enjoying. Another time Christine, a very big, aggressive, tempestuous year ten girl, was flirting mildly with him and engaged him in a brief conversation about a new Simpsons game Nathan took out of his bag. ‘It’s only just come out,’ he says, to which Christine agrees, ‘it’s just come out.’ It’s not much, but it’s something. As I’ve said before, I think the support room gives the students a chance to put down their guard, somewhat, and allow themselves to be a bit more vulnerable. I think this is a result of that phenomenon. They can afford to talk to Nathan in there without fear of public censure.
I like Nathan a lot. He’s a nice kid and the way he’s treated breaks my heart, but there’s something about the way he talks about being bullied makes me think that the way he’s reacting might be unconsciously exacerbating the situation.

‘He pushed me. I got scraped. I got this big red mark just there,’ it sounds like he’s five years old again. ‘He grabbed my arm and held it pretty hard. And then he just pushed me into the ground, he actually just tackled me, more or less...Held me down then, yeah, I hurt my shoulder.’ He says, ‘I’m very nervous. Especially when I meet new people I get very nervous. Very shy. My dad can even say that too because when I used to meet new people when I was little I used to hide behind his back,’ which no self-respecting teenage boy would own up to. Then he said that the big threat Liam held over his head was, ‘If you don’t do it we’ll call you all these names.’ The way he reacts makes him more of a target to those who are looking to intimidate him and prove their ‘masculinity’. The point is Nathan doesn’t know whether he is likely to run into bullies in the workplace so I ask him, ‘what will you do if someone treats you badly at work?’

‘Just do what you do at school – just go tell the boss or supervisor or whatever.’

‘How could you deal with it on your own?’

‘Dunno.’ He paused to think about it. ‘Probably just talk to them about it. See what their problem is.’

‘What would you say?’

‘Why are you being mean to me?’

‘They’ll love that,’ I thought.

And he will be treated badly, of that I’m sure. He’ll become a target because he just stands out, saying odd things like when he was listening to a conversation and started saying, ‘It’s like when...’ and just trailed off. Or when he butts into a conversation saying, ‘Sorry, I only go to bed at night time,’ causing a girl to say, ‘You’re a freak. That doesn’t even make sense.’ Or, in the same lesson when he says, ‘Hey Rasta,’ to one of the African boys causing him to look long and hard at...
Nathan, clearly shocked and contemplating how much offense was meant. He replies, 'I'm not a Rasta,' and the conversation is dropped.\(^{173}\) I wonder whether he's heard someone else say this to one of the Africans and has used it out of context.

Then there's his quirky use of the word, 'whatnot\(^{174}\) in general conversation. That's odd for a teenage boy, you have to admit. Or openly picking his nose in the middle of the classroom.\(^{175}\) Then there's the fact that, due to a medical condition, he had to wear a colostomy bag for the first two years of high school and he didn't maintain the bag particularly well meaning there was an odour problem.\(^{176}\) I think these little things all make him the target of bullies and that won't ever change, but he seems blissfully unaware of it.

I think Lenny does a better job of flying under the radar. Nathan just seems to blindly blunder around attracting negative attention just by being a little odd. One day in the workshop the teacher starts to address the class and Nathan walks right up to the teacher's desk and stands right next to him whilst the others hang back and listen. He is so uncomfortably close that the teacher looks at him, puzzled, before continuing his address. It seems this is enough of a provocation for Donovan to punch Nathan in the arm. In response Nathan stands behind the teacher for the rest of the talk,\(^{177}\) missing valuable instruction. Perhaps if he'd hung back with the rest they wouldn't have noticed him, but I don't think he was aware he was doing anything inappropriate.

Nathan's construction teacher says Nathan, 'Winds up the other students and brings a lot of it on himself,'\(^{178}\) which is a terrible thing to say but is not entirely unfounded. Not to say that he is responsible for their horrific treatment of him but it cannot be denied that these little idiosyncrasies draw negative attention, but he appears to have absolutely no control over it.

You'd think this limited ability to anticipate and lack of social awareness would extend to his perception of others, like his inability to nominate the popular students:

'So who do you think the popular kids would be in your year?'
‘I don’t know. There’s a lot of people. Um, I don’t really know.’

‘So who are the kids who are really cool?’

‘I don’t know.’

However, he shows some social awareness when he and Malachi were doing the coaching activity in PE and Nathan advises Malachi, ‘Chances are not a lot of people are going to listen to you cos they don’t like you.’ Again, when he admits he was doing ‘stupid things’ to get attention.

Also, he has some awareness that Lenny is trying to ditch him because he said, ‘He doesn’t really seem to be paying much attention to me. He’s always hanging around under [the music] block. Like he doesn’t really, he doesn’t wanna really hang around me any more. Not saying we’re not friends any more,’ he said quickly, ‘he just doesn’t want to hang around me any more.’ But there have been ample signs that Lenny wants to end the relationship: only seeing Nathan on weekends, and then usually only when there is something to be gained, such as the company of a girl; not sitting with him at breaks and not encouraging Nathan to come to Thursday Lunch Club with him, preferring to go to the Christian band concert on his own than going with Nathan; telling Nathan to stay on in school even though he (Lenny) will be leaving. The signs are abundant. Either Nathan can’t or won’t take heed of the signs and make the logical connection between them. Maybe he’s ignoring his intuition because it leads to a painful realisation but I think it’s more likely that he’s just not aware of it.

Lenny’s Story

There’s a hint of menace in Lenny’s eyes and although it never surfaces you get the feeling it might in the right circumstances. He’s seventeen, in year twelve, quite tall, above six feet, and is solidly built. He is very softly spoken, pleasant, friendly in a guarded way and helpful but not outgoing at all. When he gets to know you he can be quite chatty and relaxed but often doesn’t talk to anyone in lessons, even in support lessons.

Someone’s done a real number on Lenny about his academic ability.
‘Why are you not good at the maths & English?’

‘Cos it’s thinky,’ he replied.

‘Ah, thinky,’ I sighed.

‘I’m not a good thinker.’

Lenny is quite tight lipped about his home life. The only comment about his father reveals he has eight children in all, six from another relationship (or relationships), none of whom have finished year twelve but he wants Lenny to graduate, ‘Cos it’s my dad’s dream. He wants one of his kids, one of his kids to go through to year twelve.’ During this conversation he adds, ‘and my sister Brittany is supposed to go through as well.’ This comment is the only mention of his sister although they share a classroom and are both participants in my study. He knows they both attend my interviews but when I ask him if they talk about coming to my interview he says they don’t talk. He says mum drops him off at school and doesn’t mention her again. Strangely enough Lenny has told me more about his grandmother who has been unwell after a fall and has recently been moved to sheltered accommodation. His other grandmother lives up the coast. Aside from these occasional comments Lenny reveals nothing about his home life which I find unusual as the other students talk freely about home and reveal much more depth in their familial relationships: good and bad.

Lenny enjoys making model aeroplanes and playing golf with Tom who sees himself as Lenny’s advocate. He likes fishing with his friend Mathew and playing PSII and basketball with Nathan. Even though he enjoys basketball he doesn’t play in the courts in his free time when there are other students playing. I don’t quite understand the dynamics at play on the handball court but he plays every day with either the amalgamous year eights or year twelves although he admits he doesn’t know the names of any of the year eights and he doesn’t have any friends in year twelve.

As with all the participants, bullying at primary school was an issue for Lenny.
Bullying

‘Did you have a lot of problems in primary school?’ I asked.

‘Um yeah. There was this kid, Jack. He was giving me crap and I snapped and smashed him.’

I’m not sure whether I believe this is true but if I take it on face value either there was something about this kid Jack that made it acceptable to retaliate or times have changed dramatically because now Lenny just accepts the teasing.

When Lenny arrived at Southside he continued to have social difficulties. These social difficulties were dramatically magnified when he met Liam, the boy who encouraged Lenny and Nathan to sexually harass the female students for fun. I asked him how the other students treated him back in those early days.

‘Terrible.’

‘How come?’

‘Oh, apparently I was doing some bad stuff.’

When pushed to elaborate he won’t comment on the ‘bad stuff’ but reveals, ‘they used to threaten me and all this. Then some people came up and tried hitting me,’ he admitted. ‘Everything that they was saying. They put me down.’

The bullying has certainly eased recently but he is still the victim of significant bullying by anyone’s standards.

‘It’s just people who pick on me. I don’t really know their names,’ he claimed.

‘Ok,’ I said, trying to sort out his social standing in the year group, ‘so, in your year?’

‘Hmm, lower,’ he admitted.

‘Kids in the years under you pick on you?’ I asked, incredulous. He’s huge!

‘Yeah.’
‘Oh, ok.’

‘I don’t know why.’

But it’s not just the younger students. He has problems with several students in his own year, particularly Mike.

‘I don’t like him. Cos he always puts me down and everything. Every time I see him he goes like, “Lenny, Lenny,” implying he’s slow.’

One day I was observing his Home Economics class. He sits alone in the corner until the teacher puts him in a group with Mike. The group decide to exclude him, forcing the teacher to intervene. Lenny picks up a bunch of bok choy and says, ‘What do I do with this?’ and is ignored. He hands some ingredients to Mike who takes it and throws it back on the bench. It’s like he’s humouring a small child. Lenny decides to start chopping and Mike takes the knife from him and shows him how to do it ‘properly’. He walks way but returns again to show Lenny how to chop, miming how to do it but in quite an exaggerated, condescending way. A third time he shows him, telling Lenny, ‘You’re too slow.’ He’s very critical, coming back again to pick up what Lenny has dropped.

Twice the teacher comes over to Lenny’s area, talking to him and showing him how to chop although he is actually doing fine on his own making me think maybe this is where Mike’s attitude comes from. Two other boys, Jamaal and Terrance, are chopping, undisturbed.

Lenny notices someone else is stirring his group’s pot. He starts walking towards the culprit then stops abruptly, turning around saying, ‘That’s not yours, it’s ours,’ over his shoulder, almost under his breath. Terrance hears him and goes to claim the pot. Lenny starts chopping another item. Jamaal yells, ‘Shred it!’ to which Lenny replies, ‘I am! Shredding is this!’ and glares at the boy until he backs down. Mike then comes and takes over shredding saying, ‘Are you watching, Lenny?’

Mike notices the chilli has been chopped with the seeds still in it.

‘Lenny, did you do that?’

‘No,’ he replies.
Mike takes a softer tone with Jamaal who actually did it. ‘Nah, doesn't matter, you just need less seeds.’

Terrance asks, ‘Do we need to heat the noodles?’ to which Lenny aggressively replies, ‘it's already been done so leave it.’

When the teacher mentions something about hygiene in the kitchen, Lenny tells the group about when he worked at McDonalds. The group laugh at him.

Whilst Lenny enjoys a certain level of acceptance amongst the African contingent, that acceptance exists within boundaries.

Whilst we are waiting for the teacher outside the work ed. classroom, Lenny is trying to convince me how popular he is by being very animated and trying to engage the other students. He approaches a small group of African students and they are receptive at first. However, he’s showing off and one-by-one they move away from him or turn their backs. It’s so subtle I’m not even sure they are aware they’re doing it.

He shouts at the teacher when she arrives for being late but no-one laughs so he shouts again, twice more.

In the classroom he tells Steven, one of the African students, to move up a seat to let him sit down amongst them.

‘No, man. Go sit over there.’

‘Where?’ asks Lenny.

‘Over there,’ Steven retorts, waving vaguely towards an area where there are no spare seats. There are spare seats in with the African students but they don’t want him there. He blushes and finds a place to sit next to another African boy, Sam. Even though he says he is friends with Raymond, the boy chooses to sit in the popular group at the furthest point away from Lenny.
Paul suddenly shouts out, ‘You! You annoy me,’ pointing at Lenny. He says, ‘it says on here who do you not like and I don’t like you. You annoy me.’ It was completely unprovoked.

Later a boy with a very similar name to Lenny shouts out, ‘I know who I’m putting. He stole my name,’ referring to Lenny.

Another two students chuckle when one says something he’s written down about Lenny. I can hear them say his full name but nothing else. You can tell the other boy has written something rude about him. Lenny looks over at them. He knows they are talking about him.211

Then in another work ed. Class Lenny has forgotten to bring a pen and, instead of asking the boy next to him or anyone for that matter, he sits there without working until the teacher notices. She tells him she’s disappointed in him and tells him to see her at break. She asks another student for a pen for Lenny and the lesson continues. This is important for three reasons: he has missed out on an important learning experience; he got into trouble with the teacher; and, as a result, missed out on valuable social time at break. All this because he couldn’t find someone in the classroom who would lend him a pen.

**Problematic Friendships**

The problem with selecting friends from students who are already rejected is that it is likely that you will be rejected by association. Liam encouraged Lenny to do things that ensured he would never be accepted and then left, leaving Lenny to deal with the repercussions alone. It was Liam’s idea to break into the school hall and destroy the mirror ball212 and he got Lenny in trouble for throwing chairs off the balcony when Liam actually did it.213 He caused tension between Lenny and Nathan and, in a comment that was left unelaborated, he, ‘treats people like crap.’214 As Lenny says, ‘I’ve matured a lot and the person that was making me get in trouble has left.’215

‘I was doing real stupid things,’ admitted Lenny.

‘Doesn’t everybody do stupid things?’ I asked.
‘Not as much as what I did. Cos I got suspended twice for doing it.’

‘So do you regret it?’ I asked.

‘Yep.’

‘So what do you reckon made you do those things? Was it like Liam or somebody getting you to do stuff or did you just want to do it?’

‘No, he was getting me to do it.’

You would think that once Liam left the bullying would subside, but it didn’t. As I suggested earlier, Lenny has fared slightly better and he isn’t ignorant of this fact. Just like when no-one retaliated for the first attack on Nathan because the bully was popular, Lenny doesn’t stand up for Nathan against anyone other than Liam, even though Nathan was bullied incessantly by a bevy of thugs. He can afford to take Liam on because Liam was even more unpopular than Lenny. He knows when to get involved and when to back away which is exactly what he has been doing since Liam left.

Lenny has tried mixing with a few different groups, trying to find somewhere to belong. A few different sources told me about Lenny’s relationship with Derek and Jason\textsuperscript{217} who are two years his junior. Barbera the TA told me Lenny joined the pair last year because of a shared interest in Yu-gi-oh\textsuperscript{218} and they used to play together every day outside the girls’ bathroom. Nathan told me how the relationship ended.

‘Oh, Jason and Derek?’ I asked. ‘When was he hanging out with them?’

‘He was hanging out with them last year and pretty much this year as well,’ Nathan replied.

‘Oh, ok, right. And why did they kick him out?’

‘Maybe they thought he was annoying or something.’

‘How do you know they kicked him out?’ I asked.
‘They told me.’

‘Ok.’

‘Yeah.’

‘And they didn’t give any reason?’ I mused.

‘No. It was kind of he was annoying or he did something and they kicked him out.’

Following that Lenny found a group of year twelve students playing handball and who allowed him to play.

‘Who are the year twelves you hang out with?’ I asked.

‘Raymond, Dillon Harrow, Mikey Abrams, Lee Lucern, that’s pretty much it,’ he answered, naming the hand ball players.

However, when he calls these his friends I think he is exaggerating, an assertion which is supported by Nathan’s reflections.

‘I sometimes just go there and watch and one day when I was watching them play handball, you know Raymond?’ asked Nathan.

‘Yeah.’

‘He just goes to Lenny and,’ he punched the air, ‘went like that.’

‘What, hit him?’

‘Yeah,’

‘Oh right.’

‘And I didn’t think that was fair cos Lenny didn’t do anything to him.’

When he tells me about his friend Raymond he doesn’t mention that Raymond refuses to sit with him in the mainstream classes they share like
construction and work ed. In fact, the only time I have seen Raymond talk to Lenny is in support where there are no other year twelves to talk to.

The only time I see Lenny in any interactions with the others he named, other than playing handball, is when he and Dillon Harrow share a work ed. classroom. They are standing outside waiting for the teacher and Lenny is standing behind Dillon. As I approach, Dillon shouts at Lenny, 'Why are you watching me? I'm just having a drink!' When they go inside Lenny sits next to Dillon who doesn't complain. I remember thinking that this was another strategy to convince me of how popular he is, but maybe he would have made the move without me watching. Lenny takes Dillon's book making him shout, 'Get off you idiot! You're so irritating.' When the teacher tells the class to work in pairs Dillon turns around and works with the girl on the other side of him. Towards the end of the lesson when Dillon and his friends have finished they allow Lenny to listen to their conversation, not engaging him, but clearly including him in the discussion. Lenny hasn't finished his work, but is enjoying the attention, laughing at their comments. They start teasing an African boy, Sam, who Lenny was sitting with last time and Lenny joins in. You could reasonably expect a bit of loyalty from Lenny towards Sam, but clearly he is more interested in social climbing with the more popular Dillon than sticking with Sam. The teacher calls on Lenny for his answers, but he hasn't done the work because he was behind to start with for not having a pen, then he was listening to the boys' conversation. Not having an answer and having this fact broadcast to the class and the teacher further emphasises Lenny's learning issues when, in actual fact, it's his social issues that are responsible.

Lenny also exaggerates his friendship with the year eight handball players. He reports these students as his friends even though he can't name any of them.

'Who else do you hang out with?' I asked.

'Oh, just the rest of year twelve and some grade eights,' he replied.

'Grade eights? Who?'

'Yeah, just under [the music] block. I don't know their names.'

'So what do you do?'
‘Play handball.’

‘Oh, ok.

However, it is his dysfunctional relationship with Nathan that is perhaps the most problematic.

The first thing Lenny tells me is that Nathan is his best mate. They’ve been friends since Nathan started in year eight and that’s the longest friendship Lenny has maintained. But it’s an odd friendship. Lenny tells me Nathan introduced him to a friend of his, Brad, but that’s all Lenny ever offers about Nathan unless I bring him up. They’re in different years so they don’t share classes and they don’t sit together at break because Lenny is off making other friends. They sometimes see each other on weekends and play PlayStation II, but they don’t see each other outside school during the week. They don’t even walk home together.

This is because Lenny has a plan.

‘Cos I want to have...wanna have a good...good end of year, um, good friends cos I don’t want to be enemies...with anybody,’ he said.

‘So you think you’re going to manage that? Not being enemies with anybody by the end of the year?’ I asked.

‘Probably.’

He stops himself short of saying here that he wants to be friends with everyone before he leaves because I think he knows that is not possible, but maybe it is possible not to have any enemies. Maybe his hope is to sail through the last few months in peace without any threats of violence, even if that means he just doesn’t talk to anyone for the rest of the year, including Nathan because he knows Nathan is a bully magnet and associating with him makes Lenny a target too. He must have seen the way the others treat Nathan and the way new kids are discouraged from making friends with him. He knows enough to know he doesn’t want any part of that because it would jeopardise his grand plan. Nathan is Lenny’s
constant reminder of their unfortunate past and Lenny’s own unpopularity that he’s trying to put behind him.

But, strangely enough Lenny says he’s never been lonely at school because he’s always had Nathan. But this has not earned Nathan any loyalty because since Liam left Lenny has strategically searched for another friend, anyone so he didn’t have to hang out with Nathan. That’s not the way he tells it though.

“So have you ever felt like the friends that you have are not good enough? Like, “I wanna hang with that crowd instead.”’

‘No.’

‘You’re happy with them?’

‘Hmm.’

‘That’s good. And have you ever or would you ever ditch a friend if a more popular friend came along and wanted to be your friend?’

‘No. I’d just ask them if they could join.’ But I’m not sure this is true because Lenny didn’t ask the handball players if Nathan could play. He just let him sit on the sidelines watching him cavorting with his new ‘friends.’ There’s no joining-in there. I think it’s because he wants to discourage Nathan from hanging around his more popular friends. But he’s happy to hang out with Nathan at the weekend when Lenny’s new ‘friends’ are all off having parties without him. So actions speak louder than words in this case. Lenny is clearly dissatisfied with his current social situation.

Loneliness and Social Dissatisfaction

Lenny won’t admit to being lonely. Not ever. In fact he’s always had friends and, besides, things are much better now.

‘Have you ever felt lonely at school?’

‘No.’
'Even like when you were in year eight, nine, whatever and kids were being mean to you. Did you ever feel lonely, like sad about it?'

'No, I never felt lonely in grade eight and nine.'

'Not in any of the grades?'

'No, cos I had...I had... well Liam was my friends until Nathan came along in grade eight...nine...eight, when I was in nine. And Bobby came in when I was in grade ten.'

'And he's left now?'

'No, he still is.'

'Oh right.'

'He's just working at the moment. He works Wednesdays and Fridays.'

Even though he says he only works two days I don't see him in the nine months I'm there: not in Lenny’s classes and I never see him with anyone at breaks. When he talks about going fishing with him, it seems to be in the present tense but he doesn't go fishing with him during the data collection period.

In fact, I rarely see Lenny with anyone, not even in class. Comments such as, ‘Lenny sits alone in the corner,’ ‘Lenny arrives to the lesson on his own,’ ‘Lenny and Joe are quietly listening to everything. Lenny watches Paul but doesn’t talk,’ appear frequently in the observation data. I do see him sitting with Raymond one day in support, helping him with his work. Interestingly Raymond is in Lenny’s work ed. lesson too but, in the company of more socially desirable people, Raymond doesn't speak to Lenny and sits as far away from him as possible.

Of all the participants I think Lenny has experienced the most changes in friendships. Since the breakdown of his relationship with Liam he has distanced himself from Nathan and approached a number of different groups to gain admittance. Even Derek and Jason, students two years his junior who are not particularly popular in their own right, held more social value than Nathan in Lenny’s eyes.
'I used to hang about with Derek, Jason, CJ at the time. We were playing Yu-Gi-oh and Pokemon,' said Lenny. Note that he didn’t say we were hanging out with Derek and Jason, because Nathan was never included even though Nathan introduced Lenny to his friend, Brad.250

Nathan explained to me that it wasn't Lenny’s decision to end the relationship with Jason and Derek.

‘Oh, Jason and Derek?’ I asked. ‘When was he hanging out with them?’

‘He was hanging out with them last year and pretty much this year as well.’

‘Oh ok, right. And why did they kick him out?’

‘Maybe they thought he was annoying or something.’

‘How do you know they kicked him out?’

‘They told me.’

‘Ok.’

‘Yeah.’

‘And they didn’t give any reason.’

‘No. It was kind of he was annoying or he did something and they kicked him out.’

‘How did they kick him out?’

‘Just told him to get out.’

Following their rejection Lenny began to play hand-ball with the year eights and year twelves. As I have mentioned, I’m not sure how satisfying this situation can be when the relationships don’t extend beyond the hand-ball court and he doesn’t even know the names of the year eight students, but he claims to be satisfied.
‘So have you ever felt like the friends that you have are not good enough? Like “I wanna hang with that crowd instead?” I asked.

‘No.’

‘You’re happy with them?’

‘Hmm.’

I wonder why, then, when he was offered the opportunity to come to the Thursday Lunch Club, did he come throughout every break, every day, for the duration of the club. I would say that, in spite of Lenny’s protests to the contrary, he experiences a great deal of loneliness which is indicated by the desperation with which he conducts his social climbing. There is clearly a discrepancy between his actual and desired social relationships which he acknowledges:

‘So is there anyone at school that you would like to be friends with that you’re not friends with?’ I asked.

‘Yeah, some of the grade twelves,’ he admitted.

‘Who?’

‘For instance Zack.’

‘Oh, you’d like to be his friend?’

‘Yeah.’

He’d like to be Zack’s friend because, even though Zack isn’t one of the more popular kids, he’s leagues more popular than Nathan and Lenny. And he’s more likely to get invited to all the parties.

‘So, what do you think the other kids in your grade do on weekends?’ I asked.

‘Um, party.’

‘Have you heard of many parties that they’ve had?’
'Yeah, I’ve heard of one happening in grade twelve that they’re going down the Gold Coast.'

‘Oh right. Are you going?’

‘Probably not.’

‘Why not?’

‘Cos I got no way of getting down there,’ he said, unwilling to admit that he wouldn’t be included. I’m sure he wonders why he’s not.

‘How often do you think other kids go out with their friends? Like go to parties and that?’

‘Like, every weekend and that.’

I’m pretty sure that they don’t have parties every weekend, but he thinks they do and obviously wishes he was invited.

‘So what did you do on the weekend?’ I asked him.

[shakes head]

‘You didn’t do anything?’

‘Nope.’

I wonder if his exclusion is something to do with his problematic social skills.

**Social Skills**

I find Lenny’s lack of social strategies to deal with conflict very interesting because, more often than not, he uses just one strategy - total silent submission. He struggles to assert himself effectively in interactions with his peers, but what I find even more interesting is that he allows himself to be bullied by students in the years below him even though he could cause those little kids so much damage if he chose to. I think the youngsters are doing it for sport, tormenting the giant in the hope he’ll fly into a rage and chase them.
'What do they say?' I asked him.

'Aw, just say, "You’re fat," and all that.'

'What do you do when they say that?'

'I just go, "rightyho."'

'Oh ok. That’s probably the best way to deal with it.'

'Yeah, I’ve actually learned how to deal with it.'

'How did you used to deal with it?'

'Just shut off.'

'Oh ok. How do you deal with it now?'

'Turn my head and just keep going.'

'So, you used to shut off meaning what?'

'Like I used to ignore ‘em and everything.'

'And now you ignore them as well?’

'I still ignore ‘em, but I just keep playing.'

'So what’s the difference?’

'I used to like shut off and do nothing.'

I don’t perceive a huge difference between turning his head and doing nothing and shutting off and doing nothing. I think he hasn’t really learned how to deal with these situations. He admits that he really doesn’t like these kids, so it does bother him when they tease him.

Then you look at the way he responds to Mike in the cooking classes. He allows Mike to criticise every aspect of his participation in the class, scolding him, taking things off him, talking down to him.
‘I don’t like him. Cos he always puts me down and everything,’ he said.

So I thought, ‘Is this what he means by turning the other cheek? Biting his tongue and putting up with it?’ So I asked him.

‘That day in hospitality – what’s that ginger haired kid called again?’

‘Mike.’

‘Yeah, when I was watching he kept criticising and telling you you were chopping it wrong and stuff. He was being really bossy.’

‘Yeah.’

‘So how did you feel when he was doing that?’

‘Um, I wasn’t really worried. I was like, “Yeah, you do it.”’

‘So you told him to do it himself?’ I asked, knowing that never happened.

‘Mmm.’

‘So how could you have dealt with that situation better?’

‘Um, let him do it in the first place.’

I ask him about how to deal with Mike’s constant criticism.

‘So if he was being bossy and he just wouldn’t stop being bossy, so how would you get him to stop being bossy?’

‘Teacher.’

‘So...what?’

‘I’ll ask the teacher and say that he’s being bossy.’

‘Would you ever think of talking to him?’

‘Not in person.’

‘Why?’
'Because... I don't know why. Me and him don't really get along that much.'

So there it is again, 'telling tales.' It seems to be cropping up everywhere. He says it again when he was being bullied because of his sexual harassment of the girls:

'What did you do?'

'Oh,' he says with a big sigh, 'ran... up here... told the teachers.'

His lack of assertiveness affects other lessons, such as construction where he is prevented from participating by the other boys who don't let him use the tools, using him instead as a gopher to collect their tools. Lenny just obliges. In construction the boys are all working on a path down the side of the sheds. Most of them are working on their own little section. Lenny is being very helpful, lifting the bags of cement mix for the other boys. He's managing to lift the bags easily and they allow him to help without criticism.

The teacher tells the students they have to choose between two options for fixing this steel structure in the ground. Lenny wants to do option one, but the other boys immediately decide on option two, so everyone does option two.

Now I've seen Lenny helping out in the veggie garden and mowing the school lawns; he's very capable. But here he just stands around watching everyone else doing the work. He approaches one of the boys and tries to help lift the frame, but the boy says, 'No.' He uses his initiative and goes over to get a digging tool to help dig the holes to fit the structure in, but another boy takes it from him and begins the task himself. Lenny just lets him take it.

When an African boy takes another tool off Lenny, he tries to be more assertive, but the boy simply says, 'No, no,' and takes it. They need another tool so a boy tells Lenny to go and get it. 'No, not that one,' says one boy when Lenny returns with the wrong tool. Another says, 'That'll do,' and Lenny hands it straight over. The boy tries to make do with the wrong tool before deciding to send Lenny to
go and get the right tool. Lenny fetches it and hands it straight over without being
asked.

At this point the teacher intervenes and assigns Lenny a similar task to do, but as soon as the teacher’s back is turned the small African boy takes over. I wonder why Lenny isn’t more assertive. This boy was half his size.

Eventually everyone has their own task to do so Lenny gets on with the job of tying up the frame unhindered. He does a fine job. I don’t think it’s his lack of manual skills that makes them take over. I wonder if the teacher asking him to be his gopher created this situation.

These learning opportunities could be extremely valuable to Lenny. His self-esteem is not all that is being damaged by his peers continually taking over. Failure to complete tasks results in lower grades and further lowers his self-efficacy for construction, meaning he’s less likely to believe in his ability to get a construction job. Construction is his favourite subject and the one he thinks he’s best at, but the teacher says he’s just ok at construction. Maybe he could be better if he was given more opportunities. The teacher giving him jobs like collecting rubbish and making him ‘offsider’ to ‘keep him out of the way’ means he misses out on even more opportunities to learn valuable skills.

Learning is quite often a cooperative experience and when you don’t feel comfortable sharing, you’re going to miss out.

‘Do you normally join in with class discussions?’ I asked him.

‘Not really.’

‘So like if they’re ever having a discussion about a particular thing and people are putting their hands up – do you do that?’

‘No.’

‘Why?’

‘I don’t know, I just don’t like really talking real...like out loud.’
I do catch him one day in work ed. (where he’s in love with the teacher!) bravely contributing to a class discussion. The teacher really doesn’t have control of the discussion and there are comments flying across the room as students shout out in an attempt to be heard over the din. Lenny doesn’t shout out. He waits until the discussion has disintegrated into chaos and everyone is ignoring the teacher and quietly tells her his answer. She tells him to, ‘Hold that thought,’ because the others are not paying attention. She gets their attention and asks him to repeat the answer now that everyone is listening to him. He gets it wrong. She’s very good about it, but I don’t think she realised how costly it was for him, especially when he has a crush on her.

In work ed. they have to write up ideas for jobs in their work books. The teacher fields responses from everyone as they complete the task. It’s an opportunity to test their ideas before committing them to paper. Lenny doesn’t join in. Neither does he complete the task. When the teacher goes around the room asking them to read out their responses she realises Lenny hasn’t done it and says, ‘You have to think really hard,’ expecting him to come up with three answers off the cuff. Lenny looks quite uncomfortable and he’s probably feeling quite vulnerable now.

Occasionally Lenny shows glimpses of anger in place of assertiveness that suggest he could really explode given the right circumstances. In home ec. Lenny is chopping something. Jamaal yells, ‘Shred it!’ to which Lenny replies, ‘I am! Shredding is this!’ and glares at him until he backs down.

This seldom-seen aggressive side came out when Nathan was having trouble with Liam eating all his food. He asked Lenny to deal with it, but Lenny didn’t fight Liam himself, instead he went around trying to find students who also hated Liam to help fight him. The enemy of my enemy is my friend. This makes it harder to believe that he ‘smashed’ the boy in primary school like he claims, but it’s possible.

‘You’re not a fighter?’

‘No. Not yet.’
'Not yet? What do you mean?'

'I might turn...might become angry,' he said ominously.

'You might become angry?'

'I have a tend to do that sometimes.'

'Oh ok. And what happens when you become angry.'

'I lash out.'

'You hit people or...?'

'No, not at people. Well, I hit walls or something.'

'Oh right, that would hurt.'

'Nah.'

'It doesn't?'

'No, not me.'

'You don’t feel it when you get like that?'

'No.'

I’m really not surprised Lenny resorted to sexually harassing girls to get their attention because he doesn’t seem to have the skills necessary to engage a girl’s attention in a positive way. Take for example his behaviour in the work ed. class where he was desperately courting the attention of the young, very attractive female teacher. First, he shouts at her for being late to class, which she ignores so he does it twice more. He interrupts her when she’s addressing the class by shouting out random questions. Whilst she walks about the room he studies her intensely even though he’s supposed to be reading. He is agitated and rocks in his chair, seeming more like a toddler or an anxious puppy than a seventeen year old boy.
He has learned a valuable lesson from his experiences with Liam, though. He has learned how not to get the girls’ attention. Although I don’t think he actually knows what it was he was doing wrong, he admitted it was a maturity thing, but he’s utterly baffled about how to make appropriate advances.

‘I’ve probably stopped whatever I was doing.’

‘Oh ok.’

‘And become more ma...more mature.’

‘Oh, was it an immaturity thing?’

‘Probably.’

But strangely enough he’s very uncomfortable talking about girls, demonstrating behaviour that is more suited to a boy of ten, than a seventeen year old. When he told me he sometimes goes fishing with Bobby, his friend who I never see but apparently comes to school three days a week, I ask him what he talks about sitting there for hours on end.

‘Do you ever talk about school? About kids at school?’

‘No.’

‘Girls?’

‘No,’ he laughed.

‘What else do you do?’

‘Go the movies,’ he laughed.

‘With [Nathan]?’

‘And some of, erm, some girl mates,’ he said, sounding quite awkward.

‘Some what, sorry?’

‘Some girl friends.’
‘Oh, so you have a girlfriend?’

‘No, just girlfriends,’ he blustered. ‘Girls... that... are... friends,’ he stressed, blushing.278

This immaturity extends to the friends he chooses. He used to hang around with Derek and Jason who were two years below him and play Yu-gi-oh with them, which is an odd choice for a boy his age because it’s designed for much younger kids, but it’s not unheard of for high school students to play it.279 Now he plays handball with the year eights.280 Even Nathan is in the year below. I wonder what he gets out of this relationship with younger boys? Perhaps they look up to him in a way that makes him feel good or perhaps he feels more comfortable with boys who are more aligned with his maturity level. I remember when the support kids all went to the movies and I asked them what they saw. They had all split up to watch different movies, although the majority saw the action movie. Lenny was the only one who selected a children's fantasy movie about a little girl. I remember thinking it was a very odd choice281 but I’m not sure Lenny would have been aware of it because, like the other participants, Lenny’s social perceptions and awareness are problematic.

Social Perception and Awareness

Lenny doesn’t fit in. Again, it’s really subtle things that make him different. For instance, when the boys in his class are all wearing long trousers, Lenny wears shorts, even though it’s cold and rainy and he wears a thin sports uniform jacket when all the other boys just wear their formal shirts.282 And he doesn’t just look different. One time he went to find the gardener and genuinely got lost even though he’s been at this school for five years!283 But I think it’s mostly what he says and does that makes him stand out and I’m convinced he doesn’t know what it is he’s saying and doing to put people off.

‘Do you think you’re good at making friends?’ I asked.

‘Ah, yeah, sort of.’

‘How can you tell?’
‘Depends if I don’t get on their bad side,’ he replied, hinting that, more often than not, new acquaintances don’t really go well.

‘How would you get on their bad side?’

‘Ah...well, I don’t know. I really don’t know. Depending on what I say to em.’

‘Do you say things sometimes that people don’t like?’

‘Probably,’ he said, giving me the distinct impression he didn’t know what it was he was saying. That was reinforced when he told me, ‘Oh, apparently I was doing some bad stuff.’ It’s those words, ‘probably’ and ‘apparently’ that make me stop and think. It sounds very much like he’s been told that he says and does these things but he’s not quite sure which particular aspect of it bothers them. He’s not going to elaborate anyway.

‘So what did they say you were doing?’ I asked.

‘I wouldn’t remember it was ages ago,’ he said dismissively.

Watching him in the construction yard with the other boys I get an insight into what he means when he says he annoys people. They are all just standing around talking and Lenny tries to join in but instead of being submissive to the obvious ‘alpha male’ of the group Lenny begins by ridiculing what he’s saying. He’s quickly shot down and the conversation ends for him right there but why didn’t he know that he needed to show this guy some respect if he was going to be accepted in discussion? Obviously it’s related to his poor social skills but this, in turn, is related to his inability to perceive what the appropriate course of action would be in this situation. He’s also lacking the requisite social skills to allow him to put this plan into action. I think this is also why he insists on going on dates with Nathan: he doesn’t know it’s inappropriate. Interestingly, he knows enough not to let Nathan do the same.

‘So, does he ever let you come on dates with him?’ I asked Nathan.

‘I know he said to me he went out on dates with this girl and I didn’t really find out til afterwards,’ meaning he knows that if he tells Nathan beforehand then
Nathan might do the same as Lenny does to him and show up and try to steal the girl.

He also has some awareness of popularity although he can't identify the popular group in his year.

‘So who would you say were the most popular kids in your year?’

‘Not sure.’

‘The ones that everyone likes?’

‘Umm, say the ones that hang out at the year twelve common room.’

‘Who are they?’

‘Oh, like Zack,’ he said, bitterly, referring to a kid Tom said was, ‘obnoxious and tolerated at best’ but who might appeal to the likes of Lenny, ‘and yeah, that’s all I know at the moment.’

‘You don’t know any of the other names?’ He shook his head in response. ‘So you don’t know any of those guys? You’re not friends with them?’

‘I know ‘em but not off by heart.’

He has enough awareness, though, to know that he should distance himself from the unpopular Nathan as this relationship might be preventing Lenny from achieving social success, which is not totally inaccurate because Nathan is more overtly bullied than Lenny now, but it’s complicated: even without the rejection by association with Nathan, Lenny would still have to contend with his history at the school and his social awkwardness. Another example that demonstrates he has a little social awareness is that he knew people were more likely to help him beat up Liam because Liam was so unpopular.

‘I think for some reason Lenny wanted to get all these people...’ explained Nathan, ‘like he went to the station and he literally like went around all these people and he was like, “Oh, can you help me bash up Liam,” and whatnot. And everyone was like, “Oh, I don’t know.”’
But, really, the other boys were very unlikely to side with him against any
body because he was just as unpopular as Liam. I think this demonstrates a lack
of awareness about peoples’ feelings about him but an accurate awareness of peoples’ feelings about Liam, which is interesting.

Speaking of which, he really doesn’t comprehend his social status. Firstly, he thinks Raymond is his friend, although he doesn’t see him on weekends or sit with him in his mainstream classes. In work ed., for example, Raymond sits with the popular group at the opposite side of the room. Even when they are in the same classroom and they are the only year twelves in the room, they still don’t always sit together. Occasionally Raymond deigns to sit with Lenny in support so he can ask Lenny for help with his work.

‘Whenever he wants help he asks me.’

‘In the classroom?’

‘I always help him. Cos Mr Grade, he called me one of those influence things.’

‘He called you a positive influence?’ I asked, taking a stab in the dark.

‘Mmm.’

‘On Raymond?’

‘Yeah, and everybody could learn off what I do when I read and that.’

‘Ooh,’ I said, still stuck on Lenny being a positive influence on Raymond, ‘what about in construction, does Raymond ask for your help then?’

‘Not really cos he knows what he’s doing.’

‘What about when you need help?’

‘I always ask the teacher or someone else.’
It seems that he’s a fair-weather friend but he does play handball with Raymond. I know this because Nathan told me he went to watch them play and Raymond hit Lenny, ‘for no apparent reason.’ Some friend.

Actually, I think he lacks awareness about his social status in general.

‘I’m actually getting along with people better than in grade eight and nine,’ he said. It could hardly have gotten any worse.

‘Do you think most of the kids in your year like you now?’ I asked.

‘Yeah, they’re starting to,’ he replied with conviction. ‘I’m becoming a part of the group. They’re starting to talk to me more often now.’

‘Why do you think that is?’

‘Because I’ve probably stopped whatever I was doing,’ he replied, again with the words ‘probably’ and ‘whatever’ resonating loudly.

‘So why did you stop what you were doing?’ I asked Lenny.

‘Because I wanted to get good grades and everything.’

‘How was it stopping you getting good grades?’

‘Oh, it was just putting me down,’ he sighed.

‘What was?’

‘Everything that they was saying. They put me down.’

‘And how was that...’

‘It was just putting me more concentrated on what they were saying and everything.’

Do you know what I think? I think he needs to believe that he was being bullied because of the ‘silly things’ he was doing rather than some innate
characteristic. Now that he’s stopped doing these enigmatic things, surely that means the bullying has stopped. So he’s convinced himself that his popularity is on the rise because he’s not doing silly things but, as we know, this simply isn’t true.

‘Cos I want to have...wanna have a good...good end of year, um, good friends cos I don’t want to be enemies...with anybody.’

‘So you think you’re going to manage that? Not being enemies with anybody by the end of the year.’

‘Probably.’

There’s a real optimism there. I wonder how it can be founded, but then I wasn’t there when things were really bad.

‘So is there anyone at school that you would like to be friends with that you’re not friends with?’ I asked.

‘Yeah, some of the grade twelves.’

‘Who?’

‘For instance Zack,’ he replied, referring to the ‘popular’ boy who hangs out in the common room.

‘Oh, you’d like to be his friend?’

‘Yeah.’

‘So why aren’t you his friend?’

‘I don’t know. We like get along but not that good.’

‘Hmm. So if you wanted to be his friend how would you go about being friends with him?’

‘Hmm. Like talking to him.’

‘Do you do that?’
'Sometimes.

'Ok. So do you think he likes you?'

'Don’t know.'

'What kind of vibe do you get about it? What feeling do you get from him?'

'Hmm, like friends...sort of,' he said, unconvincingly.

It’s sad, but perhaps not surprising, when you consider the many changes in his social network. Something is happening to prevent Lenny keeping these relationships going. His relationship with Liam disintegrated and I’m convinced he doesn’t know why. Nathan has told us that Jason and Derek ditched Lenny because he was annoying. I think it’s also false logic that has made him distance himself from Nathan. What is he going to do next to alienate himself from the handball players, if he hasn’t already done so? And where were all these friends when he went to watch the Christian band and had to stand by himself even though people were running about and dancing having a great time all around him. What about when he spent every break time up in support doing jig-saw puzzles with me. Did they miss him? I doubt it. I wonder if he knows the answer to that question. I doubt that too.

Watching Lenny I see that his chosen strategy for avoiding being bullied is to stay quiet, keep to himself and turn the other cheek if anything kicks off. It means he spends a lot of time alone and silent. He walks to class alone always. In one hospitality class he arrives alone and sits alone in the corner. There are two boys sitting near him but he isn’t part of their group and they don’t include him. There’s a space between Lenny and the boys and, when a fourth boy arrives, you would expect he’d sit in the space but, instead, he squeezes in between the other two in an obvious attempt not to sit with Lenny. He watches everyone else working, looking a little lost because he’s been kicked out of the group. Lenny arrives to construction alone. The other students are chatting but he only talks to the teacher. There’s lots of chatting and shouting going on but not Lenny who keeps to himself. During support Lenny wanders alone up and down the hall outside.
and there are times when Lenny is in the lesson but is so unremarkable that I have nothing to write at all about him. When he does say something, it’s often inappropriate in some way so the others laugh at him. For example in Hospitality when the teacher said something about hygiene in the kitchen and Lenny piped up about working at McDonalds making the others laugh at him. He shouts at the teacher when she arrives for being late and no-one laughs so he shouts again, twice more. He over-hears a slightly funny comment and laughs too loudly, getting stares from the boy and his friend.

Lenny is the poster-child for poor judgement. With the sexual harassment episode he followed Liam’s lead right into the lion’s den and was eaten alive. He then did something particularly offensive and decided to share this secret with Nathan who immediately told anyone and everyone who would listen, thereby marking Lenny as a pervert for the rest of his school career. As we’re talking about bad judgement, he showed very bad judgment, to say the least, when he did what he did but then used further bad judgement in telling Nathan about it. The point is, somewhere inside, Lenny thought it was an ok thing to do and, what’s more, he thought that others would think it was ok too. I believe it shows a lack of awareness about what is appropriate, which is slightly worrying.

This lack of awareness extends to Lenny’s interactions with his teachers. When he finished a jig-saw puzzle in support, Tom had it mounted and displayed it in the classroom. But when I asked him, ‘So, Mr Grade was proud of it because he put it on the wall?’

He answered, ‘Yeah, he was glad that it was done,’ making me think he missed the point somewhat as he implies that Tom just wanted it out of the way when, in reality, I think Tom wouldn’t have put it on the wall unless he wanted to show Lenny he was proud of his accomplishment. It’s unfortunate Lenny didn’t pick up on that.

I asked him about his perceptions of the teachers’ feelings towards him.

‘Which teachers don’t like you?’

‘Um, I don’t know,’ he replied.
'Not many?'
'I don’t know.'
'You kind of get a feeling for whether someone likes you or not, hey?’ I persevered.
'Not really. Not with teachers that don’t like me – I don’t know.'
'So which teachers do you think like you?’
'Mrs Grace.'
'Why do you think she likes you?’
'Sometimes if I get in trouble we work it out.’
'Ok,’ I responded, confused.
'Yeah.'
'So why would that mean she likes you?’ I asked.
'Cos when I’m not in trouble I always come up and talk to her.’
'Ok. Cool,’ I replied, wondering if we were having the same conversation.
'And what makes you think she likes you?’
'Cos if she wants help I help her. Cos I’m one of those people that likes to help,’ he replied, persistently not answering the question.

'It’s not the only example.
'The other day in construction the teacher asked you to be his offsider – do you remember?’ I asked.
'Mmm.’
'Why do you think he did that? Why did he ask you to help him out?’
'Cos I can help him.’
‘How?’

‘Er, because he’s not really good at construction,’ he replied, flooring me with this monumental misjudgement of his teacher’s motives. I had thought the teacher did it because Lenny was good at construction and could maybe show the other boys what to do but a brief conversation with the teacher put me straight. It turns out that he makes Lenny gopher to keep him out of the way because he doesn’t mix well with others. That’s an interesting observation because, in her own words, Lenny doesn’t, ‘mix well,’ with his sister either.

**Brittany’s Story**

You wouldn’t imagine Brittany would be the type of girl who would have social problems. A typical fifteen-year-old, she cares about her appearance and always looks neat, clean and fashionable (within reason considering the uniform) with her long hair straightened and styled, her eye-brows perfectly shaped, and French-manicured finger nails. But underlying this is a lack of confidence and self-loathing.

‘I don’t want to be Brittany.’

‘How come?’

‘Cos Brittany’s stupid,’ sounding almost childlike.

‘You’re not stupid.’

‘Yeah, I am.’

‘So can you think back to a time when [the teacher] was trying to teach you something and you didn’t get it? How did you feel?’

‘Like I sucked. Gave up.’

‘Why do you think it was that you couldn’t understand it?’

‘Don’t know. I wasn’t smart enough. I don’t know. It’s just difficult.’
She feels her teachers do little to relieve those feelings.

‘Why don’t you like [Mr Carson]?’ I ask.

‘Because he doesn’t get me. He doesn’t help me right.’

‘Can you explain that?’

‘Like when you’re in his class he’ll give you book and you’ll just have to look at it and do your work as best as possible and if you don’t get it just try your best. Put your hand up and ask him a question he’s like “blah, blah, blah, blah, blah,” really quickly and you’re just like, “what? Say it slowly.” It’s difficult with him.’

‘Do you think that he knows [how to help you] and just doesn’t do it or does someone just need to tell him?’

‘I think he knows. He just doesn’t do anything.’

She tells me about learning to read in the glare of public scrutiny.

‘When the teacher asked me to read I had to say, like, “I can’t read,” or “I can’t...I haven’t got my glasses,” or something stupid to get out of it,’ she admitted.

‘Oh, right.’

‘Something so I wouldn’t have to seem dumb.’

Her brother, Lenny, is two years her senior and attends the same school. Her relationship with him is strained, at best, characterised by, ‘abuse and yelling and screaming,’ to use her words. In fact, in the interviews Lenny only refers to his sister once in passing to tell me his dad wants her to finish year twelve and Brittany only mentions him four times, twice to tell me they don’t get on, once to tell me her parents don’t intervene when he is physically assaulting her, which he does regularly, and once to tell me about a painful memory involving him.

Unfortunately they also share a classroom.
‘[Mr Grade] comes around and he tells me I’m going in support,’ she said, ‘and I was like, “I don’t want to be in there!”’

‘Why didn’t you want to be in there?’

‘Because my brother’s in there.’

‘Oh, ok.’

‘And Lenny and I don’t exactly mix well.’

However, when she wants something from him she becomes very coy and almost babyish making a confusing and complicated dynamic between the two.

Brittany mentions her mother twice; once when she tells me about her mother meeting with a school psychologist, ‘She had a interview with mum but that’s when she told mum I was gonna learn at my own rate.’ The second occasion was when she had fallen out with her friend Danni and looked to her mother for support. She never mentions her father which is unusual for the participants in this study. What isn’t unusual, though, is Brittany experienced significant social difficulties at Primary school.

_Bullying_

‘In primary school I was like a loser...’ said Brittany, looking me in the eye.

‘Oh really?’

‘Like everyone would be, like, pick on me and stuff.’

It’s this brash, naked honesty that endears her to me. A few teachers find her loud and annoying, and she is, but it’s obviously to hide the raw vulnerability.

When she started at Southside she truly believed she could make a new start.

‘After three weeks of actually settling into school,’ she said, ‘the whole of grade eight goes away and we settle in again and get to know everyone, have all these activities and stuff. And then we had these activities and I just felt like I could
talk to anyone and they won’t, like, look at me like, “Who are you, why are you talking to me?” They’ll just talk to me like I’m normal, I’m a human, not, like, judge me the way I’m looking and stuff,’ she said, revealing so much more than intended.

Though life certainly is better - she has a group of friends, problematic though those friendships are, and is bullied much less - she can’t escape who she is and children can be cruel.

‘Yeah, everyone calls me a sped and that...’ shrugged Brittany.

‘A what??’

‘A sped. A retard,’ she said, matter-of-factly. Just like Nathan, it’s this bland acceptance of these cruel taunts. ‘Everyone’s like, ‘You’re a sped, you’re a retard, blah, blah, blah.’ And this is without being officially labelled with learning disabilities, remember. They know she can’t read and tease her about it:

‘I heard you say, “What is a zygote?” that’s when I came to help you,’ I said. ‘And a boy in front of you shouted, “Read the text book and you’ll know,” and when he looked back and saw it was you he said, “Oh, get someone to read it for you.”’

‘Hmm.’

‘I think you told him to, “f-off,” or something.’

‘Hmm,’ she replied, mulling it over.

‘So why do you think he said that?’

‘Cos he knew I was in support.’

She’s also had some clashes with Priscilla, an Egyptian girl with a fiery temper.

‘She called me something, cos back then I was really hot-headed and like if you said something, like, really mean to me I’d like, “Blah, blah, blah,” and go off my head at them.’ So she retaliated. ‘Um, yeah, so she’s said something and I’ve gone,’ she clicked her fingers, ‘BAM and gone off my head and then she didn’t act
like I was giving out stuff and then she didn't like what I was taking...what I was giving, so she started giving back..."  

These events made school a less friendly place to be, especially as she was having difficulties with her close friend, Danni.

**Problematic Friendships**

Trying to untangle a very complicated relationship, it seems that Brittany and Danni were thrown together at the beginning of year eight. I find it interesting that even before the students were assessed and placed in support, they had already developed into a group which would become the learning support kids. That is, Brittany, Danni, Derek, Joe and Jamie all ended up in support but were friends way before then. The group also comprises Buzz (Ash Beverley), Carl and Charlie who aren't in support but are social misfits. The question is, did they identify a kindred spirit in each other or were they thrown together when everyone else rejected them? It's impossible to say, but something to think about.

As the only two girls in the group Brittany and Danni were best friends for the first three terms. This is when Lacey came to Southside. Brittany immediately became best friends with Lacey to the exclusion of Danni.

‘Yeah, in grade eight we were best friends,’ said Danni, ‘all the way until like the year... until the end of... like til the last term. We were best friends in grade eight and that until term four and then Lacey came along and we were all best friends.’

Then the jealousy and tension began.

‘The reason me and Danni ain’t friends anymore,’ revealed Brittany, ‘is cos...she was going out with this guy and he called up Lacey’s house saying like, “You come to my house, blah, blah, blah, my dog and stuff,” and yeah I got in trouble because apparently he was my boyfriend when he wasn’t - he was Danni’s.’

‘Who thought he was your boyfriend?’
'Um Nan and Pop – that’s Lacey’s nan and pop - and Danni’s parents and so, like Danni didn’t wanna stick up for me and tell them, “Well it’s not her boyfriend, it’s mine.” She’s, “Yeah, it’s her boyfriend,” but...

‘Right,’ I said, trying to keep up.

‘Yeah, so and that happened and we were, like, fighting for the beginning of last year. And then as we got through the year we, like, got over it and we was, like, ‘whatever’ and now we’re just, like, friends and stuff.’

But that’s not the way Danni tells it.

‘My dad actually doesn’t like Brittany because of how she dresses and that cos she like wears short, short...um...skirts around my house,’ gushed Danni, ‘and my dad got real angry and that...and my dad told Lacey out the back...and Lacey probably told Brittany but I didn’t care... I just like pulled out of the group, started being friends with someone else.’

‘Yeah, her parents called me a tramp and stuff,’ admitted Brittany, ‘so I was just like...

‘Oh ok!’ I exclaimed. It’s that brash honesty again.

‘Yeah, so I was just like, “r-i-i-ight,”’ she said, sounding offended, ‘if that’s how you wanna be and I told my mum and my mum’s just gone, “Yeah you can’t do that, you’re not going to be friends with her,” and I was just like ‘Alright’ and for a while there we just stopped talking, we split up. Me and Lacey went our way and Danni went her way. But then later on during the year she gave us a note saying she wanted to be our friends again.

Then Lacey left. ‘Um, my best friend isn’t at this school any more. She left,’ admitted Brittany tearily.

‘What’s her name?’

‘Her name is Lacey. She was a gorgeous girl. I loved her, but, um, no, she goes up to Northfield now, so...’
‘Oh ok. So when she left what did you do then? Did you have another best friend?’

‘Um, no. I promised her no more best friends - she’s gonna be my best friend,’ Brittany whispered.

So where does that leave Danni, you might ask?

‘Danni’s already made it that she doesn’t want us to be best friends any more so I was like “alright,”’ Brittany stated, sounding a bit offended. ‘[She’s] not allowed over my house any more so I don’t really have Danni over, um, because of the whole incident.’ Which is an odd basis for a friendship, considering Danni and Brittany sit together in almost every lesson and hang together every break time. It seems that the two feel mutual distrust and perhaps lingering resentment which gets in the way of any real chance of support for each other, which could be so crucial for them both.

‘Um, yeah, I can talk to Danni,’ said Brittany, ‘but then again I can’t really talk to her because I told her something cos I thought someone was cheating on someone and, um, she went off and told the person what I thought and, like, she thought I was the one who broke hers two up, those two up.’

‘Oh, ok.’

‘And I like got in trouble so I don’t really trust Danni any more. She doesn’t understand me. Like, if I’m upset I can’t talk to her.’ Lack of trust and rejection is hardly the basis for a satisfying, valuable friendship. Not surprisingly they have had their share of clashes this year.

‘Think it’s would have to be when me and Danni had the fight.’

‘When was that again?’ I asked.

‘The beginning of...year nine.’

‘Did people, like, side with her?’
‘Kind of you could say that. Cos like she’d go out and put her story over mine. And like say her story is a lot badder. When I’m the one that’s been the one that’s gotten the wrong done. But she walked out and she’s like, “Yeah Brittany’s being a b...Brittany’s being a bitch,” and just telling me I’m just like a...I’m all these names and stuff. It’s like, “Come on, are you serious? I’m the one that’s being done wrong and you wanna go out and stay all this stuff.”

‘Did people believe her?’

‘At the time, yeah, they did.’

And things seem to be deteriorating.

‘Danni and I aren’t even good friends,’ she admitted.

‘Not even good friends anymore?’

‘We’re friends, but that’s it.’

Danni seems to feel the same way, telling me that her and the boys want Brittany out of the group now because of her promiscuous behaviour, but that could be jealousy on Danni’s part. Regardless, these don’t seem to be the feelings of a close friend.

‘So what’s been happening with Brittany and that this week?’ I asked Danni.

‘She’s all good and that. We’re both good but half the time she gets on my nerves. We want her out of the group kind of thing because she’s annoying. The group...hate how she acts half the time cos she’s flirting with the guys and she’s going around doing this and that and drinking and that and I didn’t like that and I just don’t want her ending up like pregnant and that. They call her like a slut and all that. Sometimes I just want like me and Jamie and Joe, and Brittany not to be there because Brittany, like, kind of gets me angry a little bit and that and just sits there and sometimes when guys come up, she just hugs them and that and, like, that’s flirting.

She was asked, ‘Do you hate her?’ to which she replied, ‘Sometimes...cos she hangs around Pippa and that and ever since she hangs around Pippa she’s just
like...Brittany chose to do it but I don’t want Brittany ending up coming to school, “Oh, I got laid and I’m pregnant,” and stuff like that."³⁵⁶

‘Who’s Pippa?’

‘This chick in grade eleven and that. She hangs around my brother. And she like...like today I got like a little pissed off because, um, I was walking and all she did is wave to Brittany and not me so I was just like, “it’s all good.” She’s nice and all that but half the time I get annoyed because Brittany takes off and hangs with her and, like, tonight Brittany and her are going to be going drinking apparently.’³⁵⁷ This is something Danni has no time or respect for.

‘Sometimes she just flirts with nearly everyone,’ said Danni looking disgusted. ‘And half the time I just sit there and I just look at her and she’s just, like, flirting around.’

‘Why does she do that?’

‘I don’t know. To get attention or something...I’m not sure...she does that to, like, every boy.’³⁵⁸

It seems that Brittany is doing her best to make the move away from Danni again, just as she did when Lacey arrived, but Brittany doesn’t mention Pippa at all and I don’t see them together so I wonder what the basis of the relationship is.

Danni has her own ‘absent best friend’, Libby, who moved overseas³⁵⁹ who was, ‘Way cooler [than Brittany] cos she wasn’t, like, way up herself and that.’³⁶⁰ according to Danni. In Libby’s absence Danni claims Jamie as her closest friend,³⁶¹ just as in Lacey’s absence Brittany claims Carl as her closest friend.

‘My closest friend as, like a guy, have...would have to be Carl.’³⁶²

But I think even this relationship is problematic for Brittany.

‘Me and Carl, we’re like tight and stuff so I can talk to him about anything but then again I don’t really talk to him about that cos it’s like girl stuff and you can’t really talk to guys about girl stuff cos it just doesn’t work.’³⁶³
This may be true. Carl may be her closest friend but she only ever mentions him to say he’s one of the group or that they are ‘tight’. She has no anecdotes of their relationship and acknowledges she finds it hard to talk to him.

She also claims Buzz as a member of her friendship group and says that they sit together in class but Danni told me that, in an email to her Buzz wrote, ‘Brittany’s a skank...that’s why we don’t like her.’ By Brittany’s own admission Charlie, another member of her group, calls her a sped and a retard.

‘Lately he’s been kind of annoying and very annoying,’ she admitted. ‘He’s, like, pissed me off so many times.’

Perhaps it’s not surprising, considering this social dissatisfaction, that she’s socially aspirational, trying to break into a different crowd.

Loneliness and Social Dissatisfaction

I really don’t know if Brittany has ever felt consciously lonely or not. If she has, she doesn’t feel comfortable talking about it, just like her brother Lenny.

‘Have you ever felt lonely at school?’ I asked her.

‘Have I ever felt lonely?’

‘Yeah, do you know what feeling lonely is all about?’

‘I’m not sure. I think there’s been a couple of times I’ve just been like, I don’t have anyone to talk to.’

‘That’s the kind of thing. How did that feel? Having no-one to talk to.’

‘Um, I’m just like shut down. It’s like, “what?”’ she shook her head, miming being dazed and confused, ‘and then, like, click back in when people try talking to me but, um, yeah,’ she replied, giving me the feeling she was trying to tell me but then had to pull back, doing a complete u-turn to avoid having to admit she had no-one to talk to.

‘So has there ever been a time when you haven’t had anyone to talk to?’ I asked, trying to make sense of the previous reply.
'Um, yeah, I can talk to Danni, but then again I can’t really talk to her because I told her something cos I thought someone was cheating...’ she went on, with a non-too-subtle redirection that didn’t answer the question. She wants me to see her as a popular, well-liked girl. I’m afraid I’m not buying it.

She admitted to feeling lonely when her best friend, Lacey, left and told me how that felt, ‘Oh when I get like lonely and stuff I just don’t want to be at school. I shut down from everything, like when I’m upset you can’t even get through to me, you can’t even talk to me because I’m just like,’ she shrugged, ‘and it’s, like, it’s really hard for me to be at school when I’m...I’m putting more strain on the teachers cos they can’t teach me because I’m not in the mood for learning cos I’m upset and stuff.’

I remember thinking that was an odd response. Why would she be concerned about putting more strain on the teachers? It sounded out of character and I suspected it might have been Brittany just telling me what I wanted to hear. I remember thinking that, ‘well, maybe she really hasn’t ever felt lonely.’ I think even if she’s not aware of her feelings of loneliness (and I’m not convinced), her social dissatisfaction is there for all to see.

When her best friend, Lacey, left Southside, Brittany took it very badly.

‘How did you feel when she left?’

‘A bit tired and annoyed and upset cos like she was the only thing keeping from working and stuff,’ she said, choking back tears, ‘but now that she’s gone...it’s like...I’m like getting better but...’ she said, her voice trailing off.

‘Are you upset?’

‘I’m still upset that she’s gone but, like, I still get to see her sometimes.’

‘So she still lives near you?’

‘No she actually lives up at North Village. I only get to go up there at the...like, holidays and stuff.’
Brittany and Danni were friends before Lacey came along so, naturally, they fell back into their old habitual friendship but too much water had gone under the bridge for that friendship to be a success.

‘Danni’s already made it that she doesn’t want us to be best friends any more so I was like, “alright,”’ she shrugged, sounding a little offended. ‘Danni and I aren’t even good friends.’ Because, of course, Danni has her own absent best friend, Libby, and doesn’t need another, or rather, says she doesn’t because Brittany promised Lacey, ‘No more best friends - she’s gonna be my best friend,’ and Danni wasn’t going to admit she had a vacancy in the best friend department unless Brittany also did.

As a result of this tension the observation data features comments like, ‘Brittany and Danni sit separately outside the classroom,’ ‘Jamie sits between Brittany and Danni,’ and Brittany admits she doesn’t get what she needs out of any of her friendships.

‘So, who else have you got to talk to then?’ She didn’t answer so I offered, ‘Carl?’

‘Not talking to Carl about girls’ stuff.’

‘Who have you got to talk to about all this then?’

‘No-one.’

‘What about Lacey. Can you email her about this stuff?’

‘Yeah, but she’s all the way over there and I don’t want to interrupt her...stuff,’ she said bitterly.

‘What do you mean?’

‘Like, she has her own problems and we don’t exactly get to see each other or anything. And if I just told her everything that was going on she’d been like, “Voom! Annoying.”’ It doesn’t sound like she places much value on this relationship either.
‘And if you’re in trouble then Danni would help you out?’ I asked. She shook her head.

‘I don’t really trust Danni any more. She doesn’t understand me. Like, if I’m upset I can’t talk to her.’

It must be a relief to her to have her boyfriend for company on the weekend, but she admits that she’d like to see more of Danni at the weekend and she seems a little wistful when I ask her about the other kids.

‘What do you think the other kids in your year do on weekends?’

‘Um, I don’t know. Go out, movies, shopping…’

‘Do you do that kind of stuff?’

‘Yeah.’

‘And how often do you think the other kids go out with their friends?’

‘Probably every weekend.’

So where does that leave her? Desperately trying to find a place to belong she turns to Pippa who shows her a version of popularity that Brittany can aspire to, which is characterised by drinking and having sex with boys. I think this is going to backfire on her, though, because she will continue to struggle to fit in without adequate social skills and this promiscuity is a double-edged sword.

Social Skills

Brittany can often be quite aggressive, but she has real difficulty being assertive. When someone won’t do what she wants, she either gives up or gets angry, in pretty much equal measures.

‘How do you get someone to listen to you?’ I asked.

‘Talk.’

‘Hmm. What if they’re not listening?’
'Say their name.'

'What if they still don't listen?'

'Don't worry about it.'

'What if it's important that they listen to you?'

'Scream at them.'

'Is that the best way to do it?'

'No.'

'What's the best way to do it?'

'Get them to shut up and listen to you.'

'How do you do that?'

'Um, say, "Listen to me!"' she shouts. She doesn't wait for a convenient opportunity to interject, she doesn't make those noises and gestures that tell someone you want to be involved in the conversation, she just shouts. But only when she feels confident shouting and drawing attention to herself. More often than not she allows the conversation to move on, even when she wants to participate:

'She starts talking over me that's when I get angry and drop it,' she says of Alev, a confident, bossy and outgoing girl who is in her Drama class

'She talks over me.'

'What could you do about that?'

'Get her to shut up. Ask the teacher.'

Again, employing the teacher to fight her battles. Alev is much more socially skilled and accepted than Brittany, even though she is a little bossy. Brittany demonstrates her awareness of this by sulking instead of employing her other, more aggressive, techniques. She's well aware of the social order in this regard and won't challenge Alev.
‘Do you ever join in class discussions?’

‘Yeah, but not that anyone ever listens to me.’

‘What do you mean?’

‘In drama we have to do this thing where we have to make up a play – that’s what I had just then.’

‘The Shakespeare thing?’ I asked.

‘Yeah...We have to have a discussion on how we want to do it and today it worked but the other day...it didn’t work because the people in my group kept talking over me so I just thought like, “Ok,” and I just stopped putting my thoughts in and then she turns around and says, “Can we kick these two out?” and then I got really angry.’

‘Why [did they want to kick you out]?’

‘Because she thought we wasn’t doing anything but we couldn’t do anything because she’d talk over us.’

‘Was everybody talking over you or was it just her?’

‘Every time I tried to put my ideas in someone talked over me and at one stage I was putting my hand up like I was in a classroom. Like I was talking to the teacher and then even when I did put my hand up she didn’t even answer me.’

‘Ok. So how were you trying to talk? What were you doing to join in?’

‘We have to do this war cry thing...’

‘Yeah.’

‘Our heads are down and I wanted to bring them up, not like slowly and every time I tried to put that in she’d look at me and be like, “Blah, blah, blah,” and keep going and I’d be like, “Can you listen to me?”’

‘Well how did you say it, what were you saying?’
‘I was like, “Can we do this?”’ she said, dead pan. ‘And then she’d just keep talking then I’d talk to Buzz about it and he’d be like, “I reckon we should,” so I tried telling her again and she still ignored me so I gave up. I was like, “Well, fine then,” and when she said, “Can we kick these two out?” I was like, “f-you!” and I walked out.’

She seems to get angry a lot. Particularly when she’s frustrated and unable to assert herself in conversations. It happens with Danni quite a lot.

‘She starts talking over me that’s when I get angry and drop it,’ she complained about Danni. So she can’t even get her friend to listen or take turns in conversation.

‘You let me finish what I was saying before you said something,’ she said of our conversations together. I secretly think that’s why she comes to the interviews; someone to talk to. ‘She’d talk over me,’ she continued. ‘That’s what got me upset. It’s ok if she wants to talk about that, like, cos I’ll talk to her about her stuff but when she starts talking over me that’s when I get angry and drop it and stop talking about it because there’s no point talking about it if she’s going to just talk over you.’

So sometimes she gets angry and sulks and sometimes she gets angry and lashes out.

‘When I was in primary school I was a very angry child,’ she confessed. ‘If I’m having a bad day I’ll take it out on everyone.’

‘Now when we talked the other day you said you don’t do that anymore, lash out at somebody.’

‘I do sometimes but that’s only when I’m really, really angry.’

‘Hmm. So you said that you’d learnt to control it – let things kind of wash over you. So, what’s different today?’

‘That day I wasn’t angry. I can like hold my anger but it’s been building up for ages that’s why, like, I haven’t lashed out yet – I don’t think I will. But like...’

‘You nearly had a go at Donovan just then, hey?’
‘Yeah. But it was only cos he was like...I’m in crazy stage and he wants to like bag me out because I’m upset and stuff.’

‘Oh yeah, that was totally insensitive of him.’

‘Like, I won’t, like...like I wouldn’t really chuck my phone at him,’ she means she wouldn’t throw it with force because she did actually throw it at him when he teased her.

‘You did break your phone when you threw it though.’

‘Well, no, the back just came off.’

She has no problem using her anger to get her own way in the support classroom. At one point Geoff, the Junior teacher, takes her outside to tell her off for not using the calculator when he’d already told her to. Her voice starts to rise as she whines, ‘You’re pissing me off when I was working quietly.’ When she comes back in she starts playing with her phone so Geoff takes it. Brittany throws her work on the floor, puts her head on her arms and starts to cry. After a while of being ignored she storms off out of the class. She soon returns, storms around then sits outside. No point in having a strop unless she has an audience.

She obviously wants Geoff’s attention but lacks the skills to get it in a positive way and bad attention is still attention. She’s not good at competing for attention either. In the support room she only has Danni to compete with and their antics are quite amusing, taking it in turns to show off about the most banal things like having a cold, or menstrual cramps. She sneezes loudly saying, ‘Aahhhchooo.’ She throws her bag loudly on the floor and puts her feet on the desk. ‘Feet down please, Brittany,’ says Geoff in response. I can see why teachers find her irritating. Perhaps she believes she won’t get attention for being smart, because she thinks she’s stupid, and she doesn’t seem to get much attention for her learning difficulties, so this is the only thing she can think of.

When Alev is hogging the attention in drama, Brittany gets up out of the circle, turns her chair around and huffs, sitting back down. She raises her hand. The teacher tells her to put it down. The teacher asks a question and all the students shout out their responses. Brittany shouts loudest. The teacher rewards
her with a direct question to which she gives a silly answer. The teacher asks her to, ‘pay attention please.’ Brittany is fidgeting in her chair. Another girl asks a question and Brittany shouts over her. The teacher ignores the outburst so Brittany starts getting frustrated and begins to moan and whinge.  

She can be very silly, particularly when Geoff is involved. I think she clearly has a crush on him and her strategies for courting his attention are, by turn, juvenile and disturbing.

One lesson Geoff was teaching and the girls were supposed to be in another lesson. Brittany, Danni and Katie come to the door and knock. Geoff ignores them and continues teaching. Brittany, giggling, knocks on each and every window down the corridor to get a reaction from Geoff.

It’s worse when she’s actually in the lesson with him. One lesson Brittany is trying very hard to flirt with Geoff but it’s merely causing him irritation. She says to him, ‘You’re my favourite teacher,’ and lies on the desk in front of him, stretched out seductively. Geoff tells her to sit up.

She must be perplexed because it seems to work with the boys in class. For example, towards the end of the science lesson the work the teacher left has run out and the cover teacher has lost interest. The students start to move around the room. Jamie and Joe stay together and chat near Danni who has her head and chest on the desk, face down. Brittany puts her feet up, her bare legs stretched out provocatively on the desk which wasn’t lost on the boys. She doesn’t often flirt with Jamie because he is Danni’s special friend but one lesson in support when Danni had gone home early, Brittany took full advantage. As soon as Jamie comes in she ditches Katie and starts flirting with Jamie. She cuddles up to him and tells Joe to sit down with them so she could lie between them. She sits between the two boys holding Jamie’s hand and slapping him playfully as they watch a movie. She’s giggling and touching Jamie’s knee and tickling his ribs. There is no supervision so I go and tell Tom who comes to separate them. After this she lays back on the beanbag, her skirt drawn up exposing her thighs and her legs open.
It hasn’t escaped Danni’s attention that Brittany has some pretty full-on flirting techniques.

‘Half the time I just sit there and I just look at her,’ says Danni of her friend, ‘and she’s just like flirting around.’ So much so that Danni’s parents called Brittany a ‘tramp’ and told Danni to stay clear of her.

Her moves are obvious and unrefined (not to mention downright embarrassing) but they will have an audience. I wonder if she’s prepared for that.

She shows her immaturity when she came to Thursday Lunch Club the first time to work on the puzzle. It was very early on when we only had the border completed. Danni and I were working quite hard to get the first few pieces to fit but Brittany was having no success so I watched to see what she’d do. She became frustrated and petulant and started to jam incorrect pieces together, banging them down with her fist. The puzzle was located in Brittany’s form room and, the next day, when we went to work on the puzzle all the pieces Danni and I had pieced together had been dismantled but the border remained intact. I don’t know that it was Brittany, but I strongly suspect it was. I think she was humiliated by her inability to find any pieces, when, in reality, it was merely lack of patience, which is essential for this type of group activity. A major factor in Brittany’s inability to learn effective social skills is her limited social perceptions and awareness.

Social Perceptions and Awareness

With a little more confidence and refinement Brittany could be a real siren. She’s blossomed into an attractive young woman and is clearly loving the attention she’s getting for her coltish body. She looks and sounds like the popular girls, using their dialect, ‘and stuff,’ using incorrect grammar such as, ‘the reason me and Danni ain’t friends anymore,’ and phrases used by Australian teenagers such as, ‘we’re not, like, tight,’ and, of course, the indispensable filler, ‘we were like fighting for the beginning of last year. And then as we got through the year we like got over it and we was like ‘whatever’ and now we’re just like friends and stuff.’ She knows how to have her hair highlighted and straightened to look like the other girls and tweezes her eyebrows, manicures her nails and wears her socks the right way: ‘casually’ relaxed so they are neither up nor down. She does it all with an unstudied
air which makes me think she has more social awareness than the others. Yet, she’s still not popular. I’m sure she finds it perplexing too.

She tries to join in and banter with the other girls but she somehow overplays it or misses the mark. As we’re waiting for the science teacher to arrive Brittany sees a girl across the courtyard and shouts out, ‘Been for a cigarette, have you?’ in an unnecessarily loud voice. The girl is clearly embarrassed and glares over at Brittany saying, ‘You’re so loud.’ It happens again whilst we’re waiting for the drama teacher to arrive. She’s showing off and being unnecessarily loud. Then there are other little things like when we were watching a movie together and the character’s brother dies, Brittany exclaims, ‘She’s crying. Why is she crying?’ And in drama she shouts over for another girl to, ‘chuck us a pillow,’ but the girl refuses at first before giving in and throwing a cushion towards her. Brittany yells, ‘No throwing cushions!’ perhaps as an attempt at humour but the girl just looks confused.

Brittany doesn’t seem able to identify the popular group either.

‘So who are the most popular kids in your year would you say?’

‘No-one really.’

‘There’s no popular kids?’

‘We don’t really put anyone into popularity. We’re all just friends.’

You could argue that she knows enough to know that Pippa and her friends are more popular than Danni and the boys so she’s making the move into Pippa’s group as a social climbing exercise, but it seems to be Danni making the decision to separate, not Brittany. As a result Brittany is looking around and she’s managed to find another friend, but for how long? I’m not sure whether she is aware of Pippa’s popularity or not.

I ask a couple of teachers about the popular girls in Brittany’s year and we agree that Beth and Katie are probably the most likely candidates. These are the coolest girls who sit with the coolest boys and ooze charm and worldliness.
watched them all in Marine to see how they treat Brittany and Danni. Katie, Beth and Amy sit at the central table with a handful of boys. There’s lots of giggling and flirting going on at the table but the rest of the room is quite subdued. Danni and Brittany sit together to the side, much quieter than I’m used to. They are usually the life and soul of the party in support. Katie puts the television remote control to her ear like a telephone and talks to an imaginary caller. Brittany looks around to see what the joke is as Katie’s companions start laughing. Katie glares back at her as if to say, ‘What are you looking at?’

I decide to ask Brittany about these girls.

‘In Marine, there are some girls...like really giggly girls?’

‘Beth...’

‘Yeah that lot, there are about three of them. Are you friends with those guys?’

‘Yeah, we talk but we’re not like tight.’

‘So you don’t like see each other on weekend or anything?’

‘No. It’s just school. We see each other, “Hello,” she waved, ‘keep walking. It’s not like full conversation with them.’

‘Do you talk to them in class?’

‘Yeah, sometimes.’

I see no evidence of her talking to them in class or outside the gym where they hang out or even waving to them in the corridors. So I ask her about them again.

‘So you said to me that you were friends with Katie and Beth.’

‘Katie?’

‘Girl with blonde hair in Marine? Braces. Plaits?’

‘Oh yeah.’

‘And Beth.’
'Is she kind of dark?' she asked, making me check my notes. She said she was friends with those girls and now she doesn’t know who I’m talking about.

‘Would you rather sit with those guys than with Danni?’

‘I don’t know I’m kind of all over the place at the moment.’

‘How do you mean?’

‘One time I’ll be sitting with them then I’ll be sitting with Danni...’ she said. She’s trying to convince me that she sits with these girls, but why? To try and convince me of her popularity in the face of all evidence to the contrary? Perhaps it something to do with her perception that things are better now than they used to be.

‘In primary school I was like a loser...’ she admitted.

‘Oh really?’

‘Like, everyone would be, like, pick on me and stuff.’

‘So what’s changed? Why are you not ‘the loser’ any more?’ I asked, indicating speech marks with my fingers.

‘I don’t know,’ she answered, sounding genuinely baffled.

She really has no way of judging. When I ask her how she can tell if people like her or not she offers a very confusing reply.

‘Um, just, like, when you like look at someone you can tell, like, whether they actually like you or not and when I talk to someone, I don’t talk like, like, um, how can you put it? Like when you’re talking to someone you, like, explain, like, you say...you be all nice, right? If they don’t like you they’ll just stop talking and walk away or something and then, like, you can tell.'

No subtlety there then. I don’t think she actually knows how to tell if someone likes her or not which must make it hard to judge her popularity.

She doesn’t know why she wasn’t popular in primary school but she had real hope that Southside would be different. When she first started at Southside they all went on a camp and that was the first time she had felt accepted.
‘I just felt like I could talk to anyone and they won’t like look at me, like, “Who are you, why are you talking to me?” They’ll just talk to me like I’m normal, I’m a human, not, like, judge me the way I’m looking and stuff.’ I was,’ she paused, grinning, ‘SO HAPPY! I was, like, my cheeks hurt that much, like, cos in primary school I never laughed. The most I laughed was, like, one day and, like, the next day would be, like, GAY but, like, I came here I was, like, smiling, laughing, my cheeks started hurting I was, like, “Ahh! It hurts!”’

But, as I’ve already told you, there have been problems all along, even within her own friendship group. She talks about Danni and the boys like they are close, but they say mean things about her behind her back and Danni makes it clear she doesn’t want to be best friends. I was surprised when I went to watch a Christian band performing one lunch time and Danni arrived with Katie and had a great time dancing in the mosh pit whilst Brittany was nowhere to be found. You could argue that Brittany made her choice about her friendship with Danni when she promised to remain best friends only with the absent Lacey. At the very least this shows poor judgement because what is the point having a best friend you seldom see and isn’t interested in what’s happening in your life?

‘Like, she has her own problems,’ shrugged Brittany, ‘and we don’t exactly get to see each other or anything. And if I just told her everything that was going on she’d been, like, “Voom! Annoying.”’

Another participant who is dearly in need of a close friend is Helen. It’s a pity they haven’t found each other but, then again, Helen’s not really Brittany’s cup of tea.

**Helen’s Story**

Helen doesn’t stand out in a crowd. She speaks with a slow, deep voice, but with an impressive vocabulary which is, for the most part, accurately used. Her long, blonde hair is always tied up in a ponytail with a pretty ribbon and she’s very neat and tidy. Compared with Brittany she doesn’t look fashionable, maybe because she doesn’t have styled hair and doesn’t pluck her eyebrows, but she’s amiable, laughing easily and frequently, but not giddy.
There are no academic records at Southside for Helen but she’s well aware of her learning difficulties.

‘Did you ever want to be Dux?’ I asked her, as the topic came up.

‘Yeeahh, but that’s probably never going to happen.’

‘You don’t think you could be the best, not at any subject?’

‘No. It’s probably never going to happen cos I’m not that smart.’

Helen is a Scout leader, even though she’s not sure she wants to be because she has frequent conflicts with the head of the troupe and the other group leaders and she’s jealous that they are given more responsibility than her. She admits that she can’t get the kids to listen to her and she’s tried ‘everything,’ but her repertoire of leadership skills is very limited.

Her parents divorced recently after some violence, which continues. She has a younger brother whom she thinks is favoured by both parents, but that’s not usual for siblings. I met her mother once when she came in to see if Tom could do anything to stop Helen dating Malachi and I overheard her complaining that Helen wouldn’t do as she was told at home and she’d run out of ideas. Tom told her to restrict her phone and internet privileges but she didn’t appear satisfied. A very intense woman, she gives the impression of being overprotective and strict, not letting Helen wear certain clothes and trying to choose her boyfriends. Helen has frequent visitations with her father and he does activities with both children but is prevented from attending Scouts activities because of his Domestic Violence Orders.

Max, Helen’s younger brother, doesn’t have any learning difficulties, ‘He’s the smart one,’ but her cousin has Asperger’s Syndrome.
'My cousin’s got, what’s that disease? Asperger’s?’ she asked. I nodded and she continued, ‘The higher end, then...lower end,’ she said, indicating herself at the lower end.

‘He’s at the higher end?’ I asked.

‘He’s...he can read well, like, write well, but knows a lot, thinks he knows everything in the world, but he doesn’t.’

‘Yeah, and what were you saying? You’re at the lower end?’

‘Yeah. Below average.’

She thinks her learning difficulty is the reason she stands out and gets excluded by the other students, which is actually quite perceptive. Following social difficulties at primary school, her grandmother agreed to pay for Helen to go to an elite girls’ school in the hope she’d, ‘Do well there.’ However, the social difficulties escalated at the, ‘posh school,’ so she was transferred to Southside, where she’s much happier, but the social difficulties have followed her.

**Bullying**

‘Primary school from grade one to seven I was bullied a lot,’ admitted Helen. ‘They used to pick on me something shocking.’ They would say things like, “you don’t have any friends,” [and] “you, like, ugly,” and all that sort of stuff. The bullying became so bad the Principal had to intervene and force Helen and the bullies to sit together every lunch until they learned to get along. She said it had limited success.

Then one day the girls decided to make a project of her, like they would have seen in any ‘Ugly Duckling’ Geek-to-Chic teen movie, and give her a makeover. She tells the story so well I’ll leave it to her.

‘I’m going to tell you a story about what happened to me in grade seven,’ she said, relaying to me a conversation she’d had with her friend, Adiya. ‘Cos all the girls wanted to change my wardrobe and stuff...These girls gave me magazines and
another whole heap of stuff what they had, hairspray and God knows what else. The works. Just to, like, improve my, what do you call it...?"

‗Image?‘ I asked.

‗Image and personal stuff. Cos I wore these clothes to school and changed out of those ones into better ones that I thought I was better in. Mum made me the ones I was wearing beforehand, to school.‘

‗Oh, I see.‘

‗Cos she thought they looked nice on me and I wanted to have what I wanted to wear.‘

‗Did you not wear uniform to school?‘

‗No, it was a free dress day that day. Yeah, they saw what I was wearing beforehand and put makeup on me and all that stuff. I wanted to hang out with them. I wanted to be like them cos I wanted to be popular but I wasn‘t. And they said you should have the best time of your life in grade seven should have heaps of friends, like in grade seven. And then my mum and dad got really angry at me for doing it. My dad said, “Oh, you sh...we can um, we can buy you clothes, we‘re not that poor and blah, blah, blah,‖ and then they asked for them back and I gave them back except for things we‘d given away or I‘d used. One girl, she gave me clothes, she said, “Oh, can I...I‘d like my clothes back or my mum‘ll kill me,” or something.’

‗Hmm,‘ I murmured.

‗And, um, so I understood. I gave them back. And she immediately cut them up.‘

‗Oh, really?‘ I said. ‗Colour me not surprised,‘ I thought.

‗I was thinking, “what the hell? You wanted them back. Your mum would kill you,”‘ she puzzled.

‗Why did she do that?‘
‘I don’t know. She maybe wanted to use them for a project or something like that.’

I wonder why the plan backfired. Perhaps they realised before Helen did that it wasn’t the clothes and makeup making her stand out.

From there she moved on to Lennox Hall, an all girls’ school, where the bullying took more of an exclusionary form.

‘They just, hang on, ah, what’s the word, discluded me,’ said Helen.

‘They excluded you?’

‘Yeah, that’s it. Excluded me from things.’

‘How come?’

‘I’m not quite sure, I think they might have realised already that I had a slight learning problem,’ she admitted, getting closer to the truth than she realised.

‘So did they tease you about that?’

‘They didn’t really tease me as such; they just didn’t involve me in things as much.’

‘Oh ok. So did you get bullied at all by those girls?’ I asked.

‘Um, I didn’t get bullied, but like they just left me out of things like in drama we had some group work and I was always left out. I’d go around to just about every single group and ask, “Oh, can I be with you guys cos we’re allowed this many number of people?” and they said, “No, we’re already got as many as we would like,” and I then resorted to telling the teacher and they said, “Oh, just work with this person.”’ Um, sometimes they said, “Oh, we don’t want her because,”’ here she paused to reflect, ‘I didn’t really know the reason why they didn’t want me. They just tried to exclude me from everything.’ I probably just didn’t fit in. Everybody else just kind of fitted in somehow, their intelligence, their art skills and stuff.’
So she made the move to Southside, which was bound to have been a bit of a culture shock for Helen coming from Lennox Hall, but she’d been promised so much in terms of what a state school would offer her.

‘I’m at a state school and the state school is more prepared to accept people with a slight problem with them – a learning problem. Cos there’s more of them in a state school.’ It sounds like the echo of an adult, reassuring her that things will be different here. When I asked her who the popular kids are here she said that doesn’t concern her, ‘because this is a state school and state schools are more prepared to accept people for who they are not what they are, whether Chinese or African or learning problems or not.’

‘So were you sad to leave?’ I asked.

‘Not really. I thought this would be a chance for me to make new friends, have a lot more fun at school.’

And so it was Helen landed at Southside and straight into learning support with Tom. Pretty much right away she started having problems with Clark, the boy with ADHD who was in support for behavioural difficulties. He has some anger management issues.

‘I don’t like Clark,’ she said.

‘You don’t like Clark? Why not?’ I answered without a hint of surprise.

‘He’s mean to me.’

‘He’s mean? What does he say?’

‘Last week in dance he said I was a whore.’

So I asked her about a time I was watching them both and he was saying she looked revolting because her lips were chapped, ‘Clark was giving you a hard time before about your lips and that.’

‘Yeah,’ she replied.
'Why was he doing that?'

'I don't know. He just probably doesn't like me.'

Unfortunately Clark is not the only one giving Helen a hard time. One day I was watching a rare hockey lesson and I saw Helen, who was on her own, on the receiving end of some harsh comments from another student, Bisa, whom she said she sits with sometimes. I couldn't quite hear from where I was and when I asked her about it later she couldn't remember what it was about but following this altercation Helen hung back from the rest of the group and had to be paired up by the teacher. The Asian girl she was paired with looked less than happy with the honour: she looked around, rolling her eyes and groaning. When they were passing the ball to each other the girl kept deliberately whacking the ball straight at Helen who had to jump out of the way. I wonder whether this is what daily life was like for Helen at Lennox Hall and whether she has really escaped that life.

'Ok. Um, so can you think of a time you’ve been at school when you’ve felt really liked and respected by everyone at school and you’ve been really happy?' I asked.

'Um,' she paused, 'no, I can't think of any.'

'Can you think of a time, probably not at this school, probably at Lennox Hall when you didn’t feel liked by everybody, that you didn’t have any friends?'

'Yeah, just about every day.'

It wasn’t just the bullies that made her feel that way. Helen had just as much trouble with her friends.

Problematic Friendships

‘And, um, and in the lunch time I would probably sit by myself,’ Helen said of life at Lennox Hall, ‘and there was this one particular group I liked sitting with. One lunch it got up and moved to another table just as I was about to sit down. And I didn’t really know why they did that but I felt really, really upset,’ she admitted.

‘Well, yeah. They didn’t give you any warning?’
‘They just went off. I think I just sat by myself or something.’

These kids were trying very hard to tell her something.

‘At lunch time I mainly sat on...well, I sat with two people but they were kind of iffy,’ she said.

‘How do you mean iffy?’

‘Like so-so. They kind of didn’t want me sitting there or something. They made jokes about me.’

‘What did they say about you?’

‘I can’t remember I’ve tried to forget it and start a NEW life at Southside,’ she stressed, obviously pinning all her hopes to this contention.

‘So, did you have any good friends there?’ I asked.

‘I have one. She’s in grade seven and she said, “Oh, I’m going to repeat grade seven.”’

‘Oh, alright.’

‘I don’t know why that was. She was a bit weird,’ she laughed.

‘Weird?’

‘In the head. Her parents were also weird and she had a brother and another sister above her.’

‘So she was a bit weird, how was she weird?’

‘Kinda told...she told lies, kind of. Her name was Lisa.’

‘[At one point] I went back to the group I used to hang out with before I hung out with her more often. Cos, like, I was getting sick of all the other year seveners asking, “Are you friends with Lisa? Are you this and that? Are you best friends?” and all that and I said, “Oh, get a life!” I wouldn’t actually say that but I meant it.’
‘You didn’t like them asking you about that?’

‘No.’

‘Why not?’

‘Cos it’s annoying, “Are you friends with Lisa every single day.”

‘Why would they ask you that?’

‘Oh, I don’t know. Cos I don’t think Lisa had many friends either.⁴⁷¹ I don’t think I’ve kept with that friendship.’

‘Oh, ok.’

‘Cos I’ve found newer, better friends.’⁴⁷²

I think this is a good place to pause and relate to you an episode which I feel is essential to understanding Helen’s experiences. I wonder if you will have the same thoughts and feelings I did when I heard the story.

You will recall I told you that a boy at primary school told Helen that she didn’t have any friends and she was ugly? He also told her that her friends didn’t like her any more, which she didn’t believe at the time. When she was at Lennox Hall someone said something similar to her about her friends not liking her and she thought back to her primary school days and thought that, perhaps it had been true, perhaps her friends had had a meeting about her and decided they didn’t want her in the group any more. Even with this information she didn’t make the connection between what had happened then and what was happening at Lennox Hall. Her friends were in the process of rejecting her and she showed little awareness of it.⁴⁷³ At this point I started to wonder if I should believe her claims that, ‘I’ve started a whole new life here.’⁴⁷⁴ Perhaps it was time to examine this blossoming friendship group with a little more scrutiny.

‘And so who do you sit with at lunch time?’
‘Um, Adiya, Naija & like a small group of people. Some grade eights as well.’

‘So who else is in the group then, Naija and who else?’

‘Naija, Adiya, Daksha, Parvati, Jayanti,’ she paused, ‘Chrissie, Josephine, Tulla...well, Chrissie, Josephine and Tulla are not kind of part of that group but they’re grade eight but they all sit in that spot.’

As time progresses I get to hear more about her relationship with these girls and I am able to observe them interacting in the dance classroom but nowhere else. I’ll take you through it chronologically so you experience it the same way I did.

Mar 26: In dance Adiya is sitting at the computer next to Helen but gets up without a word and sits at another computer.

Mar 27: Helen is sitting alone in dance.

Apr 23: Helen tells me she doesn’t see her new friends on weekends.

Apr 30: Helen is sitting near Adiya and Daksha but they are not talking to her. The teacher asks them to write a biography on a dancer of their choice. They all make their choices and Adiya says, ‘Ginger Rogers.’ Helen changes her mind and decides to do the same as Adiya. Helen tries to talk to Daksha but she rolls her eyes and turns away. Adiya pats Daksha on the shoulder and looks at her as if to say, ‘Be nice.’ Adiya explains to Daksha that she’s already accepted Helen’s offer to work with her. Daksha looks furious. Adiya tries to appease her mouthing, ‘I can work with you if you want.’ So she’s prepared to ditch Helen to make Daksha happy. Daksha says, ‘Forget it,’ but Adiya perseveres to which Daksha replies, ‘It doesn’t matter,’ in an angry tone. Helen and Adiya chat about the project. Helen is unsure about something and Adiya puts her right.

May 2: I question Helen about her relationship with Adiya and Daksha.
‘And how’s everything going with Daksha and Adiya and that?’

‘They’re good. Daksha, Adiya and Naija were fighting...stuff.’

‘Fighting stuff? What’s that mean?’

‘They were like fighting about like Adiya and Naija having problems.’

She decides that the right course of action here is to side with Naija, the underdog, and give Adiya a lecture.

‘I said, “You shouldn’t take your jumper back. You gave it to Naija and now you want it back. That’s not very nice.”’ Then Daksha told me, “You shouldn’t meddle in other peoples business,” and stuff and, “Just stay out of it,” and I tried to say, “She told me so I had a right to be involved,” but they wouldn’t listen so I just got up, walked to the toilets then Naija followed and went off to find someone else.

‘So, were Daksha and Adiya talking to each other?’ I asked.

‘Yeah.’

‘So who was on Naija’s side?’

‘I was on Naija’s side. They were talking to me, just not Naija.’

She said that Daksha had rung around the whole group of friends to see where their loyalties lay. She didn’t, however, ring Helen.

Helen made quite a costly mistake siding with Naija who doesn’t seem to value this loyalty. I can see why she did it. She’d been there. She’d been the one left out with no friends and she’d been the one whose ‘friends’ had demanded the return of their belongings.
‘I’m trying to help her get through it,’ she explained, ‘and be her friend and that so she doesn’t feel all alone.’

May 16:  
I overhear some year ten students saying Helen is dating Malachi. All the year tens know about it even though Malachi is in year eleven and Helen is in year nine. Barbera the TA has already had to talk to them about Malachi’s forceful ‘affections.’ Helen has asked him to be less physically affectionate but it doesn’t appear to have worked. I doubt this news would sit well with Adiya and Daksha as he is possibly the most unpopular person in the entire school and their reputations would be damaged by the association.

May 22nd:  
Adiya and Daksha don’t sit with Helen in dance and Adiya says, ‘Sorry,’ to Helen as she goes off to work with Daksha leaving Helen on her own. They are all sitting on the floor. When the teacher orally spells a word for the class Helen misses it and looks over to Adiya who shows where she’s written it down in her book. Adiya then shuffles away from Helen to chat to her friends. The teacher spells another word orally which Helen misses again. Not having Adiya to ask she looks over at another girl’s book, glancing up at the girl and back to the book, leaning closer then pulling back, trying to sneak a look without having to ask. Whilst she’s struggling to read the girl’s handwriting she misses further dictation and instruction.

May 29th:  
Helen tells me she’s dumped Malachi and is now going out with Jason who writes Haiku poetry for her. I know Jason and he’s lovely. I’m so relieved!

June 5th:  
As I’m leaving on the final day of data collection I run into Helen who is sitting with her new boyfriend, Jason. I asked her why she wasn’t sitting with Adiya and Naija and she told me Adiya had told her the others didn’t want her in the group anymore and she’d have to find someone else to sit with at break.
It's only during analysis that I pieced this situation together. I remembered she had told me that when she first started at Southside Adiya and Daksha were assigned to show her around. In my experience the new girl would be expected to stay with her guide only until she found her own niche. I'd say once Helen had a taste of being part of a reasonably popular group she wasn’t going to let go easily. She probably saw this as her best shot at a group of friends after being lonely for so long. I believe the signs were there that she didn't fit in and they were just being kind but, just like at primary school and then again at Lennox Hall, she failed to recognise the signs in time. Perhaps the situation could have continued with them allowing her to remain on the periphery of the group as long as she got in no-one's way but I believe she made two fatal errors, giving Daksha the excuse she needed. One was that she sided with Naija against Daksha and the other is when she chose Malachi as her boyfriend.

‘I'm tired cos I was talking to someone...' Helen said, coyly.

‘Who were you talking to?’

‘My friend...cos he text...’

‘On MSN?’

‘Um, no. On phone,’ she said, giggling.

‘Til late last night?’ I asked, feeling she wanted me to dig.

‘Well, he called...he text me late and...’

‘He did, did he?’ I teased, eyebrows raised. This is the first I’ve heard of a boy.

‘Yeah,’ she laughed, enjoying my interest, ‘I gave him my number and he text me and he said, “Can you call me blah, blah, blah.” He was bored.’

‘Who is it?’

‘Someone in grade eleven. He’s been suspended but...’
‘Oh,’ this was not what I expected. ‘What’s his name?’

‘Malachi.’

‘Malachi? I know Malachi,’ I said with an inadvertent look of horror that made Helen giggle. So you going to go out on a date?’

‘I don’t know.’

In retrospect, I would have tried harder to encourage Helen and Nathan to join our Thursday Lunch Club because I think they would have benefitted the most, taking them out of harm’s way for a while and, perhaps, helping them build ties with students who were in the same boat. As it was, Helen suffered significant feelings of loneliness as a result of her social difficulties.

**Loneliness and Social Dissatisfaction**

Helen freely admits she has suffered from loneliness at Lennox Hall but believes all that is behind her now. When I asked her if she’s ever been lonely she replied, ‘Um, yeah, I have,’ in a very matter-of-fact tone.

‘What did that feel like?’

‘It felt really sad. No-one cared and yeah, I didn’t have any friends,’ and she admitted she felt this way, ‘just about every day,’ which made it hard to find someone to work with in lessons.

‘I then resorted to telling the teacher and they said, “Oh, just work with this person,” and that was always one particular girl and she made friends by the end of that year and I hadn’t.’

Of course this would spill over into break times making these often quite painful times for Helen.

‘In the lunch time I would probably sit by myself,’ she admitted and told me she, ‘felt very alone,’ during this time.
And the consequence of having no friends is that even on the holidays you’re starved of social contact. So much so that Helen used to spend her first week of the holidays hanging around, uninvited, at her old primary school. ‘Cos I was at Lennox Hall, they had longer holidays and I used to go up there in the holidays when I had longer holidays.’

‘To do what?’

‘To look after my brother and, like, go to school and, like, go to his school cos I didn’t have anything better to do.’

I wondered whether she would have accepted just about anyone as a friend or would she only accept socially valuable friends? She had that friend, Lisa, the girl who, ‘Was a bit weird’ and told lies and the friends that got up and left the table when she went to sit down and made jokes about her. I believe she took what she could get from these relationships, at least she wasn’t on her own, but I believe she had set her sights a little higher.

‘So were there some friends there you would rather have been friends with than [Lisa]?’

‘Yeah, there were. Some. But they were really not so nice,’ she said, referring to the girls she claims had lots of money, a prerequisite for popularity in a ‘posh’ girls’ school. ‘They thought they were the best,’ she said, scathingly. This contempt didn’t prevent her from wanting to join their group though.

‘I wanted to be like them. I tried to be myself but it just didn’t work because no-one...I don’t think anyone, like, fancied me or whatever.’

‘And do you spend a lot of time alone here?’ I asked.

‘Not much,’ she replied, and I believe she was telling the truth but for someone who has, ‘made life-long friends, in a way,’ here at Southside, she spends a significant proportion of her time alone.

‘Who do you sit with in Marine?’

‘There’s really no-one that I hang out with in Marine.’
‘Who do you sit with in SOSE?’

‘I normally sit by myself cos it's mainly guys. I don't really sit with anyone in hockey. Oh, hold on. There's Jayanti. And Bisa. I sit near them sometimes.’ But, as I told you before, when I was watching the hockey lesson Bisa was talking very nastily to Helen and left her to be partnered by the teacher, so I wonder how satisfying this relationship is. And I've never seen her with Jayanti in lessons but then, I only watched one hockey lesson so I couldn't say what usually happens. I watched plenty of maths and English lessons in the support room, though, and I know that Katie only sits with Helen in the absence of a better offer.

‘And you don't sit with Katie in maths?’

‘Kind of. Depends who’s there. Katie normally goes off with her own friends.’

‘Oh ok. So why does she sit with you in English then?’

‘Cos there's only four no three of us cos Clark’s gone.’

Both girls share dance lessons but don’t sit together even when, in the same lesson, Helen’s friends move away from her and Katie’s friends ignore Katie and turn their backs.

She says she normally talks to Adiya in dance lessons and, if this were true, it would be problematic because that relationship has now ended and she won’t have anyone to talk to. As it is, I don’t believe Adiya ‘normally’ talks to her at all. In one dance lesson Adiya and Daksha are sitting near her but not talking to her. In another the room is full of girlish chatter and her ‘friends’ are present but Helen is silent. I have seen them working together and seen Adiya help Helen but I get the sense that it is out of kindness on Adiya’s part and not out of camaraderie because she is quick to drop Helen when Daksha complains and then, of course, she is the one to tell Helen she’s not welcome in the group any more.

I wondered what her weekends were like, having made the move to a new school. She told me she didn't see her school friends on the weekend, ‘Cos I
haven't organised anything yet, but then, neither have they. I suspect she'll be waiting a while.

'Is there someone you'd like to go out with on weekends?'

'Um, yeah, I'd like to go out with my friends to the movies and stuff, but I think that my family's probably more important than them at the moment.'

And it's true that, as her dad has recently moved out, she might want to spend more time with her parents, but I would imagine that, as she said she wanted to see her friends more, that she probably would rather that she didn't have the responsibility of her parents' separation.

'So what do you think the other kids in your year do on a weekend?'

'They probably go shopping, um, ah, out to the cinemas and have a good time.'

'How often would you say the kids in your year go out with their school friends?'

'More often than I do,' she laughs.

I think Helen's feelings of loneliness, of wanting better quality contact with those she perceives as friends and wanting so desperately to fit in stem, in part, from her problematic social skills.

**Social Skills**

Helen just can't seem to assert herself in social interactions, relying on a couple of ineffectual conflict resolution strategies before becoming frustrated and angry.

'How do you get someone to listen to you if they're not listening?' I asked.

'I don't know. Cos I don't normally do anything. I just get angry.'

'So what do you do?'

'I just yell at them.'
'You just yell at them?'

'I don't know,' she laughed.

'I've never seen you yell at anyone,' I said with a smile.

'I'd try again until they answer or do it.'

'So I saw you once in SOSE and you turned around and were talking to these boys and you were trying to tell them something and they kept interrupting you and wouldn't let you finish and then you just...

'Gave up.'

'Yeah, you gave up. Is that what you normally do?'

'Yeah, I give up.'

'What's a better strategy do you think?'

'Say please. I don't know. It's probably really frustrating for me cos I'm in Scouts and in Scouts no-one listens at all.'

'Are you a leader?'

'Yeah. I'm a patrol leader and no-one listens to me...The assisting patrol leader took over from what I was doing and everyone listens to him and they don't listen to me and I'm really...and I say much the same things as he says to them. They don't listen.'

'Why?'

'I'm really confused.'

'Why do you think that happens?'

'I don't know. Maybe he's more popular. I don't know. I'm really confused. Cos he says, “Can you please do this,” to this person and I say much the same thing like I say, “Will you please do this, so-and-so,” and they don't even do it.'
'What's the difference between the way you say it and the way he says it?'

'I don't know. I really honestly don't know.'

She said, ‘I would have had to get angry before they listened. Cos everyone pushes the button on me at Scouts. To such a point that I either break down in tears or get really, really angry with them. One particular patrol leader...apparently he does a really good job and he's got one of the difficult people, apparently. And, like, I've known this kid for, like, more than they have and his name's Cameron Williams. He went to my primary school. Well, he still does, but anyway and I was like, “Can I have such-and-such a person cos he's really good at knots and I think I can control him?” “No, you're not allowed him because he needs a firm hand,” and this one patrol leader said, “We put him in Andy's patrol cos Andy has a firm hand.” I thought, “What the hell?” I'm just as good as him but my people don't listen.’

‘Hmm.’

‘I was getting uptight cos one of my people, she didn't listen at all. When you asked her to do something she's like, “No. I won't do this. I wanna do this.” “Just do as you're asked. It'll make your life so much easier.” She eventually quit after that last camp,’ she admitted.

‘She quit? She's not coming back?’

‘Hmm. It's just so annoying.’

‘I'll bet. How could you get her to do as she's told, do you think?’

‘There's nothing I can do. I've tried everything.’

‘What have you tried?’

‘“Just do as you're told,” I just tell her.’

Similarly when she is in class she doesn't have the skills to be able to get what she wants. Like when the girls were all pairing up in dance and she just stood waiting for everyone to pair up, expecting the odd one out to join her. She wasn't assertive or maybe confident enough to turn to someone and join in. Perhaps it's just resigned acceptance that she won't be able to find someone. Then when she
doesn't know how to spell a word and she sneaks a look at another girl's book. She
looks like a kicked dog looking at a bowl of food as she keeps glancing to see if
she's been 'busted' trying to read the word.\textsuperscript{527}

So she has trouble getting people to listen or convincing others to do what
she wants. She relies on telling tales or engaging an adult in the dispute, rather
than try to sort it out herself, which is quite an immature approach. I asked her
about the situation with Adiya and Daksha when they fell out with Naija. By aligning
herself with Naija she was bound to attract negative attention from the other group
members. I wondered how she would cope with that.

'So what happens if the other girls who are on Adiya's side start saying stuff
to you?' I asked.

'I don't know. I'd probably go up to the Principal and say, "so-and-so and so-
and-so and so-and-so were saying this to me and Naija,"...that's probably what I'd
do.'\textsuperscript{528}

'How could you sort it out yourself?'

'Talking to the Principal...or Mrs Felice.'

'Without asking a teacher, how could you sort it out just by yourself?'

'I don't know. Just tell them to stop?'\textsuperscript{529}

She admitted that when the other girls wouldn't work with her she, 'Resorted
to telling the teacher.'\textsuperscript{530} Much the same as she did when she was being bullied in
primary school. 'Well, in grade seven I went to him and said, "These two boys are
picking on me, they're calling me fat every time I walk through the door and making
like really rude gestures."'\textsuperscript{531}

Similar to Lenny, Helen likes to spend her time with younger people. Her
friend at Lennox Hall, Lisa, was in the year below\textsuperscript{532}; she walks to school now with
two boys from the year below\textsuperscript{533}; and during the school holidays she enjoyed going
back to her primary school to spend time with the younger students.\textsuperscript{534}

'So how did it feel, then, with all those little kids looking up to you?'
‘It felt pretty good knowing I was an older kid like one year back and like...yeah, I felt, “Yeah, I can do this. I can prove I’m better now I’m older than them with a bit more authority.” Say, “Oh, if you do this to me, which you’re not allowed to do, I can take you up to [the Principal] and say so-and-so is picking on me.”’

‘So this is the school you used to go to?’

‘Yeah. They used to pick on me something shocking.’

‘Who did?’

‘My...the, like, the classmates, not the teachers but like people in general at the school.’

‘So were any of those kids left there when you went back?’

‘Some of them but not many.’

‘Did they say anything to you?’

‘Um, well, um I didn’t get into any fights, as such; I just didn’t like this one kid who said, “You shouldn’t be here! You should be at school!” And I’m like, “I’m off school. I’m out of school,” but he wouldn’t believe me.’

‘Yeah.’

‘And I said, “Yeah, my brother’s here so I can be here if I want to. And the teachers would let me, so.” And he just wouldn’t believe me and leave me alone so I just, I don’t know, I did the ups to him or something and he said, “Oh, I’m going to take you to Mr Lang,” and I said, “No, you can’t, you can’t take me to Mr Lang cos he’s not there,” and he said, “how do you know?” “Cos his car’s not there,” and he said, “how do you know his car’s not there? He might of changed it or changed his spot.” “Cos I know where he parks. I’ve been here seven years. Beat that one!”’

I’m convinced that the way Helen behaves, whether it’s her immaturity or odd behaviour is related to problematic cognitions including her perceptions of herself and the behaviours of others. To put it simply, I don’t think Helen really understands the world around her or her place in it.
Social Perception and Awareness

Helen knows she doesn’t fit in but doesn’t know why. ‘Um, sometimes they said, “Oh, we don’t want her because,”’ here she pauses to consider, ‘I didn’t really know the reason why they didn’t want me, they just tried to exclude me from everything.’ I don’t know. I probably just didn’t fit in. Everybody else just kind of fitted in somehow, their intelligence, their art skills and stuff.

‘So what do you think it was about yourself that they didn’t like?’

‘Um, I don’t know. I think they might have realised already that I had a slight learning problem.’

And I think that’s true, but not the way she thinks. Not only does she look slightly odd, I think she says and does things that make her stand out without knowing it. She labours hard at trying to fit in by trying to change, but can’t seem to get it right..

‘So did you ever try and change to be like them?’

‘Maybe not like them but like the other people. I wanted to be like them.’

‘How did you change?’

‘I just tried to be...different, by wearing different brands of clothes and show them, “Oh, this is me. This is what I wear,” and sort of stuff, cos some of us thought if we wear this sort of stuff they won’t think highly of us and I just thought if I wear expensive clothes they’d think we had a lot of money, we can do whatever we like.’

And I think there’s an element of truth in there: I think she probably doesn’t know how to dress like the other girls because they tried to give her a makeover, meaning they probably also thought it was just a matter of changing the way she looks, but there are so many little social nuances at play that Helen isn’t conscious of. For instance, in dance she changes into a tight, low-cut, very revealing top to dance in whereas the other girls wear their baggy school shirts. There are a few exchanged glances and muttered comments as the girls lower their eyes and giggle at the inappropriateness of the outfit. She just doesn’t get it. Then again when a
girl raises her hand to get a ‘high five’ from Helen for a good practise and Helen stands looking at her blankly until she realises, too late, what the girl wanted. By this time the girl has dropped her hand, shaking her head.\textsuperscript{543}

She has quite an impressive vocabulary, which is great, but doesn’t really assist her in her desire to fit in. She says things like, ‘I then \textit{resorted} to telling the teacher,’\textsuperscript{544} and, ‘I think the group of friends I’ve got are quite \textit{adequate},’\textsuperscript{545} and, ‘it was \textit{composite} [class].’\textsuperscript{546} Or she uses phrases that are quite old-fashioned like, ‘I don’t think anyone, like, \textit{fancied} me or whatever,’\textsuperscript{547} and, ‘he was all over me like a rash,’\textsuperscript{548} which sounds like something your gran might say. She annoys her friends by lecturing them about being kind\textsuperscript{549} or telling them to give up their seats on the bus\textsuperscript{550} because someone’s told her to ‘lead by example’\textsuperscript{551} and she’s taken that to mean tell people the right way to behave, which is pretty annoying. She also doesn’t seem to realise that going back and just ‘hanging out’ at her old school, uninvited, might not be an appropriate thing to do, even though she must have noticed she was the only high school student there and the students were demanding she explain herself.\textsuperscript{552}

Helen’s perception of her social position is problematic. She believes that she’s more popular at Southside than she was at Lennox Hall, but I don’t think that’s true.

‘Well, I’ve got more friends here than I had at Lennox Hall.\textsuperscript{553} I’ve found newer, better friends.\textsuperscript{554} I’m doing better here at my school work in every way, like my English, my maths, my social aspect of school...’\textsuperscript{555}

It’s true that she had very few friends at Lennox Hall, and clearly no socially valuable ones, but, as I’ve said before, she spends a lot of time alone for someone who has, ‘a lot more friends now.’\textsuperscript{556} She still struggles to find someone to work with in group situations,\textsuperscript{557} perhaps not as acutely as at Lennox Hall, but I have no means for comparison.

I don’t think Adiya, Daksha and Naija are really her friends. I know they were assigned to show her around when she first started\textsuperscript{558} and I think that’s because she was having trouble settling in,\textsuperscript{559} but I think she was supposed to find her own friends and when she didn’t, the girls started to push her away, but she didn’t take
the hint. They didn’t invite her to go out with them on weekends; they rarely sat with
her in class; I saw Adiya move to sit somewhere else when they were sat together
in dance; then they finally have to directly expel her from the group.

Three times now she’s been in a situation where her group of friends didn’t want her
around and she was the last to know. The first was in primary school when her
friends had a meeting and decided they didn’t want to be friends with her but she
was the last to know; the second was when her friends made jokes about her and
everyone knew they didn’t like her but she had no idea; the third was with Adiya and
Daksha. Each time she can’t anticipate it.

‘They didn’t give you any warning?’

‘They just went off.’

Maybe she didn’t want to believe what was happening. Maybe she just
didn’t recognise the signs, but whatever it is, it just keeps happening and although,
in retrospect, she recognises that that’s what happened, she seems powerless to
avoid it happening again.

It’s like when I observed Helen, Adiya and Daksha in the dance there was
obvious friction between the three but I didn’t know why. It was when Daksha didn’t
want to include Helen but Adiya looked at her as if to say, ‘Be nice.’ When I asked
Helen about it she says, ‘They weren’t cranky as such. They were just not talking.
They were talking to me, just not Naija,’ which clearly wasn’t the case. Daksha
was being pretty obvious that she didn’t want Helen around, maybe she never did,
but it became particularly acute when Helen sided with Naija against Daksha, still
expecting to be included in the group.

‘So when you’re doing seated work who do you sit with in dance?’

‘Um, I normally sit next to Adiya and talk to her.’

‘A couple of times you’ve been on the computers for dance but you haven’t
been sitting with those guys. You’ve sat on your own.’
'Yeah. I probably couldn't be bothered to sit near them.'

'How come?'

'I don't know. I probably just didn't feel like sitting over there where they were.'

Sounds like she's finding excuses, especially with the benefit of hindsight and we know they were looking for an opportunity to ditch her. She also couldn't anticipate that the girls who gave her a make-over were going to turn on her. You would expect she would have been wary of such a generous offer coming from girls who had previously given her such a hard time but even when they asked for the clothes back, she wasn't able to anticipate that they were going to turn on her.

You could reasonably expect that Helen wouldn't have worked out yet who the popular kids are at Southside, although others seem to be pretty quick to identify the unpopular kids. Yet she struggles to identify the popular students at her previous school also.

'So who do you think were the real popular kids at Lennox Hall?'

'Pretty much everybody.'

'Who were the ones that everybody liked?'

'I don’t think...there was... I don’t think... I don’t know who was popular with everybody...there was this one big group that lots...well, they had lots of money to spare, they thought they were the best, um it consists of ten, maybe twelve girls.'

Who's to say, maybe that was the popular group, but she certainly struggled with the question.

Helen doesn't seem to be able to ascertain the motives of others either. She finds their behaviours surprising and confusing.
‘Do you remember the other day when I came to watch you in hockey and you were queuing up to get the equipment from the cupboard.’

‘Oh, yeah,’ she said, sounding unsure.

‘Bisa said something to you and you looked quite offended. Sounded like she was being quite nasty to you. Do you remember why?’

‘Probably didn't take...I was probably...I don't know. Can't remember.’

‘Ok.’

‘She’s sometimes just angry. With no reason.’

This may be true, she might just be an angry young woman but I think it’s more likely Helen just doesn’t know why she’s getting angry, similar to when the girl demanded her clothes back after the make-over then immediately cut them up, ‘I was thinking, “What the hell?”’ she said, with a baffled look, “You wanted them back. Your mum would kill you.”’

‘Why did she do that?’

‘I don’t know. She maybe wanted to use them for a project or something.’

‘So why do you think they bullied you at primary school?’

‘I don’t know. I never knew that. I didn’t really know.’

No-one liked Malachi, not the other kids at school, not the teachers, not me and not Helen’s mum who even came into school to get Tom to convince Helen to stay away from him. But Helen doesn’t seem to know why.

‘My mum thought he was ok,’ here she paused and glanced at me, probably wondering if I knew she was lying, ‘but yeah...I don't really know her reason.’

‘Her reason for what?’

‘Her reason for not liking him.’
She also can’t understand what it is that makes some people succeed where she fails.

‘They don't listen,’ she said of the kids in her Scout group.

‘Why?’

‘I'm really confused.’

‘Why do you think that happens?’

‘I don't know. Maybe he's more popular. I don't know. I'm really confused. Cos he says, “Can you please do this,” to this person and I say much the same thing like I say, “Will you please do this,” so-and-so and they don't even do it.’

‘What's the difference between the way you say it and the way he says it?’

‘I don't know. I really honestly don't know.’

She seems to struggle with the Scout leaders who have told her, ‘you're this close to losing your patrol leader stripe,‘ but she doesn’t know why because she feels she’s been clear with them and, ‘one particular patrol leader...he doesn't go every single week and he hasn't got his patrol leader stripe taken off him.’ She wants to know why the leaders think she doesn’t have a firm hand like Andy and can’t control the more difficult kids.

‘So which subjects are you best at?’ I asked her.

‘I don’t know. Um,’ she paused, ‘um, hmmm, I don't know. I really honestly don't know. I’d probably say dance maybe.’

‘Hmm. What makes you best at dance?’

‘I've done dance before like outside the school and gone in Eisteddfords and things. I don’t know.’

‘So how do you know you’re good?’
'I don’t know if I am. I just think I am but that’s just my opinion, not the teacher’s opinion.’

‘What do you think the teacher’s opinion is?’

‘I don’t know, ‘She’s ok. Might need to improve on some things but not many,’ I don’t know.’

Yet when I ask the dance teacher she says Helen is very uncoordinated and can’t keep up with the dance routines and she had to be withdrawn from the Eisteddford because she couldn’t remember the routines.

Then there’s her poor judgement. She showed poor judgement siding with Naija against Daksha when she was already new to the group and the rest of the group sided with Daksha. Perhaps she thought her and Naija would break away and form their own group, but that, too, would be bad judgement on her part. She also used poor judgement in agreeing to date Malachi.

I believe she’s a terrible judge of character which is why she can’t seem to anticipate her friends’ behaviours. She’s such a naive and innocent child and she admits Malachi, ‘was all over me like a rash,’ and she had tried to tell him to take it easy but, perhaps because she isn’t confident in being assertive, it didn’t work. Barbera the TA had to intervene and warn him not to be too forceful with his affection which, I believe, was what he had in mind all along but I don’t believe Helen was aware of his motives. Also, she had very little awareness of what the other students thought about him or the effect that dating him would have on her, already low, social value.

‘What did everyone think when you started going out with Malachi?’

‘They used to say he was gross. A bit weird.’

‘How did that make you feel?’

‘I don’t really care.’

‘Did you know all that stuff before you went out with him? That’s how people felt?’
'Not really. I knew that people didn't like him much but I didn't know why. Then they said he stank and stuff like that.'

'Ok.'

'I don't think he did but it doesn't matter cos that's my opinion.'

Thank goodness she dumped him when she did as he is known to be violent with Nathan and flares up with the slightest provocation. And with Helen's background of domestic violence it doesn't make for a pretty picture. Jason is a much better choice. He is happy to sit and hold her hand and write Haiku poetry for her.

Although the students were very different in character, temperament and ability levels, if we look across the cases, a number of similarities emerge in terms of their experience of high school. All the students experienced difficulties with their peers, most notably with their friends, they all lacked assertiveness in communication and often experienced difficulties understanding the actions of others and in selecting appropriate social strategies. Perhaps the most compelling aspect of the narratives was that all the students experienced feelings of loneliness and this loneliness, and associated difficulties, impacted on their ability to participate in the classroom. A discussion of the similarities and differences between the cases is now provided with comparisons to published research and theory. The focus of the following section is on interpretation of the results and associated implications to future practice.
CHAPTER FIVE: DISCUSSION

These narratives reveal startling details about the experience of students with learning disabilities in the classroom, which contributes to the body of research in significant ways. From watching them and listening to them, and after substantial analysis and interpretation, the researcher was able to provide an answer to the research question, ‘what is the relationship between loneliness and classroom participation in adolescents with learning disabilities,’ using social cognitive theory. A significant and complicated relationship emerged which illustrated the need for a wider focus on the issue of learning difficulties in the classroom. What follows is a discussion of the themes which arose from the narratives and the relationship between those themes.

The themes of social perception and awareness, problematic social skills, bullying and peer rejection, problematic friendships and the contribution of teachers and school belongingness emerged from the narratives. These concepts were seen to have a reciprocal relationship with loneliness and were related to the students’ participation in the classroom. During analysis using social cognitive theory, a number of patterns emerged which are now discussed.

Social cognitive theory, as has been discussed, suggests that human functioning can be thought of resulting from the tension between three interacting domains which form the model of triadic reciprocality: behaviour, environment and personal/cognitive concerns. The illustration below provides a visual representation of the phenomenon of loneliness and classroom participation using this model.
The patterns which emerged using this model suggest relationships between the three domains of triadic reciprocality, loneliness and classroom participation. These relationships assist in addressing the research question and are used to structure the following discussion.

1. Relationship between **social perception and awareness** (cognitive element) and loneliness, and its relationship to **environmental** and **behavioural** concerns and classroom participation.

2. Relationship between **problematic social skills** (behavioural element) and loneliness, and its relationship to **environmental** and **personal/cognitive** concerns and classroom participation.

3. Relationship between **bullying and peer rejection** (environmental element) and loneliness, and its relationship to **personal/cognitive** and **behavioural** concerns and classroom participation.

4. Relationship between **problematic friendships** (environmental element) and loneliness, and its relationship to **personal/cognitive** and **behavioural** concerns and classroom participation.

5. Relationship between **teachers** and **school belongingness** (environmental elements) and loneliness, and their relationship to **personal/cognitive** and **behavioural** concerns and classroom participation.
The following discussion provides a critical examination of these relationships using evidence from the four cases (Nathan, Lenny, Brittany and Helen) in conjunction with relevant literature. Implications for how the findings make a unique contribution to the field are raised throughout, followed by a deliberation on the limitations of the study. The discussion concludes with implications for future practice. To begin, the overall issue of loneliness is discussed in terms of the students’ perceptions of loneliness and an evaluation of the students’ social dissatisfaction. Following this, each of the five themes described above are discussed.

**Loneliness and Social Dissatisfaction**

Loneliness, in its various guises (Cacioppo & Patrick, 2008; Perlman & Peplau, 1982; Qualter & Munn, 2002; Weiss, 1982), was a common thread throughout the narratives. It emerged that loneliness related to a number of factors of the environment, such as bullying and peer rejection, friendships, teachers and school belongingness. It was also related to behavioural factors, such as problematic social skills, and the personal/cognitive factors which, for the present study, concern social perception and awareness including attributions. As might be expected, the findings indicate that feelings of loneliness were experienced, to varying degrees, by all of the students but in different ways and with different outcomes. The following section discusses how loneliness was experience by the students and their awareness of those feelings.

It has been suggested that the most effective way of gaining access to the, “inner world of our research participants: the world of thoughts, feelings, attitudes and opinions,” it is necessary to ask them (Greig & Taylor, 1999, p. 125). The students in this study were asked about their feelings of loneliness but were often reluctant to own such feelings. For example, Lenny stated firmly that he had never been lonely but his responses during the interviews revealed a different perspective. An explanation for this is provided by Weiss...
who has said that people might not be consciously aware of their feelings of loneliness, but be aware that something is amiss in their lives.

In a rare moment, Brittany acknowledged some feelings of loneliness when she said, “it's really hard for me to be at school when I'm [lonely]...I'm putting more strain on the teachers cos they can't teach me because I'm not in the mood for learning cos I'm upset.” If taken at face value, this suggests a surprising degree of insight. However, it was possible that this was merely an attempt to please the researcher by providing what she perceived as a desired response. Although her comments stood out as uncharacteristically sympathetic to her teachers, it is an interesting perspective nonetheless.

Nathan admitted feeling lonely at school. He reported that when he was feeling lonely in the playground he used to hide in the stairwell. He did not discuss his strategies for dealing with loneliness in the classroom but observations revealed that he was prone to daydreaming. Perhaps this was his way of hiding when he was restricted to the confines of the classroom. When asked what he will do for company the following year when Lenny was due to leave, he pondered dropping out of school. This was undoubtedly because the following year was likely to bring yet more social isolation, which would result from the departure of Lenny so soon after Malachi’s departure, and feelings of loneliness. These feelings would be exacerbated by his unrequited feelings for Angel. In this way his loneliness could, potentially, prevent him from achieving his goal of finishing school.

The narratives revealed significant feelings of loneliness experienced by all of the students, but rarely were these feelings consciously articulated. It was necessary to examine the students’ words and actions, and interpret the results, looking for discrepancies between actual and desired social contact, which is the definition of loneliness (Cotterell, 1996; Peplau et al., 1982; Qualter & Munn, 2002; Weiss, 1973).
All of the students were rejected by their peers, to a degree, and the narratives revealed that the students found this peer rejection and subsequent social isolation undesirable. This discrepancy between actual and desired social contact has been identified previously as social loneliness (Perlman & Peplau, 1982; Qualter & Munn, 2002; Weiss, 1982). Examples of social loneliness, which is discomfort associated with a lack of social contact, were evident most clearly in Nathan’s narrative. He was clearly rejected and the evidence for this is the significant and recurrent episodes of bullying and the frequent isolation from his peers and his claims of dissatisfaction with the situation. Lenny spent a considerable amount of time alone at school, as did Helen who admitted to being alone for a significant proportion of time at her previous school and wanted to make a connection with some of the other girls, even though she admitted, “they were really not so nice.” This compares with research that associated loneliness with peer rejection (Asher et al., 1990).

Clearly social loneliness was an issue, but the narratives from the present study revealed more examples of emotional loneliness, which is dissatisfaction with the lack of a valued, intimate friend. This is of concern as Qualter and Munn (2002) found that socially lonely children fared better, with emotionally lonely children experiencing higher levels of anxiety and low self-esteem. All of the students indicated feelings of emotional loneliness in that they lacked a close connection with another person (Peplau et al., 1982; Qualter & Munn, 2002; Weiss, 1973). Although he reported that he was satisfied with his weekend interactions with Lenny, Nathan complained that Lenny had little time for him, suggesting that he lacked an intimate relationship with his best friend. Similarly Brittany revealed levels of emotional loneliness when she admitted not having a trusted friend with whom to share her intimate thoughts and feelings. She valued Lacey and, when she departed, Brittany was left with feelings of emotional loneliness which her relationship with Danni could not assuage. She revealed a lack of closeness to Danni when she said, ‘Danni and I aren’t even good friends.’
Lenny and Helen did not articulate feelings of emotional loneliness but their actions suggested that this was a reality for them. This is evidenced by their efforts at social aspiration: attempts to progress to a more advantageous social network.

Lenny was perhaps the most socially aspirational of the students. He attempted movement between groups which he perceived to be more socially valuable than Nathan. However, he was unable to effectively join any of the groups. Even the handball players refused to associate with him outside of the handball court. It could also be argued that it was his determination to make connections with others, such as his desire to befriend Zack, which most clearly demonstrated his emotional loneliness. His relationship with Nathan was unsatisfactory in this regard as it could not provide the emotional support he needed because Nathan betrayed his trust when he revealed Lenny’s secret to the student body. This was evidenced by his attempts to distance himself from Nathan.

Helen indicated that she was socially aspirational when she said, “I’ve found newer, better friends,” at Southside, implying the friends she had previously were unsatisfactory. She also admitted to trying to distance herself from her only friend Lisa. She reported wanting to go to the movies with her friends on the weekend and explained that family commitments prevented this. However, even though the family situation was problematic in that her father had recently departed and she desired more contact with him, it was considered that she felt the effects of both social and emotional loneliness because she was dissatisfied with the situation.

Brittany’s narrative revealed several examples of her dissatisfaction with her current social arrangements and her desire to progress to a more popular friendship group, which adds an element of social value. As has been identified in earlier literature, some groups may have more social value than others (Prinstein & La Greca, 2002). Interaction in a less valuable peer group would reinforce feelings of low social worth and increase emotional
whereas attempts to interact with a more valued peer group, and subsequent rejection, leads to feelings of social loneliness (Qualter & Munn, 2002). She stated she wanted to find another group to belong to and attempted to move into Pippa’s group. This implied dissatisfaction, and subsequent feelings of loneliness, with Danni’s group even though she claimed to be satisfied with her relationship with them.

All of the students in this study believed that their peers were engaged in more frequent and satisfying social contact than that which was available to them, which represented a discrepancy between actual and desired social interaction and subsequent feelings of loneliness. Peplau and her colleagues (Peplau et al., 1982) have described this aspect of social and emotional loneliness as a discrepancy between the social activities of others and ourselves, which appeared to be a major concern for all of the students in this study. They expressed a desire for more social contact at the weekend and held the belief that their peers were significantly more socially active, engaging in more contact and better activities than themselves. This appears to support the contention that adolescents, “hold unrealistically high expectations for their social life,” (Peplau & Perlman, 1982) (p.75). For example, Lenny reported that his peers ‘partied’ every weekend, which is doubtful, but it indicated the level of peer interaction that he believed to be the norm.

Nathan was very open about his desire to interact with his peers more on the weekend and reported that he believed they were out ‘partying’ every weekend whilst he was home alone or at Lenny’s house. He also acknowledged that he wished to be out every weekend like his peers. Perhaps this is not surprising when he acknowledged that on the weekend he did, “nothing.” This suggests that Nathan experienced social and emotional loneliness, particularly on the weekends.

When Helen reported that she thought her peers went shopping and to the movies, “more often than I do,” she hinted at her underlying feelings of social
dissatisfaction that she was not included in the fun. Brittany reported her peers were likely to engage in activities such as shopping and movies too, and thought they engaged in these activities every weekend whereas her weekends were spent with her boyfriend. Although it could be considered that she was satisfied with seeing only her boyfriend, the narratives revealed dissatisfaction with her weekend social arrangements as she admitted wanting to see more of Danni on the weekend but was unable to because of Danni’s parents’ edict.

Each of the students acknowledged that they had experienced a number of disruptions to their friendships and this lead to social dissatisfaction. This aspect of social and emotional loneliness has been identified as a discrepancy between past and present social experiences (Peplau et al., 1982). Brittany, most obviously, was profoundly unhappy by Lacey’s departure and became teary at the mention of her name. She clearly held Lacey in higher esteem than Danni and was disappointed to have invested in someone who abandoned her, particularly as she had rejected Danni in favour of Lacey. In this regard Brittany demonstrated her feelings of loneliness most succinctly. Peplau and her colleagues (Peplau et al., 1982) claimed that changes or disruptions in social relationships can cause loneliness if the individual is dissatisfied with the changes, which Brittany clearly was. Lenny and Nathan also suffered from changes to their social relationships but for different reasons.

Lenny and Nathan both acknowledged that school was better after Liam’s departure, but this was perhaps related to the fact that the tensions in their relationship eased when he left and also because they received less negative attention from the staff and students without his wayward influence. However, the disruption to the relationship brought feelings of loneliness for both boys: Lenny sought the company of others (Derek and Jason), making Nathan melancholy about the changes in Lenny’s affection which, in turn, caused him to seek out new friends, namely Malachi. Nathan and Helen
both admitted to significant feelings of loneliness, but there appeared to be some confusion between being lonely and being alone.

**Loneliness & Aloneness**

Students with LD are often unable to differentiate between loneliness and aloneness by confusing being lonely with being alone (Pavri & Monda-Amaya, 2000). Lenny showed limited understanding of the concept of loneliness when he stated he had never been lonely because he had always had friends. This implied that he believed loneliness to be lack of social contact, not the affective reaction to dissatisfaction with lack of contact or lack of a valued other. Therefore, when asked about his feelings of loneliness he could not claim such feelings. This supports the contention that lonely people might not be aware that their social dissatisfaction creates feelings of loneliness (Weiss, 1982). When asked about her feelings of loneliness, Brittany referred to when she, “didn’t have anyone to talk to,” which could indicate her limited understanding of the difference between being alone and being lonely. However, perhaps she meant she lacked a person to share her intimate thoughts with, which would indicate emotional loneliness. She did, in fact, admit to lacking a trusted friend in later interviews and agreed that she would like to have a friend she could trust.

Nathan’s narrative suggested that he appeared to understand what loneliness was as he referred to feeling sad as a result of his loneliness and that this loneliness was due to being bullied. This is an example of the social loneliness experienced when an individual is rejected and, therefore, lacking social contact and is concurrent with earlier research which connects social loneliness with rejection (Qualter & Munn, 2002).

When asked how it felt to be in school when she was lonely Helen replied, “It felt really sad, no-one cared and yeah, I didn’t have any friends.” Saying no-one cared implies she experienced emotional loneliness but reporting lack of friends in the same sentence indicates she also suffered from feelings of
social isolation or loneliness. She admitted to feeling sad as a result indicating that she had quite a sophisticated understanding of the experience of loneliness rather than the view that being alone made her lonely. This demonstrates different findings to those of Pavri and Monda-Amaya (Pavri & Monda-Amaya, 2000) whose participants experienced difficulty differentiating between the two. A possible explanation is that loneliness and aloneness are not dichotomous constructs: there are different levels of awareness of such concepts from Lenny’s conception (no difference) to Helen’s (some difference).

Reactions to loneliness are motivated by fear of rejection and can include self-imposed isolation to avoid social rejection or over-enthusiasm in interactions with peers (Cotterell, 1996), which alienates the peer and further marginalizes the individual (Jones, 1982). Both these reactions to loneliness were discovered in the narratives. For example, when Nathan was feeling rejected he reported that he went to a secluded stair-well where he could be alone. Often lonely students find their way to the internet to assuage their feelings of loneliness (Morahan-Martin & Schumacher, 2003) and this option was available to Nathan. However, it is possible that he did not want to be seen to be alone, presumably because being alone made him vulnerable to attack, but possibly he also did not want to be seen to have no friends. This is a matter of speculation. However, regardless of why he sought privacy, his reaction to the feelings of loneliness were more exclusionary than inclusionary. Lenny approached the situation differently.

Lenny was compelled into action to remedy his feelings of social isolation and loneliness. He actively sought new social contacts but was rejected, causing him to move on to yet another target. The observations recorded outside the work education classroom suggested a possible explanation for this cycle of pursuit of potential friends and subsequent rejection. When Lenny engaged the African students in a rare conversation he became overly animated and loud, causing the students to turn away from him. When the
teacher arrived late he made a joke out of reprimanding her, but the joke fell flat causing Lenny to repeat it twice more. Perhaps as a result of this episode, or because of a history of this type of behaviour, his peers did not want him to sit with them in the classroom. If he used such an approach to gain entrance to a new group, this would explain their rejection of him. Credence for this contention is given when Nathan reports that Derek and Jason evicted Lenny from their group because he was annoying. Unfortunately Lenny does not seem able to perceive his behaviour as contributing towards his social difficulties.

Having established that the students experienced feelings of loneliness, regardless of whether they were able to identify these feelings as such, the discussion now turns to the first of the five relationships to examine the relationship between this loneliness and classroom participation using the lens of social cognitive theory.

1. **Relationship between social perception and awareness (cognitive element) and loneliness, and its relationship to environmental and behavioural concerns and classroom participation.**

Figure 3: Relationship #1: Social perception and awareness within a model of triadic reciprocity

In the narratives, loneliness was found to be related to the students’ social perceptions and awareness and these aspects of cognition were related to the behaviours of the child and the behaviours and attitudes of others in the
school environment. This relationship was, in turn, related to the students’ classroom participation. This interrelationship between each of the constructs is demonstrated in figure 3. This figure demonstrates that, when viewed from a social cognitive perspective, loneliness and classroom participation have a reciprocal relationship with aspects of the environment and the child’s behaviours and cognitions. This interrelationship will be explored in the following section. The cognitive aspect of this relationship refers to Theory of Mind, perceptions and awareness and attributions and these emerged from the narratives as being related to feelings of loneliness and ability to participate in the classroom. These topics will now be discussed and implications are drawn.

All of the students involved in the present study demonstrated problematic areas of social cognition including social perceptions, awareness and attributions and related Theory of Mind development. These difficulties were related to how they viewed their social world and their place in it. These problematic cognitions were related to problematic social skills which, within an often hostile environment, contributed to social difficulties. This confirms previous research which suggested that difficulties with cognitive processing could provide an explanation for the substantial relationship between learning disabilities and social difficulties (Pearl, 1987). One aspect of cognitive processing that resonated through the narratives related to Theory of Mind.

Theory of Mind

Theory of Mind refers to the way young children develop a sense of perspective in relation to others (Lillard & Curenton, 1999). That is, the ability to anticipate how words or actions will make a person feel (Dunn, 1996) and the ability to predict how a person might behave, or their motives for this behaviour (Verbrugge & Mol, 2008). This cognitive element, therefore, is directly related to their behaviour and how they are received by others in their environment as their cognitions dictate their actions and their actions have a direct impact on others.
Theory of Mind ability is based on the individual’s capacity to take verbal and non-verbal cues from an interaction to be able to determine the thoughts and feelings of others (Lillard & Curenton, 1999). Research has indicated that students with learning disabilities may perform at lower levels on Theory of Mind tasks than their peers (Charman & Campbell, 1997) and Dunn (1996) suggested that Theory of Mind should be assessed by observing the social interaction of students to provide evidence of an ability to ‘read minds’. Although Theory of Mind development begins in early childhood, many adults (with and without cognitive disabilities) do not use these skills effectively (Verbrugge & Mol, 2008) and there are suggestions that problematic Theory of Mind development can cause peer relationship problems later on (Lillard & Curenton, 1999). This aspect of cognition was investigated in the present study by observation and questioning to ascertain the students’ perceptions of the motives of others in addition to their ability to anticipate and predict. The students demonstrated some understanding of the thoughts and feelings of others, as would be expected by adolescence, but their responses and behaviours revealed some difficulty in this regard. These issues are now discussed.

When Nathan laughed at Malachi when the other boys were kicking him, he demonstrated an inability to predict the consequences of his actions or, rather, how his actions would be received by others and what their reactions might be. He laughed at Malachi, who was known to be violent, and Malachi’s reaction was rage and violence. In addition, when he told Malachi to, “f-off,” he was asked, “what did you expect him to do when you did that?” to which he replied, “Just walk away.” This demonstrated his Theory of Mind difficulties in that he did not anticipate how this would make Malachi feel or act and could not understand Malachi’s motives when he attacked him as a result.

This situation was similar to when Helen returned the clothes to the girl who gave her a makeover and watched as she cut them up. She acknowledged
that she was unable to comprehend the girls’ actions, although the casual observer would probably have inferred that the girl was being spiteful. Helen surmised that she wanted the clothes for an art project, which was probably not the case. This demonstrates lack of awareness of the motives of others and inability to predict the behaviours of others. It could be argued that her intuition should have told her that she should be cautious when these girls who were, “not so nice,” offered to give her clothes, magazines and makeup. Perhaps she ignored it as she was grateful for the attention, but the narratives do not reveal any acknowledgment that she could see it coming. This lack of discernment about accepting the offer and failure to be more suspicious of their motives possibly contributed to their frustration with her and their reluctance to allow her to work with them in group activities, but that is a matter of conjecture. It certainly contributed to her social isolation and related feelings of loneliness.

Lenny demonstrated limited ability to ascertain the thoughts and beliefs of others and predict their behaviours when he chose to tell Nathan his secret. Perhaps it could be argued that he should have been able to trust his friend not to reveal his secrets, but clearly he could not. Because of the nature of the secret, Lenny would have been wise to keep it to himself. Nathan’s reaction to the revelation was to relate the incident to the student body, perhaps enjoying the attention and enjoying having something of value to share with his peers, and Lenny should have understood that this was a possibility. Perhaps he thought, instead, that his friend would be titillated and they would keep the incident to themselves. As a result Lenny was rejected by the entire school population, which certainly contributed to his feelings of social isolation and loneliness. The most alarming aspect of the situation was that Lenny did not possess enough awareness to judge the appropriateness of his behaviour or how others would view him if they knew.

Nathan frequently used the term, “no apparent reason,” when he spoke about the behaviours of others. This speaks to his inability to perceive a reason,
even when the reason is apparent to observers. He had a great deal of
difficulty understanding the motives of others which was evidenced by the
numerous examples of his inability to attribute a motive for a person’s actions
when asked. The most compelling evidence was when he asked for
examples of how he irritated Malachi and mentioned that he had been trying
to work out the answer himself, with no success. This reduced ability to
ascertain reasons for the behaviours of others meant that he could not gain
insight into the appropriateness of their actions and, by association, his own.

Even when the consequence is violence, Nathan is unable to predict the
actions of others. It could reasonably be assumed that if the other students
had identified a pattern to the violence, in that Nathan’s peers slapped him in
the crotch when they saw him, Nathan should also have been conscious of
the pattern. However, he demonstrated his lack of awareness when he
complained that they, “just do it too quick,” for him to be able to react.

The narratives were littered with examples of the students’ difficulties in
discerning the motives of others. For example, Brittany did not know why the
girl in the movie was crying and Nathan could not work out why the girl took
his drink. The students did not use non-verbal cues and their knowledge of
the world to make a judgement. The repercussions of this reduced ability to
ascertain motives are that they are unable to induce a desired behaviour, or
reduce an undesired behaviour, in others. This will be discussed at length in
the section on selection of social strategies but, for the topic at hand,
understanding motives is essential in social interactions because, without it,
the students experience greater social isolation and subsequent feelings of
loneliness.

All of the students demonstrated problematic judgement to varying degrees,
which spoke to their difficulties in predicting the consequences of their
actions and difficulty in ascertaining the beliefs held by others. Helen
demonstrated this most succinctly when she chose to side with Naija against
Daksha and when she agreed to date Malachi. Siding with Naija
demonstrated either that she thought Naija might become her friend if she was separated from the rest of the group, which was highly unlikely, or she was unaware of the consequences of showing lack of support the leader of the group, if she even realised that was the situation. Because of Malachi’s level of unpopularity, dating him damaged her reputation and dreams of acceptance possibly more than she could have been aware. Had she been aware that she would be unpopular by association, perhaps she would have chosen more wisely and experienced less social isolation as a result.

One aspect of Theory of Mind is the capacity to joke and tease (Volkmar & Klin, 1998) as it requires the ability to gauge what others will find funny or offensive. Nathan and Lenny did not appear to be able to determine what others might find amusing. Nathan demonstrated this when he held the buffer wheel over the boy’s head, believing this to be a funny joke when, in reality, it was merely annoying. The narratives revealed similar findings in relation to Lenny when he sat with Dillon and took his book for a joke. Dillon responded by shouting, “Get off you idiot! You’re so irritating!” This suggested that the attempt did not achieve the desired effect. This behaviour did little to build rapport with the other students and, therefore, exacerbated the difficulties experienced in group and paired activities.

When Lenny tried to join in the conversation in the construction yard he began by immediately ridiculing the alpha-male instead of using a more subtle approach. He demonstrated that he was unable to participate in this kind of verbal banter because he was unaware of the unspoken rules surrounding such an exchange. His attempt at humour was quickly quelled. It is considered that this was, in part, related to Lenny’s inability to perceive and comprehend subtle social cues which is requisite for effective social interaction (Dimitrovsky et al., 1998) and, as a result, his social interactions suffered. Considering the nature of construction, in that the activities are designed for working as a team, these incidents hindered Lenny’s progress in this subject.
Brittany thought she was making a joke when she shouted at the girl who had just been to smoke a cigarette. Perhaps she was not aware that the girl was likely to be embarrassed at her revealing her illicit activity in the presence of a ‘teacher.’ Further when Brittany asked the girl to throw the cushion then shouted at her for doing so, she demonstrated her inability to ascertain what might amuse the girl; the girl merely looked confused. This demonstrates that Brittany, too, had reduced ability to perceive what others might find funny and this contributed to classroom difficulties.

Theory of Mind, as has been established, is associated with an individual’s perception or viewpoint. This aspect of cognition was found to be related to the behaviours of the students and the attitudes and behaviours of those in the school environment. In addition, this interrelationship was found to be related to feelings of loneliness and ability to participate in the classroom, as per figure 3. Another, related, aspect of cognition is the students’ perceptions of themselves and their environment, which were found to be related to their feelings of loneliness and classroom participation in addition to behavioural and environmental concerns. The discussion now turns to this aspect of cognition.

**Perceptions and Awareness**

Theory of Mind relates to the ability to anticipate how words or actions will make a person feel (Dunn, 1996) and the ability to predict how a person might behave (Verbrugge & Mol, 2008) whereas perception and awareness relates to self-perception, which is how an individual views themself and an awareness of how others view them (Bear et al., 2006; Pavri & Monda-Amaya, 2000), also awareness about how others see situations. The students in this study demonstrated difficulties with self-perception which concurs with similar findings that linked problematic self-perception to LD (Pearl, 1992). They also experienced difficulties perceiving events from the perspectives of others. In this way perception and awareness were found to be related to behavioural and environmental concerns. These difficulties with
perception and awareness contributed to difficulties in interactions with peers, which often occurred in the environment of the classroom (see Fig. 3). This concurred with research that has established that self-perception can affect social interactions and academic achievement (Pearl, 1992). These issues are now discussed.

Nathan and Lenny shared the perception that because they had stopped behaving in immature, unappealing ways, their social status was improving. However, their perception of the situation was not concurrent with observations which revealed that they were both substantially rejected and neglected by their peers. This subverts their optimistic claims that, “everyone’s starting to like me now.” This was evidenced not only by the observations but also by the construction teacher’s assertions that no-one else would work with Nathan, and Tom’s claims that nobody talked to Lenny. This suggests a relationship between social difficulties and ability to participate. Further, Nathan’s perception that the bullying had eased because his peers pitied him was yet more evidence of his problematic perceptions in that the narrative revealed very little compassion from his peers. Their perception that their social status was improving perhaps made it more difficult when they were, yet again, rejected (or, most notably, neglected in the classroom) by their peers resulting in feelings of social isolation and loneliness.

In the interviews Lenny revealed he was unable to ascertain whether Zack was a friend or not and claimed Raymond as a friend, despite observational evidence to the contrary. Brittany also held false beliefs about her popularity, particularly within her own friendship group. However, it could be argued that her friends were very passive in their rejection, making it more difficult for her to gauge their friendship. Helen demonstrated similar difficulties in that she believed her dance teacher thought she was, “ok,” at dance whereas the teacher reported that she believed Helen to be uncoordinated and that she struggled to keep up. These examples indicate that the students
experienced difficulties perceiving how other people viewed them. Perhaps it could be argued that this misperception that everyone had positive feelings about them could contribute to positive feelings of self-worth, except that this was not the case. Perhaps it was more likely that the misperception set them up for a greater fall, and a greater discrepancy between actual and desired social contact and subsequent feelings of loneliness, when the inevitable rejection occurred. This is a matter of conjecture but is supported by examples from the narratives where Raymond punched Lenny and refused to sit with him in work education.

In the situation where Lenny attempted to rally support for his assault on Liam he demonstrated an interesting paradox. He believed that the other boys might have been persuaded to assault Liam, which is possible considering his unpopular status, but it was extremely unlikely that they would ally themselves with Lenny in such an attack and risk social censure. In this way he demonstrated some awareness of the perceptions of others as he was aware of other peoples’ feelings about Liam, but he misjudged their feelings about him, which demonstrated lack of awareness about how he is perceived by others. An explanation for this was not found in the narratives but it could be because Lenny and the others possess differing levels of perception rather than an absence of perception.

Brittany believed she was friends with the two girls in Marine but their behaviour towards her indicated that she was not. She might not have actually believed this statement but, if taken on face value, it would indicate that she was not aware of their perceptions of her. Her belief that they were her friends, similarly to Lenny, meant that she experienced rejection when they scowled at her and did not sit with her in class. This has repercussions for both loneliness and classroom participation as the rejection by someone she thought of as a friend could have made her feelings of loneliness more acute and also it meant she had reduced opportunities for work partners in marine classes.
The interviews revealed that Brittany thought her social status had improved since she was, “a loser,” in primary school but she was unable to articulate a reason for this improvement. However, this was not supported by subsequent conversations which revealed her desire for a trusted friend and her aspiration to a more popular group of friends, meaning she struggled to ascertain how others viewed her. In an intriguing response to the question, “how do you know when someone doesn’t like you?” Brittany reported that she could tell when someone did not like her if they just stopped talking and walked away. Perhaps it could be argued that she had difficulty articulating how she knew if someone did not like her, but her perception that Katie and Beth were her friends because they waved at her in the corridor indicated that she had not picked up on Katie’s glares or their indifference to her in the classroom. This demonstrated a significant lack of awareness about the perception of others.

Helen reported that she did not know why she was rejected. She knew that she did not, “fit in,” which revealed some level of self-awareness and awareness of the perceptions of others, but struggled to attribute a reason for it. She suggested that her learning difficulty caused her social difficulties, which suggested remarkable insight, but it is unlikely that she understood it was her behaviours, which were related to problematic cognitions and social skills, that contributed to her social difficulties (see fig. 3). It was more likely that she thought that she was rejected because, as she claimed, she was, “not that smart,” and, possessed, “below average,” intelligence. Even this self-perception was flawed in that she was considered to be of average intelligence and demonstrated a number of attributes which suggested higher levels of reasoning.

Helen reported that she was more popular at Southside than she had been at Lennox Hall. Using anecdotes provided by Helen about her life at Lennox Hall, it was established that Helen spent a significant amount of time alone, both in academic and non-academic times, and was rejected and neglected
by the other students. In comparison, her experiences at Southside appeared to be similar in nature. The rejection by the girls during hockey, the taunts from Clark, and Adiya and Daksha’s neglect and subsequent rejection support this contention. It is difficult to say whether she genuinely believed that Adiya and Daksha were her friends or whether she merely hoped they were, but she stated this belief many times throughout the narratives. In addition, when asked about Daksha being angry with her during dance class she contended that Daksha had been angry with Naija, not her, when Daksha’s behaviour and body language indicated this was untrue. Examples such as these indicated that Helen was not aware of how others perceived her. What they also reveal is that this limited perception caused some of her social difficulties and that these social difficulties meant that she had reduced opportunities for work partners in the classroom.

There were diffuse signs that Lenny was attempting to sever his friendship with Nathan but Nathan showed little awareness of Lenny’s feelings or actions in this regard. He did notice Lenny was spending less time with him but claimed this was because Lenny wanted a change, not because he was no longer interested in a relationship with him. However, as Lenny reported that Nathan was his friend and appeared to desire contact with him outside of school, it must have been an extremely confusing situation for Nathan. Perhaps this does not demonstrate his lack of awareness of the perception of others insomuch as it demonstrates his desperation to maintain this waning friendship.

Lenny appeared to be aware that some people were more popular than others, as he correctly perceived Nathan to be a threat to his social climbing, but he was unable to nominate the popular students in his year. Helen was also unable to nominate the popular groups at Southside or at Lennox Hall. In fact, none of the students in the study were able to identify the popular groups. Brittany explained this by saying, “we don’t really put anyone into popularity...we’re all just friends,” which was certainly untrue. This speaks to
her lack of perception and awareness about the world around her, similarly to the other students. Being unaware of the popular groups was actually quite problematic for the students as, for example, their social aspiration to these groups was less likely to be successful, thereby contributing to feelings of social dissatisfaction and loneliness. No evidence was found for a direct relationship between this and classroom participation, but it could be argued that being unaware of the popular groups was related to their social rejection and feelings of loneliness and these feelings were found to be related to a reduced ability to participate in the classroom as per figure 3.

Students with learning disabilities often perceive themselves to be less academically (Pearl, 1992), cognitively (Hartner et al., 1998), and socially (Hartner et al., 1998; Margalit, 1994) skilled than their peers. Although the research design did not call for data relating to their peers for comparison, the students revealed quite negative perceptions of themselves, particularly their academic prowess. These issues are now addressed.

Examples of negative self-perceptions for academic tasks include when Lenny said, “I'm not a good thinker,” whilst Brittany said she was, “dumb,” and, “stupid,” and, “I wasn’t smart enough.” Helen said, “I’m not that smart,” whereas Nathan did not admit to those type of low-intellect perceptions but claimed that his peers thought he lacked construction skills. He admitted this made him feel worthless. These feelings are related to negative self-efficacy, meaning the students would be less likely to attempt tasks that would make them feel ‘dumb’ (Evans, 1989). This was demonstrated when Brittany said she felt she, “sucked,” and, “gave up,” when confronted with a difficult task. Social difficulties provoked a similar response.

The students generally acknowledged they experienced difficulties with peers, but perceived little awareness of their limited social skills and their contribution to those social difficulties. Nathan, for example, said that the teachers told him he irritated Malachi but he believed this to be untrue. Whilst both boys claimed their ‘silly’ behaviour caused peer rejection, they
articulated a level of choice in their behaviour, as if they chose to act that way and not that it was a result of their social skill difficulties. These results support previous research which suggested students with LD possessed some awareness of their social difficulties (Tur-Kaspa et al., 1998). However, neither example demonstrates any awareness that their social skill difficulties were related to rejection by their peers and subsequent loneliness as illustrated in figure 3.

It is argued that people who have low self-perception are more likely to believe that others will also have a low perception of them (Margalit, 1994). As discussed, Nathan believed his peers had a low perception of his construction skills, and this was related to his self-perception for learning activities, but the same did not hold true for his self-perception in social terms. In fact, the all the students believed their peers had higher opinions of them than the observations and interviews revealed to be true. With Helen it was Adiya and Daksha; Brittany had Katie; Nathan had Martin; and Lenny had Raymond. Lenny and Nathan thought their year group in general was beginning to like them, an opinion which was undermined by the significant peer rejection and bullying. Perhaps this, too, is related to the students’ sense of optimism. Perhaps they hoped, or wanted to believe, others had a high opinion of them rather than believing this to be true. This question remains unanswered. However, the students’ social self-perception was found to be incongruous, for some reason, with their academic self-perception although the narratives revealed they experienced significant difficulties in both arenas. This impacted on their ability to participate in the classroom which is demonstrated most effectively in the following examples.

When Nathan stood too close to the teacher in the workshop, Donovan reacted by punching him in the arm for acting strangely. By hiding behind the teacher’s desk where he was not able to see what the teacher was showing the class, he missed out on valuable instruction because he did not possess enough awareness to know what he was doing was inappropriate. There are
other examples, such as Helen’s failure to make friends outside of Adiya’s group meaning she was often sat alone in class. One such example was when she fell behind and could not catch up because she did not have a friend to copy from. In fact, lacking a partner in the classroom often meant the students had little assistance when it was needed.

The students appeared unable to ascertain the thoughts and feelings of others in terms of how they irritated their peers and teachers. For example, Brittany indicated that some of her teachers had little fondness for her, particularly the science and marine teachers, who mistook her confusion for fractiousness. She did not know how her behaviour contributed to their reaction to her. Nathan admitted that he did not know what he was doing to annoy Malachi and could not ascertain the motives behind why he was continually rejected when he sought help in the classroom from his peers, particularly Martin. However, he provided an explanation himself when he reported that Martin was becoming his friend and had started treating him with respect. Observations revealed that this was not the case. By Nathan entertaining the (incorrect) belief that Martin was his friend, he considered Martin to be an appropriate source of help. The fact that Martin continually snubbed Nathan’s help-seeking attempts demonstrated that Nathan had made an incorrect judgement about Martin and, as a result, was unable to procure much needed help in the classroom.

There were many other examples of the students’ inability to perceive the views of others such as when Lenny admitted he was doing, “bad things,” which annoyed his peers, but he was unable to gauge what they were. Perhaps as a result, he seldom attempted to sit with his classmates, thereby severing a potential source of support. Helen, too, was confused about why the other girls did not wish to work with her in class at Lennox Hall and also could not suggest an explanation as to why Bisa was angry with her at the beginning of hockey. This difficulty in assigning reasons behind the actions
of others leads the discussion on to attributions, which is another aspect of cognition.

*Attributions*

Attribution theory states that individuals who locate attributions for social failure to either internal or external factors, over which they believe they have no control (Schunk, 2008) (for example a fundamental character flaw or a particularly harsh peer group), are more likely to suffer from extended periods of affective loneliness, which is related to their social self concept, thereby making them less likely to engage in effective social interaction, which has implications in the classroom. In this way attributions are related to behaviour and the social environment, as per figure 3. It has been suggested in the literature that attributions also play a major role in the outcomes of social rejection and loneliness (Peplau et al., 1982). The implications for this will now be discussed.

Students with learning disabilities have been found to differ from their peers with regard to attributions for loneliness, and to report higher expectations for future loneliness (Tur-Kaspa et al., 1998). That is, students with LD tend to select internal, characterological attributions for failure and externalize their successes more than their peers (Jacobson et al., 1986). The findings from the present study, though they are not generalizable due to the size of the sample and the degree of attribution questioning, revealed the students demonstrated attributional styles which were not always beneficial for their social development. This was because their attributional style shaped their social behaviours and this was related to their interactions with peers. In turn, the behaviour of others, in conjunction with problematic perceptions of that behaviour and related motives as previously discussed, influenced their future attributions. This is best demonstrated in the following examples and is illustrated in figure 3.
Lenny and Nathan shared the belief that their social difficulties stemmed from their own behaviours. It is likely that this was the more empowering choice of attribution, as attributing a characterological flaw would have offered little hope for change. Deciding that they caused the bullying and rejection because they behaved in immature and inappropriate ways, or more likely that Liam was responsible for leading them astray, gave them hope that the situation would end when they ceased the behaviour. Previous research found that this type of behavioural self-blame was more empowering in that individuals believe they can change their behaviour and the resultant situation (Peplau et al., 1982). Ironically, their behaviour did contribute to their social rejection (as did a lot of other issues), but this behaviour was actually related to their problematic social perception and awareness: they were not aware of the appropriateness of their behaviours and they could not anticipate the consequences of their actions. Had they known that their social difficulties had been more characterological in nature, the literature suggests that they would have experience feelings of hopelessness as this is a stable factor (Peplau et al., 1982). The implications of this are that Lenny’s optimism might have contributed to his decision to remain at school (see Belongingness & School Attrition).

People often seek to rationalize periods of loneliness by looking for a ‘precipitating event’ or a ‘maintaining cause’ (Cutrona, 1982). It has been suggested that external attributions (for loneliness) lead to feelings of hostility and anger whereas internal attributions cause depression (Qualter & Munn, 2002). Helen attributed her social success to external causes such as the contention that Southside was more accepting, but attributed social failure to internal factors such as her learning difficulties, which was both a precipitating event and maintaining cause in that it is an ongoing issue. The exception was when she said that her scout troupe listen to Andy and not her because he is more popular, which is an external issue. Perhaps this anomaly could be due to Helen’s belief that her unpopularity was caused by internal factors, meaning that it was not that Andy was very popular, but that
she was unpopular. Helen’s attributional style was similar for her academic successes and failures. She believed her few academic successes were due to external causes: the work being easy, but her academic failure was due to internal causes: she could not do the work. In this way the relationship between social failure and academic failure becomes clear. Her attributional style does not allow her to experience the heightened self-esteem associated with internal attributions for success (Jacobson et al., 1986) and resultant positive self-efficacy for the task thereby making her less likely view social and academic pursuits favourably. Again, this provides another relationship between cognition, behaviour and environment.

Lenny believed his social difficulties were due to internal causes, “I was doing bad stuff,” and that his subsequent successes were also internal because he had changed his behaviour and acted in a more mature manner. Lenny appeared to find hope in attributing social difficulty to his own actions in that he felt able to control the situation by changing his behaviour and, as a result, control his destiny. It would be interesting to examine whether this self-blame was empowering in the long-term in the face of subsequent social difficulty. Lenny only gave one attribution for academic failure and that was internal: “I'm not a good thinker,” which is a stable, characterological flaw. It is interesting that his social attributions were behavioural and, as a result, caused feelings of optimism and hope whereas his academic attributions were related to pessimism and low self-efficacy. This mismatch of social and academic attributions might have any number of explanations, but perhaps it indicates he was more hopeful than realistic when attributing his social difficulties to his own behaviour.

Brittany and Nathan gave very few attributions for their academic and social successes and failures, although Brittany, like her brother, claimed her social successes and failures were due to internal causes such as a change in attitude and because she used to be a, “hot head.” Nathan, on the other hand, differed significantly.
Nathan, who particularly struggled to assign attributions for the actions of others, hinted at a similar philosophy to Lenny in regard to their social failure in that he, “sometimes,” thought it was due to his actions, which is an internal but behavioural, and therefore changeable, attribution. On the other hand, Nathan attributed his academic failures to exclusively external causes. For example, he did not do well on his toolbox because, “I had hurt my arm,” and, most interestingly, he claimed that his mathematical difficulties were because they put him in a class which they knew was too difficult and they lost his work records, causing him to fail the unit. This demonstrated that he did not accept responsibility for his academic difficulties which would cause him to become de-motivated, negatively affecting his self-concept, making him less likely to attempt similar tasks in the future (Schunk, 2008). Interestingly, in these examples his beliefs about his abilities were similar to those held by his teachers who considered Nathan to be unskilled in these subjects. Perhaps this was because these were accurate perceptions, but it is more likely that his attributions affected his self-concept and subsequent behaviour, as discussed, and it was this behaviour that the teachers observed and used to construct their beliefs about Nathan and his ability to participate in their classrooms (see fig. 3).

The narratives demonstrated that the attributional styles adopted by the students did not always support findings from the literature. However, Helen was able to articulate attributions for social successes and failures with greater frequency than the other students meaning that the other students used the term, “I don’t know,” with much more frequency. Perhaps this suggests a difference in their levels of awareness or, perhaps, Helen is merely more eloquent than the others. With more data on this aspect of social cognition, more significant conclusions could be raised.

The narratives revealed that social perception and awareness, including Theory of Mind and attributional style, were related to the students’ behaviours and the attitudes and behaviours of others in the school
environment. This interrelationship was found to be related quite significantly to feelings of loneliness and the ability to participate in the classroom. A number of examples from the narratives were provided to support this contention. The following is a summary of the key findings on the cognitive aspect of the narratives. Following that, the discussion will move on to the second of the five relationships.

The key findings in the relationship between social perception and awareness, loneliness and classroom participation were as follows:

- Problematic perceptions and awareness were found to be significantly related to the students’ social behaviours and subsequent behaviours of others in an often hostile school environment. This was related to social isolation and, in particular, difficulty participating in group work.

- Students demonstrated limited understanding of the thoughts and feelings of others, particularly motives for their actions, which contributed significantly to social difficulties and frequently violence in Nathan’s case. This was related to how he was treated in the classroom, particularly in classes with a reliance on group activities.

- The students demonstrated limited ability to predict the consequences of their actions, particularly Nathan, and this was related to social difficulties in the classroom and outside which contributed to feelings of loneliness.

- Problematic judgement was found to be a significant issue for all of the students and this was related to social difficulties in the classroom and subsequent feelings of loneliness.

- Nathan and Lenny, particularly, demonstrated limited ability to joke and tease effectively which often caused irritation to their peers, which contributed to social isolation and feelings of loneliness and which confounded their participation in the classroom.

- The students held beliefs about how people viewed them that were found to be questionable when compared to the observations. This
contributed to heightened feelings of loneliness when rejection occurred by someone perceived as a friend. Absence of friends in the classroom was identified as a contributor to lack of participation.

- The narratives support the contention that perception and awareness abilities occur on a spectrum, rather than a binary absence versus presence of perception.
- Perceptions and awareness were found to be related quite significantly to the students’ opportunities for working with others in the classroom, particularly in group work activities.
- All the students held perceptions that their social situation was improving despite contradictory observations.
- All the students held beliefs that they were below average intelligence although this was considered inaccurate. This was related to negative self-efficacy for academic tasks. This has implications for the education of students with learning disabilities.
- None of the students could identify the popular groups in their year levels. This was found to be related to failed attempts at social climbing and related feelings of loneliness.
- Students demonstrated little awareness of the contribution of their problematic social skills to the social difficulties.
- Nathan, in particular, demonstrated that his inability to gauge what was appropriate behaviour in the classroom prevented him from participating effectively.
- All the students demonstrated attributional styles which were not beneficial to their social development because their attributional style shaped their social behaviours and this was related to their interactions with peers. This relationship was also found to be reciprocal.
- Students had differing attributional styles and this was related to their behaviours in the classroom and the attitudes of those around them.
Having addressed social perception and awareness, which are cognitive elements, the discussion now turns to an examination of social skills, which is a behavioural element, to examine its relationship to loneliness and classroom participation.

2. **Relationship between problematic social skills** *(behavioural element)* **and loneliness, and its relationship to environmental and personal/cognitive concerns and classroom participation.**

![Figure 4: Relationship #2: Problematic social skills within a model of triadic reciprocity](image)

The narratives from the current study revealed a relationship between problematic social skills and feelings of loneliness, and demonstrated how the students’ social behaviours were related to their problematic perceptions and awareness and the thoughts and behaviours of others in the classroom environment (see fig. 4). Social skill difficulties such as communication difficulties, assertiveness, selection of social strategies and social learning abilities were found to be directly related to their classroom experience and feelings of loneliness, as is discussed, and a number of implications for this were discovered.

As identified in previous research, individuals with learning disabilities experience difficulties in the social domain in addition to their academic difficulties (Mishna, 2003; Moisan, 1998; Mungovan et al., 2002). The implication is that students with LD have social skill deficits (Haager &
Vaughn, 1995; Kavale & Forness, 1996) and that these deficits cause the students to behave in socially inappropriate ways (Tur-Kaspa et al., 1998). It has been stated that, as a result, they, “seem ill-prepared to succeed in high school,” (Deshler et al., 2001, p. 96). The narratives from this study revealed that the students experienced difficulty in some aspects of social interaction and communication. However, it is advised that this should not be referred to as a *deficit* because the students appeared to be in possession of a series of strategies, but often did not select and implement social strategies effectively. Further, the narratives indicated that social difficulties were not solely due to their social behaviours and related cognitions but, as suggested in figure 4, also due to difficulties with others in the school environment. The narratives revealed that social skill difficulties meant that the students experienced feelings of loneliness and greater difficulty participating in classroom activities as can be seen in figure 4.

Lenny provided an interesting insight into the relationship between social behaviour, loneliness and classroom participation. He reported that his problematic behaviours had prevented him from getting, “good grades,” as his behaviour caused the others to bully him and that his feelings of social isolation were overwhelming to such an extent that he could no longer concentrate in class, thereby causing poor grades. It is far too simplistic an explanation, but indicates that he was aware of the relationship between his behaviour, the behaviour of others and school success. It is considered that much of his problematic behaviour early in his high school career was related to communication difficulties, which is the focus of the following section.

*Communication Difficulties*

Social interactions play a significant role in academic achievement of students with learning disabilities (Parker & Asher, 1987), primarily due to the reliance on group activities in the classroom, meaning that social skills, such as verbal and nonverbal communication skills, are a prerequisite for effective participation. Because of their communication difficulties, classroom
interactions can be more uncomfortable for students with learning disabilities (Pearl, 1992) than their peers. Examples of communication difficulties discovered in the narratives included when Helen was unable to join in a casual conversation with the two boys sitting behind her in SOSE. They interrupted her and she was unable to continue her train of thought. A similar situation was identified when Nathan was attempting to join in a conversation and said, "it’s like when...." and just trailed off half way through his thought. Even Brittany, who communicated quite loudly when she felt it was justified, had difficulty in communicating effectively, as she demonstrated in her interactions with Alev.

When Alev called for the teacher to evict Brittany from the group because she was not contributing effectively, the teacher should have intervened and modelled positive communication skills which would have allowed Brittany to participate. However, by not intervening the teacher allowed Alev to control the situation and, because Brittany lacked the communication skills to negotiate a resolution, she became frustrated and abandoned the learning opportunity. This lends credence to the assertion that students with LD may not possess the skills necessary to participate effectively at school (Myklebust, 1995). However, this example clearly demonstrates the social cognitive perspective that the influence of others is also a factor in classroom participation as per figure 4.

It was well documented in the narratives that Lenny frequently worked alone and did not often contribute in class discussions. He explained that this was a result of his reluctance to talking, “out loud,” which could indicate a lack of confidence in his communication skills. On the rare occasion he contributed to a class discussion in work education he gave his response quietly to the teacher whilst the others were off-task and noisy. The teacher, clearly grateful for his contribution, quietened down the rest of the class to listen to his incorrect response. She did not know how difficult this contribution had been. As his answer was incorrect, he would be less likely to attempt to
contribute in future, particularly as she made him contribute publically when this was not his intention. Another example is when he was outside the work education classroom waiting for the teacher. He approached some of the African boys and attempted to engage them in conversation. However, because he behaved in an overly animated and loud manner, the boys soon moved away from him and refused to let him sit with them in class. These examples construct a clear relationship between Lenny’s communication skill difficulties, loneliness and classroom participation (see fig. 4). Nathan experienced similar problems.

Nathan and Lenny both displayed communication difficulties when they were unable to effectively communicate with members of the opposite sex, choosing to follow Liam’s lead in harassing the girls instead. There can be no doubt that the boys wanted the attention of the girls but were unsure how to court it. Liam demonstrated that they could effectively get attention by behaving rudely and, although the attention they received was negative, it may have been seen by the boys as being preferable to no attention at all. With effective communication skills the boys might have been able to engage in interactions with the girls that were effective and satisfying. This might have made classroom interactions more comfortable in that they might have felt more confident participating.

Nathan’s inability to communicate with the girls in his year not only caused him to adopt negative behaviours, as discussed, but also prevented him participating in group work. This was demonstrated most effectively when he reported that when he attempted to join in group work he was rejected quite cruelly. He said, “when it comes to me saying something they’ll be like, “Urrgghh. Get away,” or something,” indicating that his previous communication difficulties with the girls continued to impact on his ability to participate. It is a circuitous relationship, but a sound one nonetheless.

When Helen was unable to resolve the dispute over the borrowed clothing and when she was threatened with being demoted in scouts it suggested
communication difficulties. Communication involves both receptive and expressive functions and, therefore, involves being able to articulate your position and also to interpret the words and actions of others. In both examples Helen was unable to communicate a resolution but also she was unable to ascertain the intent of her opposition. This supports research that indicates students with LD often misinterpret verbal communication and the intent of the speaker (Schoenbrodt et al., 1997). In addition, Nathan demonstrated similar difficulties understanding the intent of the boys who asked him to do things then laughed at him. He thought he was entertaining them, and he was, but presumably because they were being cruel. During lessons these communication difficulties frustrated effective participation. Examples of this include when, during hockey, Helen could not comprehend why Bisa was being aggressive. She was unable to negotiate a resolution with Bisa and was left without a partner to work with. Had she been able to communicate effectively she might have been able to resolve the situation and work with her, as she claimed to have done before. As this did not occur Helen resorted to waiting for the teacher to provide her with a (less than willing) partner which resulted in a difficult lesson for Helen. Again this suggests a relationship between communication difficulties, cognitive abilities and the behaviour of others in the school environment, including the influence of teachers on classroom participation.

Although nonverbal communication is both a behavioural and cognitive concern, it is dealt with here as it is a form of communication. As previously mentioned, there are a number of inherent difficulties in attempting to untangle the three domains of social cognitive theory because, by nature, they are so tightly interwoven. In terms of nonverbal communication, there are many examples from the narratives of the students limited ability to grasp these subtle indicators in communication. For example, Brittany misinterpreted Katie’s wave as a sign of friendship and Helen could not see that Daksha was angry and did not want to work with her in dance. Both are examples of the students’ difficulties in interpreting nonverbal information
effectively in interactions with peers and others, which has been found previously (Carr & Schellenbach, 1993; Moisan, 1998).

Moisan (1998) found that students with LD were more likely to inaccurately judge behaviours to be aggressive but this was not discovered in the present study. Brittany’s behaviour was often aggressive, but it was not clear whether this was in response to her perception that others were being aggressive or whether it was merely frustration. Another aspect of problematic social skills is assertiveness, which will now be discussed.

**Assertiveness**

All of the students in the current study demonstrated a characteristic lack of assertiveness in their interactions with peers which included retreating in conflict situations, lacking resilience when others interrupted their speech, and selecting aggressive strategies instead of keeping control and asserting their position. This finding compares to research which found that students with LD tend to be less assertive in interactions with their peers and that this is one aspect of their communication difficulties (Tur-Kaspa et al., 1998). As can be seen in figure 4, assertiveness in communication was related to the attitudes and behaviours of the other students in addition to the problematic perceptions and awareness of the student. In a classroom environment this often interfered with effective communication in learning activities and subsequent participation in this context. Failure to communicate with peers exacerbates feelings of social isolation and loneliness. The following examples demonstrate this relationship most effectively.

The most compelling example from the narratives of the relationship between assertiveness, loneliness and classroom participation is the boys’ inability to participate in manual lessons. The narratives are littered with examples of boys taking tools away from Lenny and Nathan and their resultant compliance, even when there was evidence they wanted to participate. When Nathan lifted the equipment incorrectly and the boys shouted, “Nathan!
Get off!” he immediately retreated and disengaged from the lesson, thereby isolating himself and failing to participate. Lenny did the same in construction and in hospitality when he complied with the demands of his peers with trademark silent submission. Their peers prevented them participating but only because the boys’ lacked the assertiveness necessary to challenge their demands. However, there were exceptions to this. Lenny submitted to Mike, whom he disliked, but when Jamaal shouted at him in hospitality he stood his ground until Jamaal backed down. He did it in an aggressive, rather than assertive, manner much the same as when Terrance asked him a question causing Lenny to snap in response. From this is can be inferred that Lenny perceived Jamaal and Terrance (both African refugees) to be lower than him on the social hierarchy and, therefore, less of a threat. Whether this was an accurate perception or not is difficult to assess but it suggests that both Lenny and Nathan’s social interactions in the classroom were affected by their lack of assertiveness and that this prevented them from learning these valuable skills and developing positive relationships with their peers.

Perhaps an explanation for Lenny and Nathan’s lack of assertiveness in manual art classes can be gleaned from the environmental aspects of the narratives. The, often well-meaning, construction teacher communicated his belief that the boys were less skilled than their peers by being overly generous in grading their work; by worrying about Nathan using the power tools; and by giving them menial tasks to keep them occupied. The other students appeared to share those views. Whilst both boys claimed to be good at construction, they both signified a belief that their peers were more skilled. This was demonstrated most effectively when Nathan admitted that Albert could complete his project to a higher standard. Perhaps as a result of these beliefs, the boys backed down whenever they were confronted by a peer over tools or tasks involving tools. In this way their participation was related to their capacity to be assertive and already problematic peer relationships.
In Brittany’s drama classroom, discussion was a key learning strategy. Her teachers often complained that she was being too loud but she claimed, “no-one listens to me,” in discussions which, perhaps, explained why she felt the need to be loud. This was exacerbated by the behaviours of others in the classroom environment as, for example, Alev’s demanding and superior attitude towards Brittany was met with a lack of resilience in addition to lack of assertiveness. When Alev would not allow Brittany to join in, Brittany did not select assertive strategies to persuade the others to include her. She tried speaking politely, then immediately regressed to shouting, “f you,” and left the classroom, thereby ensuring her exclusion from the learning episode in addition to yet more difficulties with her peers. In the safety of the learning support room, however, she was able to contribute loudly to discussions, but without the refinement and confidence that accompanies an assertive approach. Clearly environment makes a significant difference to the impact of these difficulties with assertiveness in communication.

Nathan admitted that, when attempting to join in conversations, “they’ll sort of like cut me out half way through.” Although this also happened to his peers, it was his lack of assertiveness in these situations that prevented him being heard. Interestingly, he was occasionally able to assert himself with Malachi, but in an aggressive way, even when the result was usually violence. He told Malachi, “at least I didn’t get rejected,” when the girl stole his drink which resulted in an assault. He also told Malachi to, “f-off,” and was pushed to the floor as a result. This suggests that he was capable of being aggressive in situations with someone he regarded as an equal, even if his choice of strategies did not necessarily fit the circumstances but was unable to confidently assert himself with the rest of the peer group, similarly to Brittany.

The relationship between difficulties engaging in these discussions and lack of assertiveness was most clearly articulated in Brittany’s narrative because the others engaged in less communication in the classroom and, therefore, the relationship was less marked in their narratives. However, it is
considered that all of the students experienced difficulties with their peers and missed out on valuable learning experiences because their suite of social strategies lacked assertiveness. This leads on to the next section which examines choice of social strategies and how these are related to classroom participation and loneliness.

**Selecting Social Strategies**

The narratives revealed that the students experienced difficulty selecting appropriate social strategies or relied too heavily on relatively small selection, using them frequently regardless of their effectiveness. This concurs with previous research which stated children with LD tend to formulate quite primitive social strategies (Oliva & La Greca, 1987). Strategies used most frequently to solve disputes were submission or ‘telling tales’ and strategies to persuade were limited to submission or anger. The use of these basic strategies contributed to social difficulties and difficulty participating in the classroom. It was also considered, as per figure 4, that selection of social strategies was related to cognitive processes such as perception of the effectiveness and appropriateness of the these strategies and was related to the behaviours of the other students in the classroom and beyond. This relationship will now be discussed.

A key finding from this study in terms of selection of social strategies was that all the students engaged in ‘telling tales’ to solve their social difficulties. This is not to say that students should not rely on adults to help them with tricky situations, but this strategy was frequently used as a first resort, rather than trying to deal with the problem themselves. This ‘telling tales’ strategy would possibly exacerbate peer difficulties rather than having the desired effect of ending the unpleasant experience. However, the students did not seem aware of this. Nathan, despite this strategy doing little to alleviate his social difficulties, claimed that he would use it if he encountered social difficulties in the workplace. Although this example does not specify the reaction of their peers, it can be speculated that this unpopular strategy would be likely to
exacerbate already problematic peer relationships. It certainly did not dissuade the other students from their rejection of the students, particularly in Nathan’s case. In addition, this perception that such a strategy was appropriate was clearly flawed, which illustrates the relationship between selection of social strategies and cognition.

When asked how she would get someone to listen to her, Brittany replied, “don’t worry about it,” or, “scream at them.” In interactions with other students, and particularly with staff, Brittany relied on sulking or acting out when she felt unable to get attention. This seemed to be quite common for the students. Helen, in particular, was confused as to why her selection of strategies failed to secure cooperation from her scout group, again indicating a cognitive component. She could see no difference between the way she approached the children and the way her nemesis, Andy, approached them. She reported that she had, “tried everything.” However, when she claimed, “I either break down in tears or get really, really angry with them,” she revealed that she was unaware of a wider variety of strategies and that it was her inability to persuade or reason that was more likely to have influenced their behaviour rather than the fact Andy was more popular, as she conjectured.

Nathan demonstrated that he possessed very few social strategies to influence the behaviours of others. He admitted that he sometimes had to shout at Lenny to get him to listen but the observations revealed no examples of Nathan shouting at anyone but, he did tell Malachi to, “f-off,” when he was being annoying. When questioned he was unable to articulate how he would convince someone to do what he wanted and, when he wanted to tell Albert that he did not require his assistance with the toolbox, he could not envisage an effective approach that did not risk causing offense. This demonstrates the connection between the cognitive and behavioural aspects of the selection of social strategies and demonstrates how this is related to the behaviour of others. Nathan was unable to influence his peers
in a positive way which has implications for his social interaction both inside and outside of the classroom.

Galanaki and Kalantzi-Azizi (1999, p.3) discussed this in terms of social self-efficacy which is “the child’s evaluation of his or her ability to persuade his or her peers so as to influence their behaviour and feelings in a socially acceptable ways. The students demonstrated little evidence of their ability to do this and, when asked, revealed that they experienced difficulties in this regard. Helen admitted that she could not persuade her scouts to do what she wanted, and Brittany said, “no-one ever listens to me,” which demonstrated that she felt unable to persuade them to listen. Perhaps this was related to their inability to emulate desired social behaviours demonstrated by their more socially skills peers, which leads to the next section on social learning.

**Social learning Abilities**

Bandura believed that people are capable of learning through the observation of competent models that demonstrate behaviour and consequences (Bandura, 1977). He termed this social learning. Peer group belonging provides opportunities for social learning and, as children learn social proficiency from their peers based on observations and trial and error (Galanaki & Kalantzi-Azizi, 1999), peer group belonging is an essential factor for healthy social development, including learning basic social skills and the formation and maintenance of friendship groups (Margolin, 2001). It has been suggested that peer rejection may be due to, “failure to perform the necessary and appropriate social behaviours,” (Tur-Kaspa et al., 1998, p. 93) because of reduced chances for ‘incidental’ social skill acquisition (Lewis, 1996). The narratives from this study suggested that the students did not feel a sense of belonging to their peer group (see relationship 5 for discussion of belongingness), suggesting that, even if they were capable of social learning, this would prove problematic due to peer rejection and subsequent isolation.
Although Brittany appeared more socially aware than the others in the study (in terms of knowing how to dress/talk/move) all of the students demonstrated difficulties emulating the social skills of their more competent peers, perhaps as a result of their problematic social cognition (as discussed in relationship 1). This was evident in a number of narratives in this study. To use an example, Nathan had observed someone calling one of the African students, ‘Rasta,’ and internalized the context in which it should be used. He clearly felt confident using the term to refer to another African boy in his work education class. However, the boy’s reaction demonstrated that Nathan had made an incorrect assumption based on his inability to learn the conventions for the use of the term through observation of a more socially skilled peer. This contrasts with findings from earlier research (Fryxell & Kennedy, 1995) which found that students with disabilities use their peers as social role models thereby improving their social proficiency. This suggests that social modelling is less effective in the presence of difficulties with social perception and awareness which, again, demonstrates the relationship between perception (cognition), the behaviour of the individual and how others in the environment interact with them.

The former example demonstrates quite effectively the impact of social learning difficulties on peer relations, as the boy’s reaction was less than friendly, but as the episode took place in the classroom there are also repercussions for participation as he was trying to engage the boy in conversation. Not to say that this was classroom participation in the standard sense, as little work was done by anyone that lesson, but it did demonstrate that Nathan had difficulty joining in the activities of the classroom. The relationship is illustrated in figure 4. Maintenance of classroom relationships is clearly a key aspect of classroom participation and difficulties here were related to Nathan’s problematic social learning abilities, amongst other conditions.
A possible explanation for the discrepancy between the findings here and elsewhere in terms of typically functioning students serving as role models for students with disabilities might provide greater insight into the nature of LD. Students with disabilities often have social difficulties, but those difficulties are not seen to be part of the disability. That is, students with other disabilities might experience social difficulties as a consequence of their disability for more environmental reasons, such as lack of acceptance. However, the students with LD in the present study experienced social difficulties that were related to cognitive, behavioural and environmental considerations. These social difficulties are central characteristics of LD. This challenges research conducted by Coleman and Minnett (1993) and Kavale and Forness (1996) which suggested that peer rejection (assessed using sociometric tests) in students with LD might not have been a direct result of the learning disability, but more a secondary characteristic due to the presence of learning disabilities.

An interesting detail to emerge was that the students were all engaged in relationships with other rejected or neglected students or other students from learning support. This meant that their friendships were with others who had similar social or educational difficulties. That is not to say that students with special needs are less socially skilled than their peers and, in fact, there were a small number of quite popular students in learning support, but these were not the ones chosen as friends by the participating students. The students from learning support who were selected as friends by the participating students were generally those who were considered to be socially marginalised. The exception was Helen’s group of friends because, as previously discussed, the group in which she was engaged was not really her friendship group, but a contrived grouping due to her change in school. However, Helen admitted that her friend at her previous school, Lisa, was not accepted either. In addition, she agreed to engage in a relationship with Malachi, who was significantly rejected. Brittany was friends with a group of isolated students, most of whom attended learning support. Lenny and
Nathan were friends who were both rejected and both attended learning support. When he attempted to make new friends, Lenny befriended Derek and Jason, two ‘fringe’ students from learning support, and attempted to befriend Raymond who was the only other year 12 in learning support. Raymond was not rejected but he also was not Lenny’s friend. This means that the students had less socially skilled friends as role models, the repercussions of which are now discussed.

Returning to Bandura (1977), he believed that people are capable of learning through the observation of competent models that demonstrate behaviour and consequences. By the students forming dyads with other rejected or neglected students, they were denied competent models of effective social behaviour. That is, these students obviously did not model effective social skills because the social skills they used caused them to be rejected or neglected. As Bandura has suggested,

> It is largely through their actions that people produce the environmental conditions that affect their behavior in a reciprocal fashion. The experiences generated by behaviour also partly determine what a person becomes and can do which, in turn, affects subsequent behavior (Bandura, 1977, p.9).

In this way the students’ choices of friends and social learning difficulties were contributing to their social isolation which was related to their feelings of loneliness and social dissatisfaction and classroom participation. This was seen most noticeably in Lenny and Nathan’s relationship with Liam. Their already limited social learning abilities were exacerbated by befriending Liam as they observed and internalised his negative examples of social behaviours. This forms another connection between the behaviour of others (the less skilled friends) cognition (their limited social learning abilities) and behaviour (their own social behaviours).
The narratives revealed a complicated relationship between problematic social skills, including communication difficulties, assertiveness, selection of social strategies and social learning abilities, the students’ cognitions and the attitudes and behaviours of others in the school environment (see fig. 4). This interrelationship was found to be related quite significantly to feelings of loneliness and the ability to participate in the classroom. A number of examples from the narratives were provided to support this contention. The following is a summary of the key findings on the behavioural aspect of the narratives.

The key findings in the relationship between social skills, loneliness and classroom participation were as follows:

- Students experienced communication difficulties contributing to classroom conversations that meant they were unable to participate in learning episodes which relied on oral communication. Their responses to peer discussion situations were to either isolate themselves from the group and remain silent or, perhaps out of frustration, they became overly animated or loud. Their peers expressed their disapproval of this behaviour, which contributed to peer rejection.

- Students experienced difficulties interpreting verbal communication and the intent of the speaker which meant that they were unable to negotiate conflict resolution in the classroom. This was related to peer difficulties.

- Difficulty interpreting nonverbal information meant that the students often misinterpreted the depth of their relationships. This meant the students were often rejected by those they considered friends, which lead to social dissatisfaction.

- Lack of assertiveness and resilience in conflict situations and where others interrupted their speech were related to poor communication in the classroom which prevented the students from participating in
group tasks. The selection of aggressive, as opposed to conciliatory, strategies was also related to poor communication skills and ineffective classroom participation.

- Lack of assertiveness in manual arts prevented the boys from using tools and participating effectively in manual tasks.

- Students selected primitive social strategies such as telling tales, or submission in dispute resolution and strategies to persuade were limited to submission or anger. These possibly contributed to social difficulties as these are not assertive confident strategies. Nathan admitted that he would continue to use these strategies in the workplace.

- Narratives revealed that it was the contribution of social skills and influence of others that had an impact on classroom participation. Teachers should be aware of implications of social difficulties in the classroom particularly public contribution and group dynamic difficulties.

- Bullying impinges on the students’ ability to focus on the lesson at hand.

The discussion now concentrates on the remaining three relationships which share an environmental focus. Environment is key in any discussion of a social model of disabilities. However, Oliver and others imagined a much broader conception of environment in their model. What will be considered here is the school environment, specifically bullying and peer rejection, problematic friendships and teachers and school belongingness. The first environmental element deals with ‘bullying and peer rejection’ and its relationship to cognitive and behavioural concerns and the issues of loneliness and classroom participation.

3. Relationship between bullying and peer rejection (*environmental element*) and loneliness, and its relationship to
personal/cognitive and behavioural concerns and classroom participation.

Figure 5: Relationship #3: Bullying and peer rejection within a model of triadic reciprocality

The influence of others, including bullying and peer rejection, is an aspect of the school environment which was found to be related to the student’s feelings of loneliness in the present study. In addition, bullying and peer rejection were found to be related to the students’ behaviour and cognitive style, which are elements relating to the other two domains of social cognitive theory (see fig. 5). The narratives revealed that peer rejection prevented the students from participating effectively in the classroom (see fig. 5) but indicated that sociometric ratings, such as rejection, have limited utility within a design such as this as is discussed. Bullying and peer rejection are now considered, including implications which emerged from the narratives.

As discussed previously, bullying includes physical assaults, name calling, exclusion and gossip and differs according to the gender of the bully and victim (Demaray & Malecki, 2003; Prinstein et al., 2001) whereas rejection is a sociometric category which relates to a majority of negative nominations by peers (Ochoa & Olivarez Jnr, 1995), but does not necessarily indicate relational or overt aggression. However, seldom is the distinction made between the two as bullying is a form of rejection and rejection often involves bullying. Therefore the issues of bullying and peer rejection are dealt with concurrently.
In this study, all of the students were rejected, neglected and bullied, to some degree, by their peers whether these peers were classmates or friends. These findings were commensurate with research which indicated students with LD experience significant rejection (Margalit & Ben-Dov, 1995) and less acceptance (Valas, 1999). They are also more likely to be teased (Martlew & Hodson, 1991) and bullied (Morrison et al., 1994), which contributes to a negative school environment for these students. Further, bullying and peer rejection in this study was found to be related to the students’ ability to participate effectively in the classroom and feelings of loneliness.

Bullying and peer rejection has been identified in the literature as a precursor for academic difficulties (Buhs et al., 2006) and dropping out (Parker & Asher, 1987), and lack of friends has been identified as a precursor for school failure (Richman et al., 1998). Obviously this has clear implications for students with LD who already experience academic difficulties as a consequence of their LD. The narratives support this contention in that the students experienced bullying behaviours in the classroom that prevented them from participating effectively.

Bullying was a significant issue at Southside and all of the students with LD who participated in the study were the targets of bullying behaviour at some point during data collection. Mishna (2003) has said that very little research has been conducted which looks at bullying amongst students with LD. Therefore, the narratives provide support for more research on the topic.

The narratives revealed that Nathan was bullied most significantly at the time of narrative collection. Bullying for him was a persistent reality of everyday life. This mainly took the form of overt aggression, such as being slapped, punched and knocked to the ground, and was mostly perpetuated by boys. This supports the findings of other studies such as those by Demaray and Malecki (2003) and also Prinstein and colleagues (2001) which found overt aggression was more often perpetuated by boys. It is not difficult to imagine how this bullying is related to loneliness and might prevent a student
engaging in the classroom. As Oatley and Nundy (1996, p.258) stated, “when anxious, children do not attend to anything except the concerns of their anxiety.” The narratives include student reports of not being, “in the mood,” for learning, such as when Nathan admitted that he was sad when he was feeling lonely because of the bullying and had difficulty concentrating. Other reactions were reluctance to cooperate or not wanting to be in school at all under these circumstances. These examples reveal a clear relationship between bullying, loneliness and classroom participation. They also demonstrate that bullying, an environmental concern, is related to behaviour in the classroom.

The bullying experienced by Lenny took the form of physical assault in the earlier years (“they used to threaten me...tried hitting me,”) but during narrative collection the bullying was isolated to teasing, persistent negative criticism and rejection and neglect. These were demonstrated by his inability to find a partner to sit next to or work with for the majority of the time and difficulties working within groups. This was relational aggression which has been more often associated with the behaviour of girls (Demaray & Malecki, 2003; Prinstein et al., 2001). Perhaps this can be explained by Lenny’s physical size. It was unlikely that the boys would target Lenny in a physical fight because he was taller and heavier than most of the boys and, if he is to be believed, had a history of violent outbursts. However, the relational aggression experienced by Lenny was just as persistent as the overt aggression experienced by Nathan and contributed just as significantly to feelings of loneliness and classroom participation as can be seen in the following example.

The impact of bullying and peer rejection in the classroom was seen most clearly in the manual arts classrooms. Lenny and Nathan were both prevented from using a variety of tools by their peers because the other boys criticised them and confiscated the tools. They were both deprived of valuable learning experiences as a result. However, this criticism is also
damaging to their self-efficacy for construction, as Nathan implied when Albert completed his toolbox for him, as failure to complete tasks results in lower grades and further lowers self-efficacy for the subject. Considering their academic difficulties, these manual arts skills were quite valuable for Lenny and Nathan in the provision of potential employment, but damage to their self-efficacy for construction might mean they are less likely to believe in their ability to secure employment in construction in the future. In this way bullying might be responsible for repercussions far beyond the classroom. This highlights the need to build a school culture that does not view difference negatively, but supports all students and prepares them for a world of diversity.

Perhaps a more tenuous, but interesting, connection between bullying and peer rejection, loneliness and classroom participation is evidenced by Lenny’s behaviour when he has the attention of his peers. It is considered that, because he experiences significant rejection and isolation, Lenny is extremely grateful for social opportunities in the classroom when they occur. This is to such an extent that he becomes absorbed by the interaction, even if he is a passive participant, and fails to complete his class-work, as evidenced when Dillon allowed him to listen to his conversation. Although he denied ever feeling lonely, this example suggests that, had he been more satisfied with his existing social interactions, he might have been able to complete the task as Dillon did and chat when he had finished. Another example of the effect of peer rejection on classroom participation is that, on the two occasions Lenny came to class without a pen, he felt unable to ask a peer if he could borrow one, presumably because of his prior peer difficulties.

Brittany admitted to a physical altercation with Priscilla, but it was the teasing and rejection that affected her the most. This was certainly at a much lower level than her brother or Nathan, but when she was in Marine watching the popular girl pretending the remote control was a phone, her social rejection became more evident: the girl merely glared at Brittany for daring to join in
her fun, even as a spectator. When viewed in conjunction with Danni’s statements during the interview it can be conjectured that Brittany was the target of relational aggression which was significant. This type of relational aggression, such as gossiping and isolation, has been found to be associated with girls in previous studies (Demaray & Malecki, 2003; Prinstein et al., 2001) and is supported here. The rejection by the other girls in her year, as has been discussed, contributed to Brittany’s feelings of emotional loneliness and prevented her from joining in the activities in the classroom, even when these activities were merely social interactions.

The narrative collection period was, perhaps, not the most effective time to observe Helen because her social world was in flux. Having recently moved from a different school she had not yet had time to make any real enemies but she came to the attention of bullies surprisingly quickly. Just as Nathan had been teased by a new girl who had quickly perceived the social order and Nathan’s place very low down on it, Helen’s peers picked up on the signs that she was to be targeted. This is evidenced when Clark begins to call Helen names and when the other girls do not want to play hockey with her. This supports research suggesting that rejection is communicated to other peers and marks the student as a target of rejection (Buhs et al., 2006). A social cognitive perspective highlights the behavioural and cognitive aspect of this rejection as Helen’s behaviour, perhaps as a result of problematic perceptions and awareness which has already been discussed, brings her to the attention of bullies remarkably effectively. This bullying was associated with feelings of social isolation and loneliness and, as the girls did not want to play hockey with her, it also had an impact on her ability to participate in the lesson.

Pavri and Monda-Amaya (Pavri & Monda-Amaya, 2000) revealed that, “academic and unstructured times before and after school emerged as most lonely times for students with LD” (p.29). The researchers conjectured that the academic times were a source of loneliness, not because of frustration
with learning, but more likely because of boredom, possibly from working individually. The narratives from the current study revealed that the majority of the students spent a significant time working individually in the classroom even when pairing was allowed.

Nathan rarely had anyone to help him in class and when he asked for help from his peers he was regularly rejected quite aggressively. This happened most frequently in the manual arts classrooms where he was unsure how to proceed and received no assistance from his peers. His ineffectual attempts at help-seeking, due to lack of assertiveness in this example, in conjunction with an unkind peer meant that he was rejected and was unable to participate effectively. This supports a social cognitive relationship between loneliness and classroom participation as the interplay of cognition, behaviour and environment contributed to the situation. Observations of Helen also revealed that the absence of a friendly peer in the classroom hindered her progress. For example, in the dance class she did not have a friend to copy off when the teacher dictated the task too quickly. She hinted at this when she said friends in the classroom are important so you can copy their notes if you miss a day and they can tell you if you missed anything important. She also reported that friends are helpful because, “you can work with them, ask them questions...so you can...understand stuff and help each other.” She also identified that friends can help you with bullying. Nathan agreed when he said that friends in the classroom provide assistance and prevent you from being alone.

An interesting aspect to emerge from the narratives was that all the students admitted to being bullied at primary school, in addition to their peer difficulties at high school. In a 2006 study Buhs, Ladd and Herald found that students who were victimized in kindergarten were more likely to experience victimization later in their school career (Buhs et al., 2006) which supports the findings in this study that social difficulty is a long-term, persistent characteristic of LD. Buhs and his colleagues suggested that these
difficulties follow the students because they remain in the same peer group, however, this might not be the case with students with LD as Helen moved from another peer group and experienced the same kinds of relational aggression and neglect. She claimed, “they used to pick on me something shocking,” in primary school. This is similar to Brittany’s experience where, “in primary school I was like a loser,” whilst Nathan reported, “Name calling, pushing around, that sort of thing,” and Lenny admitted to having a lot of problems in primary school. In this regard, Helen’s experience was very revealing. As she continued to experience difficulties after a change of school setting, this suggests that social difficulties were not merely environmental in origin. As can be seen in figure 5, this bullying and peer rejection was found to be related not only to the environment, but also to problematic cognitions and behaviours. That is, the bullies in this study possibly identified something about the behaviours of the students’ that made them targets. The suggestion being made here is that there is also a cognitive element to this construct in that their behaviours were related to their cognitive abilities in addition to factors in the environment.

Bender (1985) claimed that students with LD have been found to be more distractible and more regularly off-task than their peers. However, his research did not investigate why this was the case. Perhaps the reasons are more a result of the interplay of environmental, behavioural and cognitive concerns than merely the presence of academic difficulties, which was alluded to in Bender’s study. Consider Nathan, having been knocked unconscious by Malachi then, on returning to school, being slapped in the face by Martin. It might be expected that he would have difficulty concentrating on the lesson at hand, and he did. The same could be said for Helen, who could not recollect a time when she was ever liked and respected at school. This supports a more social cognitive explanation for the school experiences of students with LD.
All four students experienced bullying but did not instigate aggression or relational bullying, other than Lenny’s rejection of Nathan. This compares favourably to research which found students with LD less likely to be the perpetrators of bullying and more likely to have been the victims of bullying (Whitney et al., 1992). As previously discussed, bullying is related to peer rejection and this peer rejection has been assessed using sociometric testing in a number of other studies. The findings from this study bring the notion of sociometric testing into question. Therefore, a discussion of the utility of sociometrics is now provided.

**Sociometrics**

Sociometric testing is used to assess levels of popularity in a given group of people. Individuals are asked to nominate their most and least favourite peers and the resultant data classifies the individuals as either accepted, rejected or neglected by their peers (Ochoa & Olivarez Jnr, 1995). However, findings from the present study indicated that this classification can be problematic, as will be elucidated.

Although sociometric tests were not used in the present study, observations revealed that Nathan was overwhelmingly rejected, Lenny and Helen were neglected for the most part, with some overt rejection by particular individuals, and Brittany was neglected with some instances of acceptance by the general population in addition to being passively rejected by her friendship group. This is commensurate with another study using sociometric tests which found students with LD were regularly rejected (Ochoa & Olivarez Jnr, 1995). Although the popularity level of their peers was not assessed in the present study, the research by Ochoa and Olivarez (Ochoa & Olivarez Jnr, 1995) found that those students with LD scored substantially lower than their peers. However, this reflects an individual deficit model of learning disabilities. In the present study, as the level of rejection differed in different contexts with different peers, it raised an interesting point in defence of a qualitative approach to popularity judgements and supports a more social
model of disability. Sociometric ratings classify the students as either accepted, rejected or neglected based on the majority of nominations whereas, in certain situations and with certain individuals, these ratings would not apply. Brittany, for example, was more accepted in drama when Alev was absent than she was in Alev’s company or in her other lessons. She experienced a level of popularity in learning support where she could be extroverted but in marine she was subdued and rejected by the popular girls. These anomalies would not be picked up in a sociometric rating but provide fascinating data on the contextual elements of peer rejection and acceptance.

The narratives revealed a significant relationship between bullying and peer rejection, which are environmental elements; cognitive factors, in particular cognitive energy; and behavioural elements such as problematic help-seeking and task avoidance behaviours. This holistic view of the phenomenon supports a social model of disability as it is the problematic school environment, not the individual, that is of concern. The interaction of the three elements was related most particularly to feelings of social and emotional loneliness and ability to participate in the classroom. This relationship, which is illustrated in figure 5, was evidenced by a number of examples from the narratives. A summary of the findings follows.

In summary, the key findings in the relationship between bullying and peer rejection, loneliness and classroom participation were as follows:

- Sociometric ratings have little utility within a qualitative project of this nature as levels of acceptance and rejection differ in different contexts and with different peers.
- The students with LD in this study experienced significant peer rejection with some acceptance and some neglect and spent significant time alone, particularly in the classroom.
- The students experienced relational and overt bullying which was related to the behaviours of others within the school environment in addition to their own behaviours and cognitions.
- Bullying and peer rejection was found to be related to effective classroom participation.
- Nathan was the only victim of persistent overt aggression out of the four students and it was considered that this was related to the school culture in addition to Nathan’s own behaviours and cognition.
- The boys, in particular, experienced persistent negative criticism from the other boys, particularly in the manual arts classes, and that this prevented them from participating effectively in these contexts.
- Relational aggression was experienced by the girls, which supports the earlier research, but also Lenny, which suggests that his physical size prevented him receiving the same physical aggression Nathan received.
- Lenny, in particular, demonstrated that lack of social contact (and related loneliness) in the classroom meant that, when he received rare social attention, he was distracted to such an extent that he failed to complete his classwork which has elements of behaviour, cognition and environment.
- Helen’s narrative suggested that social difficulties follow students with LD even when they are introduced to a new environment, which, again, has behaviour, cognition and environment elements. These difficulties within a new environment are related to heightened feelings of loneliness and subsequent classroom participation difficulties.
- All the students reported that their social difficulties were long-term and persistent as they all experienced difficulties at primary school.
- The narratives revealed that the students’ off-task behaviour was related to cognitive, behavioural and environmental factors, not merely indolence.
Bullying and peer rejection, which is an environmental element, has been thoroughly examined in terms of its relationship to loneliness and classroom participation and in relation to cognitive and behavioural elements and implications have been drawn. Now the discussion turns to another environmental element, ‘problematic friendships’ and its relationship to loneliness, classroom participation and other cognitive and behavioural considerations.

4. **Relationship between problematic friendships** *(environmental element)* **and loneliness, and its relationship to** *personal/cognitive* **and** *behavioural* **concerns and classroom participation.**

![Figure 6: Relationship #4: Problematic friendships within a model of triadic reciprocality](image)

Another aspect of environment that was found to be linked to feelings of loneliness was the difficulties with friendship groups or dyads. There is a shortage of literature available which examines friendship difficulties and classroom participation amongst students with LD, but this emerged from the narratives as a significant element in the school experience of the students with LD in this study. The narratives indicated that friendship difficulties were also related to problematic social behaviours and cognitions and that this was related to their ability to participate in the classroom (see fig. 6). Whilst the literature suggested friends provided a protective factor against many negative school experiences, in the present study it was seen to be much
more complicated, as will be discussed. Problematic friendships were found to be related to the student’s ability to participate effectively in the classroom.

The literature does not specify whether the peer difficulties faced by students with LD are difficulties with adversaries or difficulties with friends but the narratives from the current study revealed that all of the students experienced both. In addition to general peer difficulties, the students were engaged in friendships which were problematic for a number of reasons which are now discussed.

A compelling finding from the narratives was that all the students experienced difficulties maintaining their friendships and, as a result, their social network was marked by significant changes in groups and dyads. This was substantially related to feelings of social dissatisfaction and loneliness. The most convincing example of this was Lenny’s attempts to move between groups, but all of the students admitted to a series of shorter-term friendships and their longer-term friendships were problematic. The literature alludes to these difficulties in achieving and maintaining positive social relationships (Brown & Heath, 1998; Kavale & Forness, 1996; Margalit, 1998; Pearl, 1992), but does not specify whether these social relationships are intimate friendships or school acquaintances. However, research has found that students with LD reported lower quality of friendships than their peers (Margalit & Efrati, 1996). As the narratives only focused on the four students with LD it would be impossible to say whether this level of change in friendship groups and dyads was typical for the general population, but it certainly indicated long-term and persistent difficulties in maintaining positive friendships with this group.

Brittany’s friendship group was particularly dysfunctional, largely as a result of their undisclosed feelings towards her. Problems in her relationship with Danni stemmed from their mutual distrust and mutual preference for other absent ‘best friends’. Danni said her best friend, Libby, was, “way cooler,” than Brittany. She sometimes hated Brittany and found her, “annoying.” In
return, Brittany has said that she, “can’t really talk,” to Danni and does not trust her. As previously indicated, Danni shared a lot of characteristics of LD with Brittany and, as such, was probably more likely to experience friendship difficulties regardless of whom she befriended. However, this example demonstrates that Brittany’s behaviour and related cognitions were not solely responsible for her social difficulties as Danni’s passive-aggressive behaviour and unpredictable friendship also contributed to the situation. As Danni sat with Brittany in each of her lessons, this also introduced the concept that problematic friendships can cause difficulties with classroom participation.

Of the research available on the relationship between friendship and success at school, it was found that students who felt they had a friend to listen to them without judgement or advice were more likely to receive better grades (Richman et al., 1998) but it is not clear why this was the case. Brittany clearly stated that she could not talk to her friend, Danni, because she could not trust her. In fact, she revealed she did not have anyone to talk to about her problems, indicating another relationship between problematic friendship and school success. The other students did not comment on their perception of support but observations showed they had very little social support from their friends, and the narratives demonstrated a number of practical reasons why it was helpful to have friends in the classroom.

The findings revealed several examples of the practical reasons why it is important to have friends in the classroom. Brittany shared almost every class with Danni and they usually sat together but when she needed help with a question in science, instead of asking Danni, she shouted the question out and received a harsh response from the boy at the front. She said friends in the classroom were important, “cos it’s easier to work in an environment where you know people,” but could not articulate why. Perhaps knowing someone is not enough: perhaps, as the example demonstrated, it is important to have someone you know and trust to help you without judgement. This involves making a cognitive judgement and acting on it.
This example also demonstrates how the environment interacts with this judgement and action as per figure 6. Brittany misjudged the situation and received public censure. Shortly after she gave up trying, which suggests a relationship between social and academic difficulties.

An enlightening finding to emerge from the narratives was that Brittany’s group became friends before they knew they would be sharing the learning support room. This could have been for a variety of reasons, and perhaps this is an area for further research, but there are two main potential explanations: either the students sensed something familiar in each other and were drawn together (which is difficult to accept considering the social awareness difficulties they shared) or the other students sensed something discordant in the participating students and this was communicated to the mainstream students in unconscious ways, resulting in their rejection and subsequent alliance with others from learning support. This is a matter of conjecture. Regardless, it is a fascinating aspect of the narratives that provides some insight into the process of friendship selection and rejection.

Considering the others in Brittany’s group called her, “a slut,” and “a sped,” and she could not talk to her closest friend, Ian, about personal things, clearly there were significant problems within Brittany’s friendship group. However, she must have received some reinforcement from the group, perhaps in that she would rather be in a group than on her own. However, she was not able to articulate how she benefitted from the group and, during narrative collection, made attempts to move into Pippa’s group, suggesting her disinclination to continuing her association with them. This indicated her level of social dissatisfaction. Unfortunately, Pippa and her friends were not in Brittany’s classes meaning that if she made the transition to Pippa’s group she would risk offending her few social contacts in the classroom: Danni and the boys, which suggests another relationship between social dissatisfaction and classroom participation.
Helen’s friendship group, as previously indicated, was in a state of flux. Adiya and Daksha had been assigned to show her around and she had decided that she wanted to remain a part of the group when the natural time to move on had arrived. However, members of the group had other ideas and tried to eject her in often unsubtle ways. Had the narrative collection been conducted at a later date, perhaps different findings would have emerged. However, Helen was able to reveal that her friendship groups had always been problematic.

It is interesting that Helen had experienced the same rejection from her friendship groups at three different stages in her life. The first was at primary school, the second at Lennox Hall then the third at Southside. At each episode she was unable to predict the rejection. Failure to identify the signs meant that she pursued the relationships and experienced quite harmful rejection. The situation with Adiya and Daksha was particularly interesting in terms of Helen’s feelings of loneliness and classroom participation. Had she felt more secure about forming attachments, perhaps she would not have clung so tightly to their group in the hope of belonging. Perhaps she would have been able to take the time to choose an appropriate and willing friend in one of her classes to sit with if she had not been so adamant about belonging to Adiya’s group. Instead, she was rejected by Adiya’s group, thus indicating to the rest of the student body that she was a target for rejection, a relationship previously identified by Buhs, Ladd and Herald (Buhs et al., 2006). Katie would have made an ideal friend but, because of her own social difficulties, she was unlikely to befriend Helen after she was rejected by Adiya. This demonstrated how her desperation to belong prevented her finding a friend of her own to work with in class.

Nathan’s social relationships were perhaps the most overtly problematic, particularly his friendship with Malachi. His relationship with Malachi exposed him to violence and further peer rejection in that Malachi made it acceptable to assault Nathan, making it easier for the other boys to do the
same. In addition, associating with Malachi brought negative attention to the pair. This was demonstrated when the boys were on the computers and Nathan followed Malachi’s lead in shouting out and making noises, drawing attention to themselves. Considering Nathan’s already poor social acceptance he could little afford such negative attention. Further, in Malachi’s absence Nathan was met with an unfriendly classroom full of individuals who he had annoyed in previous lessons. In addition, as the teacher commented, no-one else would work with Nathan, which meant that he would be unable to complete paired tasks without the intervention of the teacher.

Because Lenny chose friends from the lower year levels and the handball players in year 12 did not interact with him in class, he rarely had any friends to work with or protect him. This was most evident in the home economics class when Mike constantly criticised Lenny and took over the tasks, but also when he was neglected and forced to sit alone. By sitting alone (as a result of rejection, not choice) he was physically isolated from the other students which made participation more difficult as there was a physical barrier between him and potential work mates.

The findings revealed that the students were in need of a trusted friend to assist them in the classroom. It is considered that the act of asking for help leaves the individual vulnerable to either rejection, as Nathan experienced in manual arts, or ridicule, as Brittany experienced in science when she asked what a zygote was. Therefore, trusted friends in the classroom were considered imperative, not merely for the socializing opportunities but also to assist with participation in the lesson.

An intriguing finding emerged from the narratives in terms of problematic friendships. As the students socialised with other students from learning support and other rejected students, they were considered to belong to groups of individuals who shared a common experience. The security of a like-minded, socially valuable peer group has been identified previously as
requisite to the exploration and development of an adolescent’s identity (Nurmi & Toivonen, 1997). However, the students’ perception of the social value of their groups was quite low. This was evidenced by their desire to move groups or make changes in their primary friends. Therefore, the students were prevented from participating in the essential activities required in identity formation because, as Derlega and Margulis (Derlega & Margulis, 1982) suggested, friendships are required to help us express or vent feelings and have those feelings validated. Without the security of trusted friends, or the perception that such a friend is lacking, an individual may be unable to obtain feedback for those inner thoughts and feelings and is unable to progress to a deeper, and more satisfying, level of friendship. There are many other benefits of having friends, for example as a protective factor from some of the negative aspects of school life.

*Friends as a Protective Factor*

The literature suggested that friends can be viewed as a protective factor for many negative experiences, particularly bullying (Hodges & Perry, 1999). When a child does not have a friend in the classroom, such as when Nathan came back after being hospitalised, then they are more at risk from bullies because the bully does not perceive a threat of retaliation (Hodges & Perry, 1999). This is supported by what happened to Nathan on that day: Kaida slapped him in the face for fun and encouraged a female student to do the same. Perhaps this would have happened if Malachi had been there (Malachi might even have been the first to slap him) but observations revealed that Nathan was never struck in the classroom whilst Malachi was there. In addition, Malachi’s absence meant that Nathan no longer had someone to work with in class as he shared every lesson with Malachi and sat with him until his departure.

Nathan’s friendship with Lenny was also problematic. By associating with Nathan, Lenny experienced negative, unwanted attention. This was the result of their unfortunate union with Liam who encouraged them to break
into, and vandalise, the school hall causing the disco to be cancelled which received significant derision from their peers. This was in addition to the negative attention they received for their sexual harassment. Fortunately for Lenny he became aware of the need to distance himself from Nathan once Liam had left. However, distancing himself from Nathan brought further difficulties for Lenny as he no longer had a stable friend for support, causing him to approach a number of existing groups with marginal success. Even in the handball group he was the victim of assaults by Raymond, who refused to sit with him in class.

The discussion provided illustrates the relationship between problematic friendships, loneliness and classroom participation. Particular attention was drawn to the nature of the friendship groups and dyads and how these friendships exacerbated an already problematic learning experience in these students with LD. A summary of these issues is now provided.

This is a summary of the findings in relation to the relationship between problematic friendships, behaviour and cognition and related loneliness and classroom participation.

- All the students with LD in this study experienced particularly problematic friendships in addition to difficulties with adversaries and these friendships were related to feelings of emotional loneliness in particular and also to their ability to participate in the classroom.
- The narratives revealed that all the students had difficulty maintaining their friendships, both dyadic and group relationships.
- Friendship groups, particularly Brittany’s group and Helen’s affiliation with Adiya’s group, were quite dysfunctional and this created feelings of social dissatisfaction.
- All the students lacked social support. Brittany, in particular, admitted to feeling the absence of a close, intimate friend and that she did not have sufficient cognitive energy for her lessons as a result.
A number of practical reasons why it is important to have friends in the classroom were provided by the students. They were able to articulate, to a degree, how behaviour, cognition and environment interacted and how this was related to loneliness and classroom participation.

Brittany’s group became friends before their learning support needs were identified, meaning that subtle social behaviours communicated something important to their peers about their levels of social desirability.

The students held their friendship groups in low esteem and this contributed to feelings of loneliness and difficulties in the classroom.

Friends were found to be a protective factor in some contexts and at some times, but they were also found to be the cause of social difficulties and prevented effective classroom participation at times.

The narratives revealed an interesting relationship between problematic friendships, loneliness and classroom participation, and also the relationship between this and cognitive and behavioural factors. This relationship has been discussed in detail and examples were provided to support the contentions. The following section addresses the relationship between teachers and school belongingness, which are two environmental elements, and their relationship to loneliness and classroom participation.
5. The relationship between teachers and school belongingness (environmental elements) and loneliness, and their relationship to personal/cognitive and behavioural concerns and classroom participation.

![Figure 7: Relationship # 5: Teachers and school belongingness within a model of triadic reciprocity](image)

The findings from the present study suggested that teacher perception and school belongingness was related to the students’ feelings of loneliness and was related to the students’ classroom behaviour and cognitions. This highlights the problematic nature of our current school culture. In addition, this situation was related to the students’ opportunities to participate in the classroom (see fig. 7). The school experience of students with LD is affected by the perceptions others have of them and the degree to which they feel they belong in that context. Research has shown that peers have the most significant influence on students and their feelings of belongingness (Richman et al., 1998) but, in the school context, teachers also have a profound influence on those in their care and their feelings of comfort and acceptance (Christenson & Anderson, 2002; Dobson et al., 1987). Therefore, they have a responsibility to ensure that an inclusive culture is maintained. Failure to feel a sense of belonging in the school context has been linked to attrition (Hymel et al., 1996) and has been found to be a significant concern for students with LD (Deshler et al., 2001; Putnam, 1995). The issues of teacher perception and belongingness and school attrition are now discussed.
Influence of Teachers

The present study found that the attitudes and behaviours of the teachers were related to the way the students were received and treated in the classroom, which was related to their participation in the lesson. The narratives suggested that the influence of teachers occasionally exacerbated an already problematic learning environment, which sustains the argument that school cultures are disabling their students. The implications of this are discussed first before moving on to a discussion of school belongingness.

In the present study, due to the teachers’ reluctance to allow research to take place in their classrooms, the focus of observations was on the students. Teachers were only observed in their interactions with the participating students. Therefore, no judgement can be made as to the degree of interaction they initiated with the students with LD compared to their peers which was identified as an issue in the literature (Chapman et al., 1988). Research also suggested that teachers engaged in more praise, criticism and feedback and had higher expectations of behaviour problems in interactions with students with LD (Tur-Kaspa et al., 1998). Again, it is impossible to comment on how the students compared to their peers in this regard, but the teachers who did comment on their perceptions of the students’ behaviours made comments such as, “You worry me on the saw, Nathan,” and, “[Nathan] winds up the other students and brings a lot of it on himself.” The comments seem to be derogatory, but they were not asked about their feelings towards the non-participating students and, therefore, it is not possible to claim that this attitude was reserved for those with LD.

Observations of teacher-student interactions revealed that the teachers engaged in negative, critical behaviours in their treatment of the students with LD. This was evidenced by observations of interactions between Nathan and his metal engineering teacher where he would not let him use the equipment; Lenny and his construction teacher who sent him on errands rather than helping him develop relationships with the other boys; and by comments
made by the students in their interviews, such as Brittany's comments about her science teacher interpreting her confusion for truculence. As the peers in these classrooms also engaged in negative, critical behaviours it could be argued that there was a relationship between the teacher's behaviour and that adopted by the students, but it is difficult to argue causation. As the behaviours of the teachers and peers prevented the students from undertaking manual tasks, this provides evidence for the relationship between teachers' perceptions and classroom participation. It is likely that the teacher gained this perception from previous interactions with the students in question, which highlights the impact of students' behaviour on this situation. However, the students' behaviours were seen as being related to past experience in the classroom and problematic cognitions which the teachers did not appear to take into account (see fig. 7).

The strategies employed by well-meaning teachers also had an effect on students' ability to participate in the classroom. A simple example which emerged from the narratives was when Lenny forgot to bring a pen to class. He felt unable to ask a peer for one and failed to ask the teacher because, as the observations revealed, when the teacher found out he was without a pen and had, consequently, not completed the activity, she reprimanded him and detained him during the break. It could be assumed that this was not the first time this had happened. The teacher has inadvertently taught Lenny that it was better to not participate and avoid detection, rather than seeking help.

The narratives revealed that the students occasionally felt that the teacher knew of their learning difficulties but chose not to provide additional assistance. For example, Brittany claimed that her Marine teacher knew she needed extra help but expected her to work at the same rate as her peers. This had a de-motivating effect on Brittany and, as she claimed, she often put her head down on the desk rather than persevere with the task. In this way the teacher held some responsibility for Brittany's inability to participate in this particular lesson which could be an explanation for why some studies
have revealed that teachers contribute to a poor classroom environment and poor relationships with their charges (Dobson et al., 1987). However, Brittany’s behaviour showed a lack of resilience and assertiveness which, as previously discussed, are related to cognitive elements over which she had little control. Again, this demonstrates the interaction of the three elements of social cognitive theory and their relationship to classroom participation as per figure 7.

Two teachers implied that Nathan and Brittany somehow deserved, or at least earned, peer maltreatment by being annoying. They were not aware that the annoying behaviour could have been related to their limited social awareness and inability to select appropriate strategies for effective inclusion in social activities. The students appeared to have limited control over the situation. This would be comparable to saying the students earned bad grades because they persisted in being unable to do maths. Social difficulties are a definitional element of LD and, as such, deserve the same support and understanding. However, these social difficulties and the attitudes of their teachers are related to the students’ feelings of belongingness at school and have been found to be related to school attrition (Hymel et al., 1996).

**Belongingness and School Attrition**

As discussed, belongingness has been linked to school attrition (Hymel et al., 1996) and this has been identified as a significant issue for students with LD (Deshler et al., 2001; Putnam, 1995). The narratives revealed interesting findings regarding belongingness and attrition, from which emerged a number of new questions about the topic that warrant further investigation. The issues surrounding belongingness, including attrition, optimism and pessimism, engagement and attendance, are examined next.

All the students stated an intention to complete their education at Southside. This included Nathan although he did admit to passing thoughts of leaving
one year early to start work. This was not commensurate with research by Deshler and colleagues (Deshler et al., 2001) and a study by Putnam (Putnam, 1995) that found students with LD were less likely to feel a sense of belonging to the school and were more likely to drop out. This apparent contradiction with the literature could actually not be a contradiction at all. There were only a small number of students who met the criteria (see Appendix 1: Learning Disabilities Indicator Chart) for the current study in terms of the presence LD. Of the students identified for recruitment prior to completion of the LDIC (therefore considered likely to experience LD but without any supporting documentation or information from the parent), one was in year twelve, one was in year 11, and five were in year 10. Obviously the sample size is far too small to draw any conclusions but it begs the question, ‘why are there so few students with LD left in year 11 and 12?’ Presuming that there were similar numbers of students with LD in each year level, where did they go after year 10? It is conjectured that all the other students with LD who started school in year 8 with Lenny dropped out before senior years. The situation is similar in year 11 with Nathan. Lenny and Nathan were the only senior students who met the criteria. Perhaps it is not a coincidence that these two were also friends. However, as there are no records indicating which of the students who dropped out had LD, this is merely conjecture. However, a follow-up to discover how many of the five students currently in year 10 matriculated might yield significant results. Perhaps there is some aspect of the character or experience of the students who participated in this study that allowed them to finish their education.

One study revealed that students with LD drop out early because of a lack of belongingness (Hymel et al., 1996). It could be argued that lack of belongingness might be related to feelings of pessimism. A student would be more likely to drop out if they were pessimistic about improvements in their social acceptance and capacity to fit in. However, the students in the present study believed that their social situation was improving, in spite of observations to the contrary or observations that the improvement was very
slight. Misplaced optimism might well be related to the students' problematic social perception and awareness, but this optimism for improved social life in the future could be a significant factor in their desire to complete their schooling. This has not been identified in the literature on belongingness and attrition.

Observations from the present study demonstrated that the students were rarely on task in the classroom, preferring to either day-dream or walk around the room like Nathan, listen to the conversations of others like Lenny and Helen or act out like Brittany. Obviously there were times when the students were on task, but the students were observed engaging in off-task behaviours for a significant amount of time. In addition, all of the participating students engaged in socialising, when it was available, instead of attending to their work. Buhs and his colleagues found that decreasing levels of classroom engagement were related to peer rejection. They claimed that, “rejected children disengage from classroom activities as a way of avoiding further abuse,” (Buhs et al., 2006) (p.2). This could be an explanation for why the students in the current study disengaged but it also might be because they felt that social interaction was more important than academic development, which was acknowledged by Lenny. However, Brittany decided the reverse was true because, “you need [grades] to get along in life.” Social interaction and academic development are not mutually exclusive, though. As the students experienced dissatisfaction with their social interaction, perhaps any opportunity to build friendships was seized. In this way the students' social dissatisfaction was related to their ability to participate effectively in the classroom.

Attendance was poor amongst the participating students but was deemed commensurate with the mainstream population based on classroom observations and discussions with the learning support teacher. That is, attendance records were not available for non-participating students.
non-attendance was a school-wide problem. Research has claimed that students who were chronically bullied (physical violence) were more likely to avoid school altogether (Buhs et al., 2006). It is difficult to identify this relationship in the narratives because only Nathan was the victim of physical violence at the time of narrative collection and his absences were, at times, a direct result of that violence, namely, he was in hospital. There is a direct relationship, though, between this violence and his ability to participate in the classroom in that he fell behind on his work as a result of his absence and he did not have a friend to help him catch up.

The narratives revealed that teachers and school belongingness were found to be related to the students’ feelings of loneliness and their classroom behaviours and cognitions. In particular, it was considered that the perception of their teachers was profoundly related to their school experience, and to how they were treated at school. This relationship is now summarised before discussion moves on to addressing the research question.

The following is a summary of the findings relating to the relationship between teachers and school belongingness and loneliness and classroom participation.

- The attitudes and behaviours of the teachers in the observed lesson was appeared to be related to the students’ treatment by their peers in the classroom and related to the students’ social dissatisfaction and feelings of loneliness.
- Some teachers held (and voiced) problematic beliefs about the students with LD in the their classes.
- The teachers’ behaviours often meant that the students were unable to participate effectively in the classroom, but this was related to previous interactions with the students, their behaviours and related cognitions.
Teachers demonstrated unhelpful behaviours which, although well-meaning, were related to the students’ inability to participate in class.

The students believed that some of their teachers knew they needed extra help but refused to provide this assistance which prevented the students participating at times. However, this was also related to the students’ resilience and assertiveness in interactions with their teachers which was related to problematic cognitions.

Teaches were not aware of the implications of the experience of learning disabilities and held beliefs that the students ‘deserved’ their social difficulties, rather than acknowledging that the social difficulties were the result of behavioural, cognitive and environmental issues.

Contrary to other findings, these four students with LD expressed the desire to finish their schooling. However, this was found to be related to feelings of optimism for social change, as opposed to the pessimism usually associated with lack of belongingness and attrition.

Social dissatisfaction and loneliness were found to be related to off-task behaviours when social interaction was more preferable to task completion.

Discussion has been provided on the relationship between teachers and school belongingness and loneliness and classroom participation. This concludes the discussion of the narratives in comparison with earlier findings.

The following chapter provides a discussion of how the findings addressed the research question, ‘what is the relationship between loneliness and classroom participation in adolescents with learning disabilities?’ Following this is consideration of how this study makes a unique contribution to the field or research, the limitations of the design and recommendations for future research and practice.
CHAPTER SIX: CONCLUSIONS

This study was designed to investigate the qualitative research question, ‘what is the relationship between loneliness and classroom participation in adolescents with learning disabilities.’ A particularly complicated relationship emerged with a significant number of threads relating each of the elements of the question. The relationships are illustrated most effectively in figure 8 which acknowledges the nature of these relationships as not only reciprocal, but intertwined and multi-faceted.

![Figure 8: Loneliness and classroom participation within a model of triadic reciprocality](image)

The model acknowledges that a construct such as loneliness occurs in the complex interplay of a person’s cognition, behaviour and factors external to the person. The same can be said of classroom participation, and the data support this. The relationship between loneliness and classroom participation, therefore, is not linear, but a complex and divergent web of relationships based on the individual’s interaction with the environment. Just as a person only becomes lonely when they experience a discrepancy between actual and desired relationships with others, so ability only becomes disability when compared with societal norms and expectations. A key concept in the relationship between loneliness and classroom participation in adolescents with learning disabilities is the disadvantageous comparison between the self and an idealised self, whether it is the individual or others.
making the comparison. A guiding principle, therefore, when insinuating change to our schooling cultures should be: we must seek not to normalise, but to adapt. This was supported by the data.

In the narratives loneliness was seen to encompass a number of factors; it was found to be a feeling of social dissatisfaction or a discrepancy between a desired social life and reality. Loneliness resulted from social difficulties and difficulties with friendships, particularly when the student had difficulty participating effectively in their peer group and also when the student’s social perceptions and awareness influenced their social decision making in an unhelpful way. The narratives revealed that these aspects of loneliness also related to the students’ participation in the classroom. This is due to the requirement of social interaction in contemporary schools.

The narratives revealed practical reasons why friends are required in the classroom, such as ability to participate in group work, and also reasons why peer rejection would prevent effective participation, such as help-seeking. Adequate social skills and strategies, and their use, was found to be related to ability to communicate in the classroom as was effective social perception and awareness in terms of, for example, the students’ ability to predict the behaviour of others based on their experiences. In addition, the environment was found to exacerbate social difficulties, particularly with the bullying culture and the influence of teachers, and this was related to effective classroom participation in regard to the modelling and imitation of exclusionary and critical behaviours. However, although the situation was not related to school attrition in this selection of students, it was unclear whether they were representative of other students with LD in this regard.

To return to the research question, how are loneliness and classroom participation related in the experiences of the population under examination? Schools are configured as social, communal spaces where interaction and communication is essential. However, in some situations environmental and cognitive factors limit an individual’s opportunity to interact and communicate
effectively in the classroom. The students in this study were rejected and neglected in classroom activities, felt overwhelmed by social concerns and loneliness and had difficulty performing appropriate and effective social behaviours. In such cases, school becomes a site of perpetual conflict and discomfort. Such a place is not conducive to effective participation, engagement and learning.

This study extends what is known of loneliness as the three domains of social cognitive theory are examined in their contribution to these feelings of loneliness. In addition, loneliness in the classroom was found to be a significant issue for these students with LD and was found to be related to the students’ participation in a variety of ways.

Having addressed the research question, the following section overviews this study’s unique contribution to the field. Subsequent discussion provides consideration of the limitations of the project, with suggestions for future research. Following this, implications for future practice are provided.

**Unique contribution to the literature**

Very little Australian research into loneliness had been completed before the present study and, of the research that existed, very little focused on adolescents and none looked at LD. Limited research existed elsewhere that explored the relationship between negative emotions generally and learning issues, but not loneliness and the aspects of learning that prevent students participating in the classroom, and not using classroom observations and student interviews, as was investigated in the present study. Further, very few studies looked at the social interactions of students with LD in the classroom and even fewer looked at bullying in children with LD.

Research was also needed to investigate attributions for success and failure in real life events (Jacobson et al., 1986), as opposed to hypothetical scenarios and to examine Theory of Mind mastery using observations of interactions (Charman & Campbell, 1997). Fine-grained, qualitative research
was also needed on the experience of loneliness (Flanders, 1982). These were provided by the present study.

The narratives revealed that, in concurrence with the literature, the students with LD in this study experienced significant loneliness and social dissatisfaction which was related to peer rejection (Asher et al., 1990) and bullying (Hawker & Boulton, 2000), and problematic perceptions (Pavri & Monda-Amaya, 2000). This occurred when the child was included in a friendship group in addition to when the child was socially isolated (Perlman & Peplau, 1982; Qualter & Munn, 2002; Weiss, 1982). However, lack of belonging in the school (Pavri & Monda-Amaya, 2000) did not appear to be an issue for the students who expressed the intention to complete their education.

Feelings of loneliness have been related to feelings of anger, restlessness, impatience, uneasiness and inability to concentrate (Cotterell, 1996) and memory capabilities (Ellis & Hunt, 1989), which indicates a relationship between loneliness and classroom participation. The students in the present study exhibited these types of feelings in the classroom that could be related to their social difficulties and feelings of loneliness.

Limitations

It should be noted that the findings were considered inextricably linked to this particular participating site and the four students. It is considered that the culture of the school contributed significantly to the experiences of the four students. This is in terms of the culture of bullying that had been allowed to develop, the conflicting cultural hierarchies of ethnicity, in addition to the physical location of the school, the presence of a learning support unit and the obvious influence of the principal. These factors are related to the wider cultural and political nature of disability which create the attitudes and beliefs
of those surrounding the students. The findings should be considered with this in mind.

The current study was also limited by the design in terms of the number of directions the narratives could pursue, as with any project. Several aspects emerged from the narratives which warrant further study. These topics are now detailed.

**Recommendations for future research**

An interesting study would follow students, such as those featured in this study, from primary school to high school and then into the workplace. Such a longitudinal study could examine whether there was any improvement in social relationships following the transition to high school and then discover whether the students continued to use the same limited social strategies in the workplace and evaluate their effectiveness. Such a study could introduce some social skill intervention and discover the effectiveness of such an approach to participation and retention at high school and better social outcomes in the workplace.

In addition, studies into the social networks of students which use sociometric tests would benefit from the use of observation to ascertain differences in students’ scores, such as Brittany’s acceptance in certain groups and situations but rejection in others. As Brittany received the most acceptance (albeit with passive rejection) in the learning support group, it would be interesting to ascertain how and why the learning support students became a friendship group before anyone knew they would be in learning support.

Further, more research is needed to examine problematic friendship groups and dyadic relationships in adolescents with LD and to discover why students like Lenny, Nathan, Brittany and Helen remained at school when their peers with LD dropped out. Such a study would rely on the identification of students with LD which, as discussed, is a significant issue in research in this field.
As has been suggested in the literature, research into how to make schools more inclusive, should include the perspectives of the various stakeholders (Ainscow, 2006). That means that those who identify as disabled should be involved in research about their experiences (Nind, 2008) from conception. Only then can truly inclusive practices be developed.

**Implications for Future Practice**

Nathan, Lenny, Brittany and Helen’s stories have provided a wealth of insight into their experience of school. This knowledge *must* be used to benefit other children with similar circumstances. There are a range of implications from this study including teachers’ need for vigilance and appropriate modelling; the need for strategies to actively include marginalised students and the provision of social support; and implications for labelling and building inclusive school cultures.

The most notable implication from the research in terms of teacher practice is that teachers must be alert to peer rejection, bullying and loneliness in their classrooms and implement strategies to alleviate these difficulties. Aside from the obligatory leaflet rack which included a variety of anti-bullying literature and the occasional anti-bullying poster, there was no coherent, proactive, holistic approach to bullying at Southside. Students engaged in bullying behaviours across the year levels in all observed subjects, largely unchecked. Whether the teachers noticed the bullying and felt unable to deal with the behaviour or whether the teachers were too preoccupied to notice, bullying was a significant characteristic of the school. This ranged from Mike saying to Lenny, “Lenny, Lenny,” in a deep voice to imply low intelligence; occasional derogatory comments about the support room and its inhabitants; the construction teacher modelling fault-finding behaviours; to the open use of expletives in the vitriolic criticism of Malachi, Nathan and Lenny witnessed
by the teachers. Such cultures further disadvantage students who are already disadvantaged by the school system.

Possibly due to the nature of secondary schooling with segmented days and multiple caretakers, the teachers were unaware of the extent of the bullying and that these students, Nathan in particular, experienced this abuse throughout the day, in their classroom and elsewhere. Even Tom, the support teacher, who had the most contact with the students during the week, did not know the extent of the students’ school experience of bullying. Even if he had known, he would have had few resources to manage the situation. Had the teachers been aware, it is hoped that they would have helped alleviate the difficulties caused by bullying in their classroom.

Teachers need to be made aware of the consequences of social difficulties and feelings of loneliness, in relation to self-esteem and belonging, but also in terms of students’ ability to participate in their classrooms. These social difficulties are often caused by negative attitudes towards difference. Social education and a whole-school, zero-tolerance approach to bullying should be mandatory. In the absence of such an approach, schools cannot claim to be caring, empathetic and equitable to the students in their care.

Teachers have to model appropriate attitudes towards their students and ensure that peers demonstrate inclusive, accepting attitudes towards all students, regardless of their personal feelings towards individuals. This was not evident at Southside. Even the well-meaning teachers identified the participants as ‘problematic’ and treated them differently. These attitudes were all too easily digested by the other students. Professional development activities focusing on inclusive practices would assist in addressing these spurious beliefs and attitudes.

Research has already suggested a number of strategies for alleviating social difficulties in secondary school and the narratives revealed that such strategies would have been highly effective at Southside. One strategy is the
assignment of an adult to provide counselling, advocacy or support to encourage appropriate behaviours in students who were experiencing social difficulties (Margolin, 2001). The narratives from the present study indicated that, although two of the students expressed the need for such a person, the school was unable to provide that support as both the guidance officers and school nurse, who could have fulfilled the role, resigned during narrative collection and the students had not yet made a connection with their replacements.

Another strategy that has received some success is a support-group approach (Hymel et al., 1993). The Thursday lunch club was designed to offer the students the opportunity to discuss common issues in a safe environment but was unsuccessful in this regard. However, Brittany, Danni and Lenny enjoyed having a safe place to come and share their stories and join in completing the jigsaw puzzle, under the supervision of an adult. The narratives revealed that this club provided a supportive environment for the students, which sheltered them from social rejection in the playground and, as they were in a group, made them less vulnerable for being without a friend. It was considered that this club also served the purpose of keeping the students gainfully employed, which has also been raised in the literature (Hymel et al., 1996).

It has been said that introduction of a wider range of extra-curricular activities or inviting the student to take on responsibilities at unstructured times to give them somewhere to be and something to do helps alleviate the negative feelings of lack of belongingness (Hymel et al., 1996). Nathan revealed that he used to hide under a stair well when he wanted to be alone but, had he been given a lunch-time responsibility or found a group of like-minded people in an extra-curricular group, it is quite likely he would have preferred this to his self-imposed isolation. Lenny, Danni and Brittany all participated in the Thursday lunch club to differing degrees with Lenny attending every break of every day and Danni and Brittany occasionally attending, sometimes alone.
and sometimes together. It is doubtful that they participated due to their love of jigsaw puzzles, although Lenny did admit to a fondness for the activity. It is more likely that they attended because it was a safe haven from the rest of the school population and it was theirs.

A controversial finding surrounds the issue of labelling, which has implications for practice. Labelling a child has negative connotations as it encourages educators to make assumptions as to the learning needs of the child, rather than getting to know the child and tailoring learning to meet their individual needs, regardless of aetiology (Graham, 2006). A label, such as LD, is associated with stigma (Elkins, 2007) particularly the word ‘disability’ as this word implies ‘deficit’ (Goodley, 2001) and labels become a self-fulfilling prophecy (Graham, 2006). As Reid and Button eloquently stated, “the answer to the question ‘Who am I?’ leads to decisions about ‘who I can become,’” (Reid & Button, 1995, p. 612). Therefore, if a child is told ‘who’ they are then this puts boundaries around who they can become. Further, labelling focuses on the problematic individual, rather than the problematic nature of schooling (Danforth, 2008). This vast body of research is not under contest. However, the narratives revealed that the teachers’ lack of knowledge about the profile of their students contributed to their students’ classroom difficulties.

The most notable example of this occurred in the conversations with the teacher who claimed Nathan caused his social difficulties. If the teacher had been aware that Nathan struggled significantly to understand the motives of others and was unable to predict the consequences of some of his actions and, perhaps most importantly, that he possessed limited ability to select appropriate strategies to make his life at school easier, perhaps he would have been more empathetic and supportive, providing scaffolding to assist Nathan in improving the situation.

Again, the teacher who made Lenny contribute publicly to the class discussion when he had attempted to contribute privately, should have been
made aware of how costly these contributions were to Lenny because of his social difficulties. Had she known she could have implemented strategies to allow him to participate in a less threatening manner, with the aim of building his confidence to a level where he felt comfortable communicating in a more public manner.

The same could be said of Brittany’s experiences with Alev. Had the teacher known that Brittany had difficulties with the social aspects of group work, she could have worked more closely with that group, modelling and encouraging a positive attitude towards the participation of all the members of the group and teaching assertiveness and cooperation.

That is not to say that labelling would bring about an end to these difficulties, of course it would not. These types of difficulties can only be extinguished through more inclusive practices. However, if the characteristics of LD were considered merely one set of learning needs amongst any number of different ability profiles, such as Gardner has proposed with his multiple intelligences theory (Moran, Kornhaber, & Gardner, 2006), then there would be no need to shy away from the term. As Dudley-Marling and Dippo (1995) suggest, we need to “remove the stigma of difference,” (p. 413). As a result, educators could use whatever information is available, be it a label or observation, to anticipate potential future issues, such as social difficulties, experiences of loneliness and subsequent learning disruption and proactively cater for their students’ needs.

Further, if educators had an understanding of the characteristics of LD they would be able to anticipate some of the potential social difficulties experienced by students with LD in their care. In anticipation of these difficulties, the students could receive proactive assistance to minimise these difficulties as they arose throughout their development. There is a clear dilemma here. The arguments for and against labelling are compelling and each has repercussions which touch the lives of these children. Whether students are labelled or not, they know they are different: the students in this
study were not labelled but they were aware of their difference, as were their peers. The social difficulties faced by these students were caused by a less than inclusive environment and related to their learning disabilities. As such, the social difficulties would be persistent and long-term. However, making the school environment more accommodating for these students would produce remarkable results.

Disability is socially constructed (Chappell, Gooley, & Lawthom, 2001; Goodley, 2001) in that students with disabilities have strengths and limitations the same as everyone else, but normalising school systems allow these limitations to impede their learning (Denti & Katz, 1995). Similarly, their strengths are not currently valued in the learning context and, therefore, the label has negative connotations (Hearne & Stone, 1995). As Poplin (1995) said, “they have abilities far beyond the range of what schools care about,” (p. 392). A truly inclusive school environment would allow these abilities to be demonstrated. Schools need to become, “democratic communities, interactive spaces where a diverse range of individualities are respected and valued,” (Danforth, 2008, p. 46) and provide unconventional opportunities to demonstrate excellence and experience success.

Another implication for future practice concerns an acknowledgement of the moral and ethical dilemma I struggled with during the project. On the one hand, I had a signed consent form which allowed me to collect the information stated in the manner stated and which outlined my ethical responsibility as a researcher to protect the confidentiality of the students unless I thought they were at risk of harm. On the other hand, I felt a personal moral obligation to do something to help improve Nathan’s school experience, especially considering his lack of support at home.

My supervisors and I wrestled with this dilemma. What to do when one’s personal and research beliefs clash? I spoke to Nathan about seeking help (both inside and outside of school) but felt that he would not organise this himself. Had I been his teacher, perhaps I could have worked with him to get
the help he needed but this was not my role. As a researcher I was limited to data collection which was the purpose set out in the consent documents. The other teachers knew of his social difficulties but I felt that they did not possess an accurate picture of the severity of the situation as they had never followed him as I had done. Genuinely anxious about Nathan, and my moral responsibility to help him, I sought advice from a university research ethics advisor. I was reassured that I had met my obligation to Nathan and there was nothing further I could do for him, particularly in view of the fact that he had probably constructed his own way of dealing with the situation and the kind of interference I would be able to provide might cause more damage than good. The ethics advisor supported my plans to disseminate de-identified findings to the staff and students. I was kindly advised that I should comfort myself with the knowledge that my work would help future Nathans.

The ethics advisor guided me to the National Statement on Ethical Conduct in Human Research, in particular the section on beneficence. This states that it is no longer appropriate to think that science inherently benefits society as often research merely benefits individuals at the risk of other individuals (NHMRC, ARC, AVC, 2007). It is hoped that, if the subject of the research cannot benefit directly from participation, then a significantly greater number of individuals will benefit with minimal risk to the participant. Thoughtful, ethical research can exercise beneficence by,

assessing and taking account of the risks of harm and the potential benefits of research to participants and to the wider community; in being sensitive to the welfare and interests of people involved in their research; and in reflecting on the social and cultural implications of their work, (NHMRC, ARC, AVC, 2007, p. 11).

It is considered that all of the students benefitted from their participation as they were able to voice their concerns to an adult without risk of censure and they returned for three interviews in most cases. They were also interested
in how their experiences could help other children. Therefore, their contribution must be used to benefit other children with learning disabilities.

The implication for future practice is a powerful one: schools must undergo a change of culture to become truly inclusive. Considering the long-term repercussions of issues like loneliness and bullying, such as school attrition (Buhs et al., 2006), drug-abuse (Rokach & Orzech, 2002), criminality (Parker & Asher, 1987), alcoholism (Loos, 2002), depression (Valas, 1999) and suicide ideation (Demaray & Malecki, 2003), minimising social difficulties in the classroom is imperative. This can only be achieved by revaluing difference.

Southside was not a bad school - it was a high school just like hundreds of others in Australia. Unfortunately a malevolent culture of bullying had been allowed to develop whilst everyone went about their business, not oblivious, but not taking responsibility for their part in it and this impacted on the students’ classroom participation and their feelings of belonging, acceptance, and loneliness. This is why the use of social cognitive theory was so essential for a study into this phenomenon - it was important to consider the interaction of behavioural, cognitive and environmental factors when examining the scholastic development of these students with learning disabilities.
Author’s note

I recently went to an open day for a Brisbane school that I am considering for my eldest son. The principal stood up in front of an auditorium of parents and vowed that he would resign if an episode of bullying was reported to him and he didn’t act on it. He said that he had issued the same challenge every year for the last ten years and he was still there. He said they had a ‘positive dobbing’ philosophy at his school and bullies had three strikes and they were out, one strike for physical assault. This attitude was embraced by the entire school and every piece of paper I saw relating to the school spelled this message clearly. If this principal could do it, why can’t all schools adopt a similar approach? The truth is, all schools have an anti-bullying policy, but most just pay lip-service to it whereas this man got behind it and insisted that both staff and students believed in it. It just shows we can do it, why don’t we?
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Appendix 1: Learning Disabilities Indicator Chart

**Learning Disabilities Indicator Chart**

*Adolescent student experiencing learning difficulties*

- **Stage 1: Establish History**
  - Is there a family history of learning difficulties?  
    - Yes
    - No
  - Have the difficulties been evident throughout the school career?  
    - Yes
    - No
  - Are the student’s difficulties specific to a particular area (or areas) of the curriculum?  
    - Yes
    - No
  - Have the difficulties continued despite intervention?  
    - Yes
    - No
  - Are the student’s difficulties unexpected (in terms of your impression of their cognitive (attention/memory/reasoning) potential?)  
    - Yes
    - No

- **Stage 2: Rule out other causes**
  - If English is a second language, does the student experience similar problems in their first language?  
    - Yes
    - No
  - If IQ tests have been conducted, is student in the average range or above?  
    - Yes
    - No
  - Have auditory or visual discrimination problems (reduced sight or hearing) been ruled out?  
    - Yes
    - No
  - Have health problems which affect concentration been ruled out (e.g., diabetes)?  
    - Yes
    - No

- **Suggests absence of learning disabilities**
  - Has student received adequate teaching and resources in the past and been in regular attendance?  
    - Yes
    - No

*Situations and conditions can occur concomitantly, with learning disabilities but learning disabilities are unlikely to be the primary cause of learning difficulties.*
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Difficulty in acquisition and use of ORAL LANGUAGE</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>E.g., inappropriate loud or soft speech, difficulty narrating events, limited vocabulary, mispronounces words, difficulty naming hours or remembering names.</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Difficulty in acquisition and use of READING SKILLS</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>E.g., uncomfortable reading aloud and lacks place often, reads slowly, guesses or omits difficult words, confuses similar-looking words (e.g. beard/bread).</td>
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</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Difficulty in acquisition and use of MATHEMATICS SKILLS</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>E.g., difficulty estimating quantity, cannot master multiplication tables, formulae and rules, difficulty remembering number facts, difficulty telling time (analogue).</td>
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</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Difficulty in acquisition and use of WRITTEN LANGUAGE</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>E.g., unduly writing, irregular spacing between words and lines, poor spelling, struggles with proof-reading, fails to develop written ideas.</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Difficulty in acquisition and use of NON-VERBAL SKILLS</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>E.g., misreads facial expressions and gestures, prolongs or avoids eye-contact, cannot infer mood from tone of voice, uncertain of principles of personal space and touching.</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Difficulty in acquisition and use of SOCIAL SKILLS</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>E.g., misreads other’s moods or feelings, makes inappropriate comments, difficulty making or keeping friends, may not consider current friends of high social value.</td>
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</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Difficulty in acquisition and use of ORGANISATIONAL SKILLS</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>E.g., difficulty keeping to a timeframe for projects or homework, brings incorrect equipment or forgets equipment frequently, struggles with timetabling.</td>
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</table>

Notes
### Checklist

#### Learning Disabilities

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Learning Disabilities</strong></td>
<td>The National Center for Learning Disabilities</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Appendix 3: LD Decision Tree
Appendix 4: Interview Protocol

Interview Questions

INTRODUCTION

Remember my project is about ‘Friends and School’ So today I’m going to ask you questions about your friends and school life. If there is a question you don’t feel comfortable answering, just let me know and we will move on. If you don’t want to continue talking to me, just let me know and you can go back to class. I really want to hear your ideas and understand what school is like for you. There are no right and wrong answers – just try to answer truthfully. Remember I cannot and will not let anyone know who told me these answers so just relax and answer as fully as you can.

Question 1

Firstly, can you tell me about the other kids at school – who are your friends and who don’t you like and why. Remember I won’t tell them.

Key Topics:
Social network > peer rejection > loneliness;
Social network > social value of friends > loneliness;
Social network > precipitating event > peer group changes > loneliness;
Social network > Peer rejection > maintaining causes > social skill deficits
Social network > maintaining friendships > loneliness.
Social perceptions & attributions > loneliness
Discrepancy between actual & desired social relationships > loneliness
Social network > belongingness
Lonely times > loneliness
Self-efficacy for peer interaction > loneliness

Probing Questions:
How long have you been friends with ...?
Has your group of friends changed since you started at this school?
Who are the most popular kids in your year?
Are you friends with them? Why/why not?
Do the popular kids like your friends?
Is there anyone at school who you would like to be friends with?
Do you thing most kids in your year like you? Why/why not?
Do you find it easy to get along with most people? Why?
Do you think you’re good at making & keeping friends? How can you tell?
Who do you walk to school with?
Who do you sit with at lunch?
Do you spend a lot of time alone? Are you ok with that?

Question 2

What do you do at the weekend?

Key Topics:
Lonely time > loneliness;
Social network > discrepancy between actual & desired social relationships > loneliness
Social network > perceptions > social expectations

Probing Questions:
How often do go out with your school friends? Where do you go?
Is there someone you’d rather go out with on the weekend?
What do you think the other kids in your grade do on weekends?
How often do you think the other kids go out with their friends?

Question 3

Have you ever felt lonely at school? Can you tell me about that?
Key Topics:
Loneliness > attributions
Loneliness > cognitive functioning >
anger/restlessness/concentration/impatience
Loneliness > cognitive functioning > behaviour patterns > over-
enthusiasm/self imposed isolation
Discrepancy between actual & desired social relationships > loneliness

Probing Questions:
Why were you lonely?
How did it feel to be at school?
How did it affect your temper or your mood?
How did it affect your ability to do your work?
Tell me how that day was different to a normal day?
How often do you feel lonely at school?
What do you do if you’re feeling lonely at school?
Have you ever felt that your friends were not good enough, that you’d like to
have someone else as your friend instead?
Have you ever ditched a friend when someone more popular turned up?

Question 4
Can you think of a time at school when you have felt like you were really liked & respected
by the other kids and everything was going well? Tell me about that.

Key Topics:
Social network > social acceptance > perceptions
Social network > social acceptance > attributions
Social network > past & present social contact > loneliness

Probing Questions:
How did you feel?
Why was this happening?
Question 5
Can you think of a time when you didn’t feel liked at school, maybe a time when you didn’t have any friends to talk to? Tell me about that. (Or have you ever been bullied?)

Key Topics:
Social network > social rejection > perceptions
Social network > social rejection > attributions
Social network > past & present social contact > loneliness
Peer interaction > theory of mind > motivations

Probing Questions:
How did you feel?
Why was this happening? (Why did he/she do that?)

Question 6
How were those two days different?

Key Topics:
Social network > social acceptance/rejection > behaviour > social & emotional loneliness
>behaviour > classroom

Probing Questions:
Did you act differently around the other kids?
Did you sit somewhere different for lunch?
Did you work better in class or worse & why?
How did the teachers treat you differently on each day?

Question 7
Tell me how you feel about coming to ‘support’ instead of staying in lessons?

Key Topics:
Support classes > support vs mainstream > peer perceptions of support >behaviours
Social network > support classes > perceptions > social value of friends > loneliness
Social network > support classes > perceptions > social value of friends > attributions
Support classes > support vs mainstream > perceptions of academic ability > self-efficacy > self-esteem

Probing Questions:
Do you prefer coming to the support room? Why?
Do the other kids in your classes know you go to support?
Do the other kids ever say anything about you going in there? What do they say?
How does that make you feel?
Are you friends with mainly kids who go to support or kids who don’t? Why do you think that is?
Compared to the kids in support, are you top, middle or bottom of the class?
Compared to the kids in your other classes, are you top, middle or bottom of the class?

**Question 8**

Which subject are you best at?

**Key Topics:**
Perceptions of academic ability > attributions > self-efficacy > self-esteem

**Probing Questions:**
How can you tell?
Why do you think you’re best at...?
Which subject do you enjoy the most?

**Question 9**

Which subject are you worst at?

**Key Topics:**
Perceptions of academic ability > attributions > self-efficacy > self-esteem

**Probing Questions:**
How can you tell?
Why do you think you’re worst at...?
Which subject do you least enjoy?

**Question 10**

Can you think of a time when you have been really proud of something you have done in class? Tell me about it.

**Key Topics:**
Academic ability > perceptions
Academic ability > perceptions > attributions
Academic ability > peer influence
Academic ability > teacher influence

**Probing Questions:**
What happened?
Why did it happen?
What did the teacher/other kids say?
How did you feel?

**Question 11**

Can you think of a time when you really couldn’t understand what the teacher was trying to teach you? Tell me about it.

**Key Topics:**
### Academic ability > perceptions
Academic ability > perceptions > attributions
Academic ability > peer influence
Academic ability > teacher influence

**Probing Questions:**
- What happened?
- Why did it happen?
- What did the teacher/other kids say?
- How did you feel?

### Question 12
In regular lessons (not in support), if you fall behind or don’t understand what to do, what do you usually do?

**Key Topics:**
- Help seeking > perceptions > image
- Help seeking > perceptions > image > attributions
- Helping seeking > perceptions of support > behaviours

**Probing Questions:**
- Do you ask the teacher? Why/why not?
- Do you ask another student? Why/why not?

### Question 13
Tell me how you feel about joining in with class discussions in regular lessons?

**Key Topics:**
- Social skills > communication > participation > discussions
- Social skills > communication > participation > group work

**Probing Questions:**
- Do you often put up your hand to answer the teacher’s questions? Why/why not?
- Do you work best in groups, pairs or on your own? Why?

### Question 14
Which teachers do you like and not like & why?

**Key Topics:**
- Teacher influence > belongingness
- Teacher influence > emphasising difference
- Perceptions > teacher influence
- Behaviour > theory of mind > anticipate reactions

**Probing Questions:**
- How can you tell?
- Have you ever gotten in trouble for saying or doing something in class and you didn’t know you had done something wrong?
**Question 15**
Will you stay on until the end of year 12? Why?

**Key Topics:**
Social network > belongingness > early drop-out
Social network > belongingness > attributions

**Probing Questions:**
What will you do instead?
How do you feel about that?

---

**Question 16**
What's more important – getting good grades or making new friends?

**Key topics:**
Social perception

**Probing Questions:**

---

**Individualised Questions (work in progress)**

‘Richard’

- You’ve been absent quite a lot this term – why is that? [belongingness > loneliness > early drop-out]
- Earlier this year you ran away from home. When you came to school you refused to work for ‘Mr Smith’ and swore at him. Can you tell me about it? Remember, I can’t tell anyone you told me. Can you tell me how it felt to be in school that day? Did it affect your concentration? In what way? Did it affect your temper or mood? In what way? What did you do differently that day as a result? [bullying > social rejection > loneliness] [loneliness & behaviour]
‘Katie’
- Who do you sit with in Dance? [social network]
- You talk to ‘Tracey’ in support but not in Dance. Why is that? [social value of friends > loneliness]
‘Lenny’
- The other day in Construction, the teacher asked you to be his off-sider, why do you think that was? Are you good at Construction? [perceptions of ability] [teacher influence]
- The other day in hospitality, you were trying to chop the vegetables and that kid with the ginger hair kept telling you you were doing it wrong. What were you feeling when he kept criticising you? What could you have done differently? [social network > assertiveness] [perceptions]
- Have you ever had a problem with being bullied? Can you tell me about that? Why were they bullying you? What did you do about it? [bullying > social rejection > behaviour > loneliness]
‘Danni’
- You said the other day that ‘Brittany’ isn’t your best friend any more but she used to be. Can you tell me what happened? How did you feel at the time? Is there someone you would/she would rather be friends with? [social network] [social behaviour] [social value of friends > loneliness] [perceptions of social ability]
‘Nathan’
- In Construction the other day the teacher asked ‘Alan’ to help you finish your tool box. Why were you so far behind? Why did ‘Alan’ do the work for you? Did you want to do it yourself? How could you have told him that? Who do you ask if you are not sure? [perceptions of ability] [assertiveness > loneliness] [help seeking]
- Who are your friends? What year levels are they in? Have any of the other kids in your year ever said anything about being friends with younger students? [social network > social rejection > dropping down year levels > social value of friends]
- Tell me about ‘David’ [social value of friends > loneliness]
‘Helen’
- Tell me about being in the musical. Do the other kids help you learn the routines and songs? Who are your friends in the musical? Does ‘Katie’ help you in the musical? [assertiveness > loneliness] [help seeking] [social network] [perception of ability] [social value of friends] [social rejection]
'Brittany'

- Tell me what happened when your friend left the school? How did it change who you are friends with? [change to social network > loneliness] [social rejection > loneliness]
### Appendix 5: Observation Protocol

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Subject</th>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Lesson</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Observations</td>
<td></td>
<td>Reflections</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


Appendix 6: Principal’s Information & Consent Pack

CONSENT FORM for QUT RESEARCH PROJECT

Loneliness & Learning in Adolescents with Learning Difficulties

Statement of consent

By signing below, you are indicating that you:

- have read and understood the information document regarding this project
- have had any questions answered to your satisfaction
- understand that if you have any additional questions you can contact the research team
- understand that you are free to withdraw at any time, without comment or penalty
- understand that you can contact the Research Ethics Officer on 3138 2340 or ethicscontact@qut.edu.au if you have concerns about the ethical conduct of the project
- agree for your school, staff and students to participate in the project

Name

School

Signature

Date / / 

OR

Statement of non-consent

By signing below, you are indicating that you:

- are not willing to participate at this time.

Name

School

Signature

Date / / 

/ / / 
Appendix 7: Parent Questionnaire

PARENT / GUARDIAN QUESTIONNAIRE

You have given permission for your child’s involvement in the ‘Friends & School’ research project for QUT. Now I need some information about your child’s academic background. Please answer the following questions. It should only take about 5 minutes. Thanks.

**THINK ABOUT THE YEARS SINCE YOUR CHILD STARTED SCHOOL…**

When did you first notice that your child was struggling with school work?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Pre-school</th>
<th>Year 1–4</th>
<th>Year 5–7</th>
<th>Year 8–12</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

Have the learning difficulties continued, despite receiving help?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Yes</th>
<th>No</th>
<th>Some improvement</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

**LEARNING DIFFICULTIES OFTEN RUN IN FAMILIES…**

Did/does anyone in your child’s family have difficulties with school work and receive special help at school?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Family Member</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Child’s Brothers / Sisters</td>
<td>Child’s Parents</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Child’s Cousins</td>
<td>Child’s Grandparents</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Details (optional)

____________________________________________________________________________________________
____________________________________________________________________________________________
____________________________________________________________________________________________

**THINK ABOUT YOUR CHILD’S DIFFICULTIES…**

Does your child struggle with one area in particular?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Area</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Reading</td>
<td>Writing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Listening</td>
<td>Speaking</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mathematics</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Were you surprised when your child started having difficulties with school work?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Yes</th>
<th>No</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
CAN YOU TELL ME ANYTHING ELSE ABOUT YOUR CHILD’S DIFFICULTIES AT SCHOOL? (continue on the back if necessary)

____________________________________________________________________________________________
____________________________________________________________________________________________
____________________________________________________________________________________________
____________________________________________________________________________________________
____________________________________________________________________________________________

Your participation is voluntary and is limited to completing this questionnaire.

When I receive consent, your name and your child’s name will be removed from the questionnaire to protect your privacy.

All documents relating to the project will be stored in a secure location.

Completing the questionnaire may help me understand your child’s school experience better and, as a result, may help his/her teachers improve that experience.

I consent to completing this questionnaire under the terms described.

Signed: ______________________________ Date: ____________________

Name (print): __________________________________________________________
Appendix 8: Parent Cover Letter

7th February 2008

Dear Mr & Mrs X

NAME has expressed an interest in being involved in a research project I am conducting. I would like your permission to include HER/HIM in the project. As NAME is aware I have been sitting in on lessons and helping out in the support unit since October last year.

My project looks at the social aspects of learning in students with learning difficulties. With your permission, I would like to talk to your child about their classroom experiences as well as observe some of HIS/HER classes with permission from your child and HIS/HER teacher. I will need to talk to [support teacher] and [guidance officer] about NAME’s academic history at [school], but I also need you to provide some information so I have included a small questionnaire with this letter.

I have included an information and consent leaflet which should answer any of your questions. Please take time to read the information and sign if you agree for your child to participate. Could you also take 5 minutes to complete the questionnaire and return both to the school in the envelope provided.

Thanks.

Mrs Briony Wainman, B.Ed (hons) [name]
Doctoral Candidate, QUT Principal
Appendix 9: Information & Consent: Student
the research is being undertaken by

"What do you think?"

The aim of my project is to

"like for teenagers who some
learn about what high school is
like for teenagers who some

other lessons and about the
the particularity how you feel
you can tell me about your school
I would really like to know what

other kids at school.

The project will start soon and run
for the next 2-3 terms.

My project will start soon and run
other students enjoy school more.

future we might be able to help
is like for you so that in the
I want to understand which school

other lessons and about the
the particularity how you feel
you can tell me about your school
I would really like to know what

other kids at school.

The project will start soon and run
for the next 2-3 terms.

My project will start soon and run
other students enjoy school more.

future we might be able to help
is like for you so that in the
I want to understand which school

other lessons and about the
the particularity how you feel
you can tell me about your school
I would really like to know what

other kids at school.

The project will start soon and run
for the next 2-3 terms.

My project will start soon and run
other students enjoy school more.

future we might be able to help
is like for you so that in the
I want to understand which school

other lessons and about the
the particularity how you feel
you can tell me about your school
I would really like to know what

other kids at school.

The project will start soon and run
for the next 2-3 terms.

My project will start soon and run
other students enjoy school more.

future we might be able to help
is like for you so that in the
I want to understand which school

other lessons and about the
the particularity how you feel
you can tell me about your school
I would really like to know what

other kids at school.
Observation of teachers and their methods is not within the scope of this research design.

Your participation would involve allowing me to come to negotiated classes.

I may want to talk to you about the students and classroom interaction.

The purpose of the project is to examine the relationship between social re-

also struggle socially?“ does what if you

School is challenging enough when you

at other interactions, cognitions and behaviours.
Appendix 11: Informed Consent: Informant

There are no risks beyond normal day-to-day living associated with your participation in this project. The potential risk of a confidentiality breach in the workplace is a concern for the researcher. It is anticipated that the benefit of participation in this project is that you might appreciate having your thoughts and ideas listened to and used constructively to help students with learning difficulties.

A report will be made available to you at the end of the project in addition to a debriefing session for interested participants and other members of the school community.

Participation

Your participation is voluntary. If you do not agree to participate, you can withdraw from participation at any time during the project without comment or penalty.

Risks

Benefits

What do you think?

[Consent]

I understand that my participation will be limited to hours and at my convenience.

I understand that I can make adjustments and that my comments or feedback will be kept confidential and all documentation will be stored in a secure location.

I will assist Brony by:

[Learning Support Staff]

offering Brony general advice pertinent to the study,

providing input regarding students who might be available to talk to students who might be available to talk to Brony,

[Project: Supporting at some point during the project]

A research project for friends

[QUT]
410


## Appendix 12: Tree Codes & Definitions in NVivo

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>SCT domain</th>
<th>Parent node</th>
<th>Child node</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Environment</strong></td>
<td>Bullying</td>
<td>Bullying anecdotes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Bullying at high school</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Bullying at primary school</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Bullying by new students</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Hopeful for cessation of bullying (optimism)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Level of inclusion by peers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>peers scare away new friends</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Peers teach others how to treat me</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Rejected by association</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Response to bullying</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>**Problematic social</td>
<td></td>
<td>changes in friendship pattern or group</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>relationships**</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Supplement**
friend distancing themself

Friends bully me

Friends don't help me

Friends don't listen

Friends encroach on my relationships

friends exclude me

friends get me in trouble

Friends in the absence of a better offer

friends make me do bad things

Friends make me feel bad

Friends reject me

jealousy and tension

Lack of trust in friends
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Personal/Cognition</th>
<th>Social skills</th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Problematic relationships</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Problematic social choices</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Assertiveness</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Communication</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Lack of social strategies</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Social maturity</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Loneliness</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Absent friend</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Alone time at school</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Conscious loneliness

discrepancy between actual and desired social contact

Socially aspirational discrepancy between social activities of self and others

Limited friends

social value of nominated friend

Solitary hobbies

Vulnerability of being alone

Social cognition

Attributional style

Learning failure

Learning success

Social failure

Social success

inability to ascertain motives

Poor judgement
Social awareness &
perception

Social nuances

Body language

Inappropriate actions

Inappropriate remarks

Old-fashioned language

Sophisticated vocabulary

Unable to anticipate

unable to nominate popular
group

Behaviour

Classroom participation
can't concentrate

Class discussions

Expectations for success

friends in the classroom

Friends won't work with me

Group work
Help-seeking

impact of loneliness on school work

Falling behind in lessons

Help-seeking

Learned helplessness

Peer help in class

Vulnerability of speaking up

Lack of resilience

No-one listens to me

Peers take over in manual tasks

Self efficacy for academic tasks

Self-efficacy for non-academic tasks

Speaking up in class
Support

Task avoidance

lack of peer support

Lack of school support

lack of teacher support

Teacher emphasising difference

Teacher frustration

Teacher teaches others how to treat me
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Code</th>
<th>Definition</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Bullying</td>
<td>Episodes of bullying either related to me by the student, by a teacher or another student or ones I witnessed myself.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bullying anecdotes</td>
<td>Anecdotes or observations of bullying (rejection, violence, teasing, neglect and isolation) at high school.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bullying at high school</td>
<td>Anecdotes or observations of bullying (rejection, violence, teasing, neglect and isolation) at high school.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bullying at primary school</td>
<td>Anecdotes of bullying (rejection, violence, teasing, neglect and isolation) at primary school.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bullying by new students</td>
<td>Anecdotes of bullying by students who are new to the school which demonstrates how fast children learn from each other who are the weak students</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hopeful for cessation of bullying (optimism)</td>
<td>Students related feeling of optimism such as feeling things are changing or have changed for the better.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Level of inclusion by peers</td>
<td>Researcher's interpretation, based on observations and discussions with staff and students, of the participants' social rating.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Accepted</td>
<td>= allowed to join in as an equal member of the group</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Neglected</td>
<td>= left out of interactions and activities, not invited to participate</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rejected</td>
<td>= actively rejected verbally or physically</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>peers scare away new friends</td>
<td>Related to bullying by new students, related examples of peers telling new students not to be friends with the participant. Or demonstrating in some way the social pecking order to</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Category</td>
<td>Description</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>--------------------------------------</td>
<td>----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>reduce their chances of making new</td>
<td>reduce their chances of making new friends.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>friends.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Peers teach others how to treat me</td>
<td>Related to bullying by new students, observed or related episodes of peers demonstrating their power over participants and other students emulating that behaviour.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rejected by association</td>
<td>Either observed or related examples of participants being rejected because of their affiliation with an unpopular student.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Response to bullying</td>
<td>How students react to being bullied. The kinds of behaviour they use to deal with the situation.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Classroom participation</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>can't concentrate</td>
<td>En vivo code for inability to concentrate in class.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Class discussions</td>
<td>Related or observed classroom discussions - either failure to participate or participation.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Expectations for success</td>
<td>This is related to attributions. Participants’ related thoughts about the likelihood of success - social and learning.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>friends in the classroom</td>
<td>Examples of how it helps (or hinders) to have friends in the classroom.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Friends won't work with me</td>
<td>Related or observed examples of nominated friends refusal to work with participants in class.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Group work</td>
<td>Related or observed examples of what happens in group work.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Help-seeking</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Falling behind in lessons</td>
<td>What to do when you fall behind or examples of when they have fallen behind.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Help-seeking</strong></td>
<td>how students go about finding help in the classroom, either related or observed.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Learned helplessness</strong></td>
<td>Examples of where the participant has developed a belief that they cannot succeed. Related to attributions.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Peer help in class</strong></td>
<td>Examples of peer helping in class or where it would be good if a peer helped in class.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Vulnerability of speaking up</strong></td>
<td>Reluctance to participate in class discussions or question and answers because of fear of being wrong or looking foolish.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>impact of loneliness on school work</strong></td>
<td>Related or observed impact of articulated or implied feelings of loneliness on ability to complete work in class. This is related to friends in the classroom.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Lack of resilience</strong></td>
<td>Related or observed examples of participants giving up in social or learning situations</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>No-one listens to me</strong></td>
<td>En vivo code. Participants can't make other people pay attention to what they have to say or make people let me join in.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Peers take over in manual tasks</strong></td>
<td>Observed or related experience of participants engaging in using tools &amp; and peers physically taking the tools from the participant or telling a participant not to complete a manual task usually because of a lack of belief in their abilities.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Self efficacy for academic tasks</strong></td>
<td>Participants' reported feelings of belief in their academic abilities</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Self-efficacy for non-academic tasks</strong></td>
<td>Participants' reported feelings of belief in their non-academic (sport, art, dance etc) abilities</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Speaking up in class</td>
<td>Related or observed examples of classroom discussion participation. Or students talking about their feelings about participating in class discussions.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>---------------------</td>
<td>----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Support</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>lack of peer support</td>
<td>Researcher's interpretation of peer support. Examples of opportunities when a peer could have helped a participant but didn't or when a peer hindered the progress of a participant.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lack of school support</td>
<td>Various mechanisms by which the school could have helped the participant but didn't or failed to provide adequate resources.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>lack of teacher support</td>
<td>Examples of how the teacher could have helped the participant but failed to act or failed to provide adequate resources.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teacher emphasising difference</td>
<td>Observations or related experiences of the teacher highlighting the participants' difference to the rest of the group.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teacher frustration</td>
<td>Related or observed examples of the teacher becoming frustrated with the participant</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teacher teaches others how to treat me</td>
<td>Observed examples of the teacher's poor behaviour being emulated by peers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Task avoidance</td>
<td>Related or observed avoidance of participation in class work. For example, wandering around, asking to go to the toilet, sulking etc.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cognition</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Attributional style</td>
<td>Reasons students give for learning and social success and failure.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Category</td>
<td>Description</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>---------------------------</td>
<td>--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Thought to be related to expectations for success or failure in the future.</td>
<td>Reasons students give for failing, or not thriving at school. Causality = local (external vs internal), stability (stable vs unstable) and controllability. Not sure if this is going to be relevant but it seems interesting.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Learning failure</td>
<td>Reasons students give for failing, or not thriving at school. Causality = local (external vs internal), stability (stable vs unstable) and controllability. Not sure if this is going to be relevant but it seems interesting.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Learning success</td>
<td>Reasons students give for any success related to their school work. Causality = local (external vs internal), stability (stable vs unstable) and controllability. Not sure if this is going to be relevant but it seems interesting.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social failure</td>
<td>Reasons students give for bullying, rejection or neglect. Causality = local (external vs internal), stability (stable vs unstable) and controllability. Not sure if this is going to be relevant but it seems interesting.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social success</td>
<td>Reasons students give for periods or episodes of popularity. Causality = local (external vs internal), stability (stable vs unstable) and controllability. Not sure if this is going to be relevant but it seems interesting.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>inability to ascertain motives</td>
<td>In questioning, or related experiences, participants were unable to conceive why someone did something</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Poor judgement</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social awareness &amp; perception</td>
<td>Related to social nuances. Related or observed experiences that demonstrate the participant is unable to pick up, understand and use the systems people use in social interaction and demonstrates limited knowledge of those systems.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social nuances</td>
<td>Interpretation of students’ actions in conjunction with related experience. Participant is unable to perceive the subtle nuances in social interactions.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>----------------</td>
<td>--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Body language</td>
<td>Observations of how the participants' body language makes them a target or makes them stand out. Posture, eye contact, etc.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Inappropriate actions</td>
<td>Observations of participants' actions and how they are not typical or 'normal' in the context. Makes them stand out to their peers.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Inappropriate remarks</td>
<td>Observations of participants. How what they say makes them stand out to their peers.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Old-fashioned language</td>
<td>Use of old-fashioned language which makes them stand out to their peers. Participants not using 'cool' or fashionable phrases but those of their parents or grandparents</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sophisticated vocabulary</td>
<td>Only applies to one student. Her sophisticated, and usually accurately used, vocabulary makes her stand out to her peers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unable to anticipate</td>
<td>Related to intuition. Related or observed experiences that demonstrate participants cannot make judgements about things that are likely to happen based on their prior experiences and knowledge or intuition.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>unable to nominate popular group</td>
<td>In questioning students are unable to say who they think the popular kids are. Demonstrates lack of social awareness.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Loneliness</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Absent friend</td>
<td>Friend who has left</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Alone time at school</strong></td>
<td>Time spent without a playmate at school</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>--------------------------</td>
<td>------------------------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Conscious loneliness</strong></td>
<td>Aware of feelings of loneliness</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>discrepancy between actual and desired social contact</strong></td>
<td>Loneliness by definition</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Socially aspirational</strong></td>
<td>Examples of students wanting to belong to a more popular group</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>discrepancy between social activities of self and others</strong></td>
<td>Related to loneliness - 'I think my peers go out more, have more fun, etc'</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Limited friends</strong></td>
<td>Only related to loneliness if participants are dissatisfied with the situation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>social value of nominated friend</strong></td>
<td>Related to loneliness, if the nominated friend has little social value and the participant is aware of it.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Solitary hobbies</strong></td>
<td>Reluctance to participate in team hobbies meaning participants are more often on their own, such as golf, fishing, etc/</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Vulnerability of being alone</strong></td>
<td>When you're alone you're more likely to be the target of bullies for example. These are examples of what happens when the participants are alone.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Problematic social relationships</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>changes in friendship pattern or group</td>
<td>Either friends leaving, breaking up with friends etc.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>friend distancing themself</td>
<td>Examples of nominated friends using strategies to break away from the relationship, usually for social gain or to avoid social censure.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Friends bully me</td>
<td>Problematic social relationships - nominated friends either reject</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Friends don't help me</strong></td>
<td>Participants or choose other friends over them (neglect) or physically attack participants.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>--------------------------</td>
<td>-------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Friends don't listen</strong></td>
<td>Usually in the classroom but also applies to fights, arguments etc.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Friends encroach on my relationships</strong></td>
<td>Examples of nominated friends not listening to participants in communication. Speaks to level of respect between friends.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>friends exclude me</strong></td>
<td>Related to friends bully me</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>friends get me in trouble</strong></td>
<td>Self explanatory</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Friends in the absence of a better offer</strong></td>
<td>Nominated friends who are only there until a better offer comes along.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>friends make me do bad things</strong></td>
<td>Self explanatory - bad things being things that others would perceive as bad even if the participant didn't realise it was bad at the time.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Friends make me feel bad</strong></td>
<td>Either by word or action nominated friends alter participants' self worth</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Friends reject me</strong></td>
<td>Related to friend bully me</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>jealousy and tension</strong></td>
<td>Friendships characterised by jealousy and tension</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Lack of trust in friends</strong></td>
<td>Self explanatory</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Problematic relationships</strong></td>
<td>Problems with nominated friends - either friends bully them, make them feel bad about themselves, exclude them, etc.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Problematic social choices</strong></td>
<td>Examples of participants making poor social choices that lead to lower</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social skills</td>
<td>quality relationships or environment.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>--------------------------------------------------</td>
<td>----------------------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Assertiveness</strong></td>
<td>related or observed experiences that demonstrate participants' level of assertiveness in communication, i.e., unable to convince others to listen/act in a certain way/do what the participant wants</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Anger</strong></td>
<td>Related or observed experiences of participants' feelings of anger. Either related to frustration or unable to solve problems in a calm and effective manner</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Communication</strong></td>
<td>Related to assertiveness. Participants demonstrate difficulty in making themselves understood without resorting to anger or sometimes the level of subtlety is so low that it is not picked up by the audience.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Lack of social strategies</strong></td>
<td>Related to social maturity. Participants demonstrate a limited number of social strategies to choose from which lacks the nuance necessary for effective communication</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Social maturity</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>age-appropriate friends</td>
<td>Participants choosing their friends from usually younger year levels.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Attention seeking</td>
<td>Observations of participants' desperate, often ineffectual or ill-conceived, attempts to get attention.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Girlfriends &amp; boyfriends</td>
<td>Any information relating to girlfriends and boyfriends</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Inappropriate behaviours</td>
<td>Related to inappropriate actions but acting out in a childish way</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sexuality</td>
<td>Use of sexuality, sexual posturing,</td>
</tr>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>------------------------</td>
<td>-----------------------------------------------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>flirting, etc</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Social immaturity</strong></td>
<td>Using social strategies which are underdeveloped and, therefore, inefficient.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Telling tales</strong></td>
<td>Telling the teacher about a problem with a peer instead of dealing with the situation themselves. Demonstrates social immaturity</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Appendix 13: CD containing data

(see CD inside back cover)
The field notes from these break-time gatherings can be found in the classroom observation notes for the corresponding day. Out of necessity I wrote the notes during whichever lesson I happened to be observing in the period following break.

Source: Project Notes/Personal Reflections on the Project

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Source: Project Notes/Key Participants/Personal Reflections on Nathan

*Name given to those receiving special educational services.*

Source: Observations/May 16 08 3.1

Source: Observations/May 23 08 3.1

Source: Observations/Apr 17 08 1.1
A children's swap card game
Dirty woman with loose morals.
I only did a couple of Sports observations, mainly because of timetabling, but I feel that the relationship between learning disabilities and ability to participate in sports lessons could be an interesting one, which needs to be addressed by someone more knowledgeable about physical education. I have paraphrased this because this segment was particularly complicated and confusing but I'm sure you will come to the same understanding if you peruse Interviews/Helen Interview 1.