Accessibility and autonomy preconditions to 'our' inclusion: a grounded theory study of the experiences of secondary students with vision impairment

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In this paper, I report core findings of a small-scale qualitative study that I conducted with a group of young people with vision impairment who attended an inclusive secondary school in the Australian state of Queensland. My objective was to capture their voiced experiences of their schooling through face-to-face interviews and to develop a substantive theory that was grounded in the collected data. Relevant to the study was my status as an insider researcher, which impacted both data collection and analysis. Here, I develop the methodological process that I followed and present core findings of the study. These findings shed light on the practices within schools that are designed to promote inclusion yet perpetuate exclusion for students with impaired vision.

Introduction

> *'You're in mainstream with a chaperone. It's like going to a party with your parents, or something.'*
> (17-year-old 'included' student with vision impairment,
> cited in Whitburn, in press).

This comment was articulated by a young person with vision impairment (VI). He was referring here to his experiences of inclusion in a public 'inclusive' secondary school in the Australian state of Queensland. His observation – dripping in benign resignation – tersely describes his reality of searching for equality in a school in which he felt stigmatised. Ostensibly, this appeared to be the case because the culture of the school did not cater to diverse learners appropriately. As a case in point, this participant held that the constant support mechanisms that were in place to facilitate his inclusion in lessons inhibited his autonomy. He reported that he had also endured a struggle for social inclusion in the school.

This was one response I received to a question I put to five young people who each had VI to learn about how they experienced inclusion in their school. I was motivated to form a theory grounded in qualitative data (Charmaz, 2006; 2011; Clarke, 2005; Glaser and Strauss, 1967; Strauss and Corbin, 1990) on lived experiences of inclusive schooling.

I – the researcher – am an insider. Like the participants of this study, I have impaired vision and had studied in a comparable setting in the 1990s. Their observations of their inclusion resonated tremendously with me. The discomfort that they experienced in relation to class pedagogy, support, human and physical resources, social interaction with peers in a school culture in which a majority of students did not have a disability, and a variety of other issues impacted not only their own, but also my experiences of schooling, despite our age differences. Throughout the fieldwork, I dared not express my accord with the young people, yet it would be imprudent of me not to recognise that my own experiences allowed me a unique insight into their circumstances and impacted on my role as the researcher.

In this paper, I develop both my position as a researcher with insider status and my justification for seeking to learn about inclusive schooling from current students. Together, these elements formed the design of this project. I also present core elements of the conceptual model that was derived from this study and demonstrate how the young people's accounts were the building blocks of its development. This explanation is by no means exhaustive; a journal paper is hardly the forum in which a complete discussion of the formation of each and every significant theoretical concept can be staged. Rather, in this paper, I present a snapshot of themes that were particularly relevant to both the design and results of this research.

Current educational arrangements for young people with VI in Queensland

Students with VI are generally educated in inclusive settings in Australia (Foreman, 2011). In the north eastern state of Queensland, inclusive schooling for young people with VI commonly follows the special education knowledge and

tradition. As such, considerable emphasis is placed on personal support. Children with VI are eligible to enrol in public schools, where they generally receive support from trained personnel who work in special education programs (SEPs) (Education Queensland, 2007b). Under these external support programs (Deppeler, Loreman and Sharma, 2005), students with VI are regularly pulled out of lessons to receive specialist instruction from the expanded core curriculum from which they learn VI-specific skills such as reading and writing braille, and using assistive technology (Hatlen, 1996). Students with VI may otherwise attend different types of settings, such as independent schools, where they receive individualised educational support on a less permanent basis. Regular visits from advisory teachers are common under these arrangements (Education Queensland, 2007a).

Although young people with VI typically study in inclusive schools throughout the Western world (Foreman, 2011; Tuttle and Tuttle, 2004), their inclusion is troubled because of the existence of impairment. Tuttle and Tuttle (2004) forcefully argue that for children and young people with VI specifically, 'physical inclusion *does not necessarily* result in social integration' (p. 11, my emphasis), a charge that is applicable to the education of many diverse student groups. The Australian Blindness Forum (ABF, 2008) meanwhile conveys that in the domestic context, specialist intervention in education for students with VI is at times inequitable, lacking in quality, reach and effect. As a consequence, they claim that many VI students leave compulsory schooling without the requisite skills that would enable them to gain further education qualifications, employment and/or independent living.

Significance of the study
The contention highlighted by the ABF (2008) that I refer to earlier suggests that inclusive programs as they are currently manifested are inadequate to address the needs of young people with VI. Although Brown (2009) finds that numerous studies have been undertaken that concentrate on educational provisions for VI students, particularly in inclusive settings, they are mostly entrenched in the professional discourse. They appear to be preoccupied with how teachers implement inclusive practices rather than how students experience them. It seems incongruous that despite a shift towards social justice in qualitative research (Lincoln, Lynham and Guba, 2011), few studies appear to have been undertaken that explicitly seek to know how young people with VI who attend inclusive settings experience and subsequently produce meaning from schooling as it currently operates. It is after all the experiences of those with disabilities and their advocates that count (Allan, 2010; Barnes, 2010; Slee, 2011).

Emphasising 'search' in inclusive education research, Slee (2011) makes the proposition that the role of inquiry in the field is to be chiefly explorative. He suggests that inquiry in the field should be conducted with the objective of understanding the complexities of exclusion. Further, Moss (2012) advances that divergent research results are produced when researchers engage participants in the collection of data.

I undertook this small-scale study chiefly to learn how young people with VI experience inclusive schooling. This research holds much significance to me, a person who is well acquainted with so-called inclusion that is purported both within schools and outside them. I find that dividing practices that have excluded me from many aspects of education, employment and family interaction are seemingly forever present, as I discuss elsewhere (Whitburn, 2013, under review). Above all, I undertook this study to learn how secondary students with VI experience and make meaning of their schooling in the present day.

VI is a low-incidence disability. ABF (2008) estimated that there are approximately 3000 school-aged children with VI who attend schools in Australia and who receive additional support to do so. Thus, following Slee's (2011) recommendation for qualitative exploration in inclusive education research and after Ball (2006), my objective is to work within a small ethnographic research design aimed at drawing rich analytical devices from a single critical case. Ball contends that such a framework allows researchers to exhibit 'creativity, insight and the ability to "think otherwise"' (p. 5) in their construction of findings. I elucidate my approach in more detail later.

Methodology
I employed a qualitative, exploratory framework (Slee, 2011) to explore the voiced experiences of participants about their schooling. Here, I detail the ethnomethodological grounded theory design of the research, my reliance on student voice and participant involvement, and the research setting. I then discuss data collection instruments. Finally, I present the analysis of data, where I describe the formation of theoretical codes and one of the emergent conceptual categories that contributed to the development of the theory.

Theoretical framework
The theoretical framework of grounded theory (Charmaz, 2006; 2011; Clarke, 2005; Strauss and Corbin, 1990) informs this study. Engendered by the sociologists Glaser and Strauss (1967), grounded theory is rooted in the symbolic interaction tradition. At the time of its creation, the qualitative methodology was 'cutting edge' (Charmaz, 2006, p. 5) because it challenged positivist quantitative paradigms that dominated intellectual discourse as it does now. The role of the grounded theory framework is to facilitate the systematic development of a formal qualitative theory through an inductive approach to data collection and analysis. It enabled me to ask wide and varied 'grand tour' questions to participants about their experiences of living with VI both in and out of school related to their inclusion. The output generated from the present study, which I present later in this paper, represents the relationships between factors that I identified in the young people's accounts of their experiences.

Following Charmaz (2006; 2011) and Clarke (2005), I took an interpretist, constructivist approach to theory generation. This contrasts somewhat from Glaser and Strauss's (1967) original conception of the methodology. As Charmaz (2006, pp. 126–127) articulates, an interpretist theory 'assumes emergent, multiple realities; indeterminacy; facts and values as inextricably linked; truth as provisional; and social life as processual'. An interpretist frame acknowledges subjectivity of the researcher in conceiving theory and is aimed at exploring researched phenomena from a social justice perspective (Charmaz, 2011). Constructivist grounded theorists therefore co-construct theory with participants from a position within the studied phenomenon. These aspects thus parallel the framework with the transformative paradigm of inquiry in disability studies, which is principally aimed at addressing power and privilege that sustain oppression of diverse groups of people (Mertens, Sullivan and Stace, 2011).

Somewhat at odds with an interpretist grounded theory framework is Strauss and Corbin's (1990) approach, which has been criticised because it leans heavily towards postpositivism (Charmaz, 2006; 2011). Charmaz (2011) argues that Strauss and Corbin's prescription of grounded theory is concerned more with application of the framework than emergence of theory. They offer a prescribed series of steps for data analysis, that is, open, axial and selective coding. Nevertheless, unlike objectivist grounded theory – as Glaser and Strauss (1967) first conceived it – Strauss and Corbin's version acknowledges the importance of the concepts of fluidity, evolution, participant voice and change (Charmaz, 2006; 2011), qualifying its applicability to the current study. I discuss the coding paradigm and its application to this study in more detail later.

Student voice
One of my principal objectives of this study was to listen to the voices of participants. I wanted to learn about their experiences of inclusive schooling from their unique vantage points. Authors call for educational research that takes into account the voices of young people with disabilities (Moriña Díez, 2010), particularly in educational contexts (Ainscow, 2005; 2012; Moss, 2012). It is held that through listening to students' voices, research is able to highlight their perspectives and enable them to be a part of solutions (Armstrong, 2005; Curtin and Clarke, 2005; Messiou, 2012; Slee, 1996; 2011). Moreover, Slee (2011) argues that listening to young people with disabilities about their needs and aspirations for schooling empowers them, as well as research itself to shift the focus of educational inclusion onto social justice.

I agree with Moss (2012), who emphasises that despite forward-looking policy and practices that aim to include marginalised others, the voiced experiences of students (and other stakeholders in education) must be heard to better interpret exclusion, both inside and outside schools. There, Moss claims that exists 'another story, a story where the systematic recognition of the experience of participants . . . are needed' (p. 2). Moss asserts that in effect, the term

'student voice' is insufficient to describe its powerful place in inclusive education research. I expected that the results of this investigation would locate inclusive practices (good, bad and/or indifferent) and offer solutions as the young people identified them. I undertook this study not as a fact finding mission to learn what was wrong with the school, rather, following Booth and Ainscow (2011), my aim was to discover the functions of current-day inclusive education and to reveal barriers to inclusion.

Participants
Four boys and one girl across year levels 8–12 and aged 13–17 years took part in the study after their parents gave written consent to their participation. Assent was also sought from participants themselves before their involvement. Although all participants were legally blind, each had divergent strains of impairment ranging from total blindness to some functional but low vision. The impairment of each had also developed at different times; one had undergone a considerable loss of functional vision after commencing secondary school. Each student had enrolled in the school from the beginning of year 8 and had studied there for at least a full term before commencing participation in this research. Finally, each had attended an inclusive primary school.

Because of the small number of participants, individuals could easily be identified by attributing views to a particular person by sex, age and level of impaired vision. Using pseudonyms would not alleviate the concern. Therefore, the comments that I include in this paper are anonymised to protect the young people's identities.

Research setting
The participants attended one secondary school in Queensland, on whose grounds operated a SEP. The participants shared access to the special education unit (SEU) with many other students who had a variety of disabilities, in which a specialist teacher of students with VI (TVI) was permanently based.

Insider status
Studies carried out with a transformative agenda carry an epistemological assumption that researchers are grounded within the cultures that they investigate (Mertens et al., 2011). This does not mean that theory building is entirely subjective on the part of researchers. Rather, Mertens et al. (2011) contend that researchers are conscious of the limitations associated with their position, and they hence conduct inquiry in ways that are both credible and beneficial to community members.

More than a decade ago, Slee (1996) considered that research conducted by those who themselves live with disabilities can challenge school cultures that couple special educational traditions with inclusion. I have significantly impaired vision and attended a similarly appointed school in the 1990s as did study the participants. This afforded me the privilege of being a researcher with insider status. I am familiar with the implications of having VI in a school that

is predominantly attended by students without disabilities. In all, this position enabled me to pursue lines of inquiry in both data collection and analysis that others with less familiarity would either overlook altogether or inadvertently disregard their significance to the young people's experiences of inclusion. This enabled a richer theory to emerge from the findings. Further, as I discuss later in this paper, key constructs of the theory were agreed upon by participants before completion of fieldwork, which strengthens the confirmability of the emergent theory as it was grounded in the data of this study.

Instruments
I collected data through semistructured focus group and individual face-to-face interviews with participants that were both iterative and intensive (Charmaz, 2006). Because of scheduling restraints, I commenced field work by conducting two focus group interviews with participants split into two groups. I then conducted a total of 28 individual interviews with participants over the following 10 weeks. Interviews were held in a meeting room in the SEU away from school staff, and they lasted between 20 and 60 minutes depending on time limitations. On the final day of fieldwork, I held a focus group interview to present the theory that had emerged from analyses up to that point and to discuss the construction of conceptual categories with participants. My primary aim here was to involve the young people in the analysis of findings.

Transcription
With permission from the participants, I digitally recorded the audio from each interview. I then transcribed each verbatim.

Interview questions
Although I intended that the introductory interviews would be open-ended, the young people appeared reticent at first to speak of their experiences. As a backup plan, I had prepared the list of questions later, which I found myself having to use. My objective in asking these questions was to canvass the young people's experiences using emotive language.

Initial interview questions.

Q1: Tell me about the most surprising thing you found when you first came to this school.
Q2: Tell me about the easiest/hardest thing at high school.
Q3: Describe when you've felt as if you have achieved well at school.
Q4: Tell me about when you may have felt frustrated at school.
Q5: Describe for me what is the most satisfying/the least satisfying thing at school.

Further questions. For the most part, subsequent interview questions were based on the answers that the young people gave to those listed earlier. This was often the case because as Strauss and Corbin (1990) suggest, concepts emerged from analyses of previous interviews that are of significance

to the phenomena under study. Subsequent questioning in this way either strengthened analytical categories or dispelled their existence altogether. For example, Although the code 'Being bullied physically over VI' began to grow in the first few interviews, I conducted with the young people, further questioning revealed that physical victimisation was not evident at the school, although there were certainly occurrences of intimidation that was directly related to the young people's impaired vision. Thus, this initial code morphed into the category of 'Peer and school culture-generated stigmatisation'. I discuss how this category developed along with key aspects of these conceptual labels in more detail later.

I also often drew the young people's attention to other dimensions of their schooling experiences in interviews, such as the use of assistive technology, friendships, class teachers, school transport and their thoughts on receiving support. This prompted them to speak about other aspects of their education that impacted their experiences, which they had not discussed automatically.

Coding a theory
'Grounded theory coding requires us to stop and ask analytic questions of the data we have gathered' (Charmaz, 2006, p. 42). Following Strauss and Corbin's (1990) grounded theory paradigm, data analysis of this study consisted of three phases: open, axial and selective coding. Using this inductive process, I made connections and generated rich descriptions from the raw data, from which core themes emerged that led to the development of a theory. Here, I explain how codes that comprise the theory emerged from this study before elucidating the core findings with a narrative.

Open coding. According to Strauss and Corbin's (1990) canons of grounded theory, researchers should embark on open coding immediately after collecting initial data of a study and iterate the process throughout and beyond fieldwork. Open codes are like building blocks; they form the basis of data analysis. Open coding primarily consists of applying theoretical labels to each slice of data and comparing them to other slices that have been generated from either successive or the same sources. The second objective of open coding is to repeatedly perform comparative analysis (Glaser and Strauss, 1967) to synthesise categories from data sets.

Following Charmaz (2006), I refrained from imposing my own sensitivity to the issues discussed in interviews at this stage of analysis. I instead coded the data line by line to synthesise theoretical significance from the young people's descriptions of their experiences. Coding line by line, as Charmaz (2006) affirms, enabled me to go beyond simple description and to identify theoretical concepts in the data. It was not until later that my own perspective played a part in producing conceptual categories from the data.

A variety of theoretical labels emerged through open coding the initial round of interview data, as shown in column 1 of

Table 1. Further conceptual drivers that were relevant to these initial codes emerged from analysis of the data that I collected in subsequent fieldwork, as shown in column 2 of Table 1. It was these that I compared against the initial codes that led to the formation of larger conceptual categories (Glaser and Strauss, 1967). Expanding on the building block metaphor I use earlier, researchers can move onto the other types of coding to link all of their analyses together and form the theory once a sufficient number of open codes have been produced.

Axial coding. Axial coding is the analytical phase that sets Strauss and Corbin's (1990) coding paradigm apart from the approaches of Charmaz (2006) and Glaser and Strauss (1967). If open codes form the building blocks of a theory, axial coding is a systematic method of constructing the cornerstones upon which it rests. Strauss and Corbin provide an axial coding paradigm, which guides researchers through the identification of a particular occurrence that emerges from open coding, and examining its causes, contexts and intervening conditions, strategies (both actions and interactions), and finally its consequences or outcomes. Thus, through axial coding, I was able to construct relationships between thematic categories that eventually formed the theory.

Allow me to expand on the discussion I started earlier on the analytical concept that grew from 'being physically bullied over VI' into 'peer and school culture-generated stigmatisation'. Through axial coding, this became a conceptual category that has significance to the overall theory. Further interviews revealed that although physical bullying may have existed in the past for some participants, it was not an issue in the present day.

In its place however, as shown in Figure 1, occurred a range of themes that contributed to the young people's sense that they were different within the school community by virtue of their VIs. A number of other emergent codes broadened this category. The dictatorial actions of paraprofessionals, specialist educators and teaching staff, and a seemingly constant inability to interact within the school on the same level as sighted peers contextualised their anxiety. Stigmatising comments made by sighted peers (both friends and other acquaintances) intervened into their interpretations of accepted norms within the school. On the whole, this led the young people to believe that although students with VI generally attend inclusive schools as they did, they were not a part of the 'normal' cultural group in the research setting.

To gain traction within the school community, the young people sought autonomy, which itself came about through increased independent access to the academic and social elements of their schooling. As an outcome of having increased access and autonomy within the school, the young people felt genuinely included. Other relevant explicating factors that were derived through axial coding are grouped around the core categories, as shown in Figure 2. I discuss them in turn later in this paper.

Selective coding. Selective coding is the concluding step of Strauss and Corbin's (1990) data analysis paradigm. At this stage of analysis, the researcher draws together the narrative that best represents the phenomena under study by sorting the categories that have emerged through axial coding into a meaningful order. Selective coding is an active process – it calls on researchers to interpret data to produce meaning rather than to passively read it to locate meaning (Charmaz, 2006). It is here that a researcher's intuitions and familiarity with the studied phenomena can enter the data analysis field.

I conducted axial coding on many slices of the data, one of which I detailed earlier. I then drew the participants together in a focus group interview to discuss findings and to produce meaning from the formulated categories. Together, we forged a comprehensive understanding of the collected data. From this group analysis, I was led to apprehend that autonomy and seamless access were central to the young people's inclusion, and the culture of the school also played a fundamental role. Thus, following Strauss and Corbin (1990), I integrated the axial codes into the theory, grouping them around the conceptual categories of autonomy, seamlessness of access and school culture. This enabled me to develop a formal theory that explicated how the actions of stakeholders within the school – including the young people themselves – impacted both positively and negatively on these specific aspects of their inclusion and how in turn access and autonomy were keys to their schooling. I expand on this later.

Presentation of the theory
Here, I present the core features of the emergent theory. As shown in Figure 2, two elements emerged that were central to the young people's inclusion relating to student agency: having seamless access to the academic and social dimensions of the school, and being able to exercise autonomously; both of which were within an inclusive school culture. Stakeholders in the school community including class teachers, the TVI, paraprofessionals, other peers and the participants themselves both facilitated and inhibited their inclusion through day-to-day actions that impacted these core requirements. I expand these issues further, by examining facilitators and inhibitors of the students' aspirations for agency (the core categories of the theory). But first, allow me to define what I mean by autonomy and seamless access.

The significance of autonomy
On the whole, the young people who participated in this study valued autonomy; they reported throughout fieldwork that when they were able to act autonomously, they felt more empowered and in turn, more included in the school. Crocker and Knight (2005) define autonomy as a person's ability to exercise choice and to be the causal origin of their own behaviour. Referring specifically to participation in schools, Booth and Ainscow (2011) observe that only when people can assert their autonomy is their membership secure.

Table 1: Open codes from interviews

Initial codes	Building conceptualisations (contributing factors)	Developed categories
Being physically bullied over VI	Stigmatising comments made by peers over VI; other students don't care; having limited sight; name calling; pinning it back to my eyesight; picking on others; others being on edge; thinking we are different	Peer and school culture-generated stigmatisation
Performing class tasks and research	Independent versus supported class tasks and research; using assistive technology; importance of subjects; support to perform tasks; getting work transcribed; couldn't do without that support; having someone read the screen	Autonomy and access
'Could be better' at school	Frustrations over actions of teachers, support personnel and peers; I can't see it; it gets to me because they think I can; I usually need a teacher aide; I just want to be normal; I can never drive; if I lived closer to the school it wouldn't be such a hassle; hate catching the taxi; negative attitudes of others; you can't change other students	Entrenched culture of deficit and support
Deriving achievement (academic and sport)	Importance of achieving well (both personally and in eyes of others); having achievements recognised; forming teams for competitions; proving I can; gaining more independence; making more friends; being competitive; they can see that I can do what they can do; finding school culture limiting, finding more fulfilment in activity outside of school	Personal ability and opportunity to exercise agency
Gaining access to school work	Accessible resources and verbal teaching; reading as they write on the board; uses a three-dimensional model so I can actually feel it; describing graphics in detail; giving me material on time; being available to meet outside of class time; allowing us to work independently; doing things on the spur of the moment; not adapting the way they teach	Teacher pedagogy (underservicing and appropriately adapted)
Getting around	Travelling to and around school (supported and autonomously); having to catch a taxi; people think I'm stupid because of the taxi; wishing I could take the bus; cannot read destination boards; others think I'm an idiot; have trouble walking around school grounds; always meeting my friends at the same place every day helps; always using the same areas because they're accessible to me; I can find it	Physical access
Receiving support in classes	Feelings about receiving support in classes (positive and negative); preparing and disseminating resources; transcribing braille; in-class support (discrete); bringing VI-specific equipment to lessons (laptops with speech/magnification, magnifiers; textbooks in electronic format); being assigned aides automatically; embarrassing having to work with teacher aides all the time; I think I feel more isolated; I'm slacking off because the teacher aide is doing everything; not unlike having another control authority figure only for me; teacher aides overstep the boundary and take on an authority role; another confrontation I don't like having; a younger person would be better; class teachers need to be preparing the classes properly	Paraprofessional support ('lite' and heavy)
Activities with friends (lunch times)	Making friends and spending time with them; easy to make friends; having difficulties socially; sighted friends help you to fit in; playing sports at lunch time; would prefer to play just with my friends; sitting and talking; helping me to buy lunch; socialising outside of school	Facilitative Friendships
Using technology at school	Feelings about using technology (positive and negative); have to sit in the corner away from my friends near the power outlet; the only one in lessons using a computer; all students soon to use laptops in lessons; most seniors using laptops; at least I can read it with the computer	VI students comparing self against 'normalcy'
Hobbies outside school	Importance of out of school achievements; winning at sport; winning at chess; it feels good to be recognised; my friends think it's normal; realising that school is very structured; proving myself as normal; other students still think you're different	VI students coping (creating cloak of competence)

VI, vision impairment.

Figure 1: Axial code representing peer and school culture-generated stigmatisation
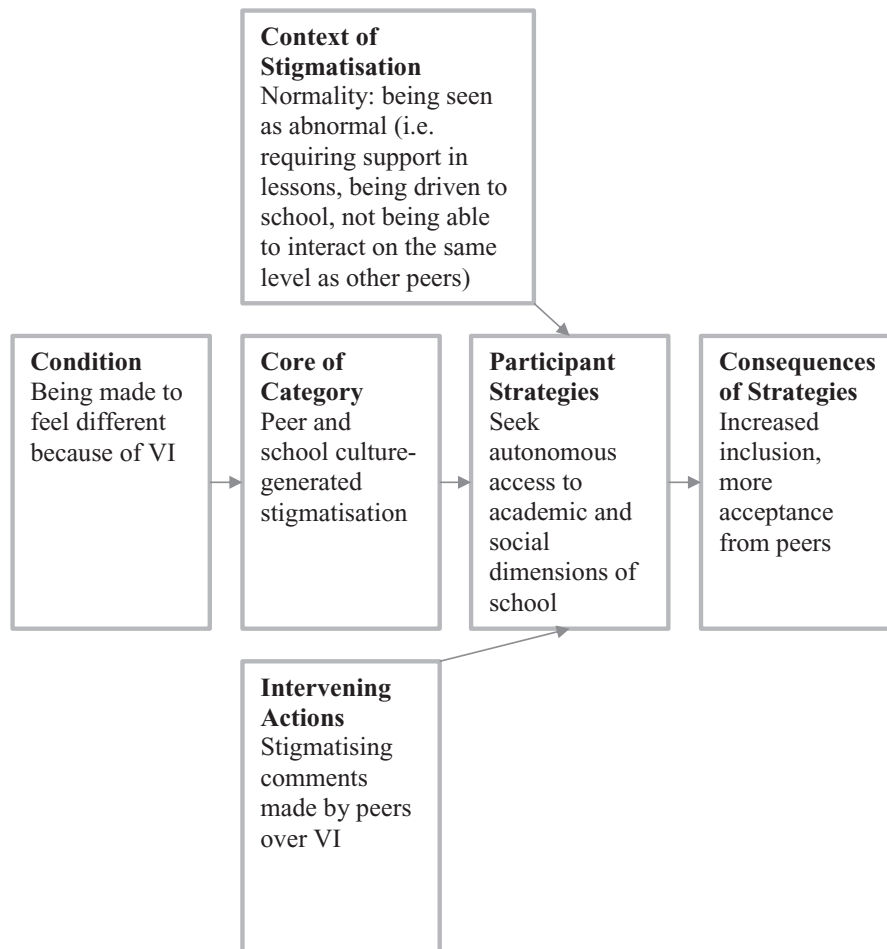
In support of these definitions, the young people believed that their inclusion in the school was effective when they could both make individual choices about their studies and complete academic tasks with minimal intervention from support staff. One participant explained, for him, having the skills to be independent was crucial 'So that you're prepared for real life. 'Cause there's no one out there to help you in the world [after graduation from school]'.

However, the young people related that they had little freedom to exercise choice because teaching and support staff habitually misjudged their capabilities. The participants each had the impression that they could attend and actively participate in classes without support personnel whose presence, they reported, tended to suppress both their social and academic inclusion. Class educators rarely facilitated their access to study material, perpetuating their need for support.
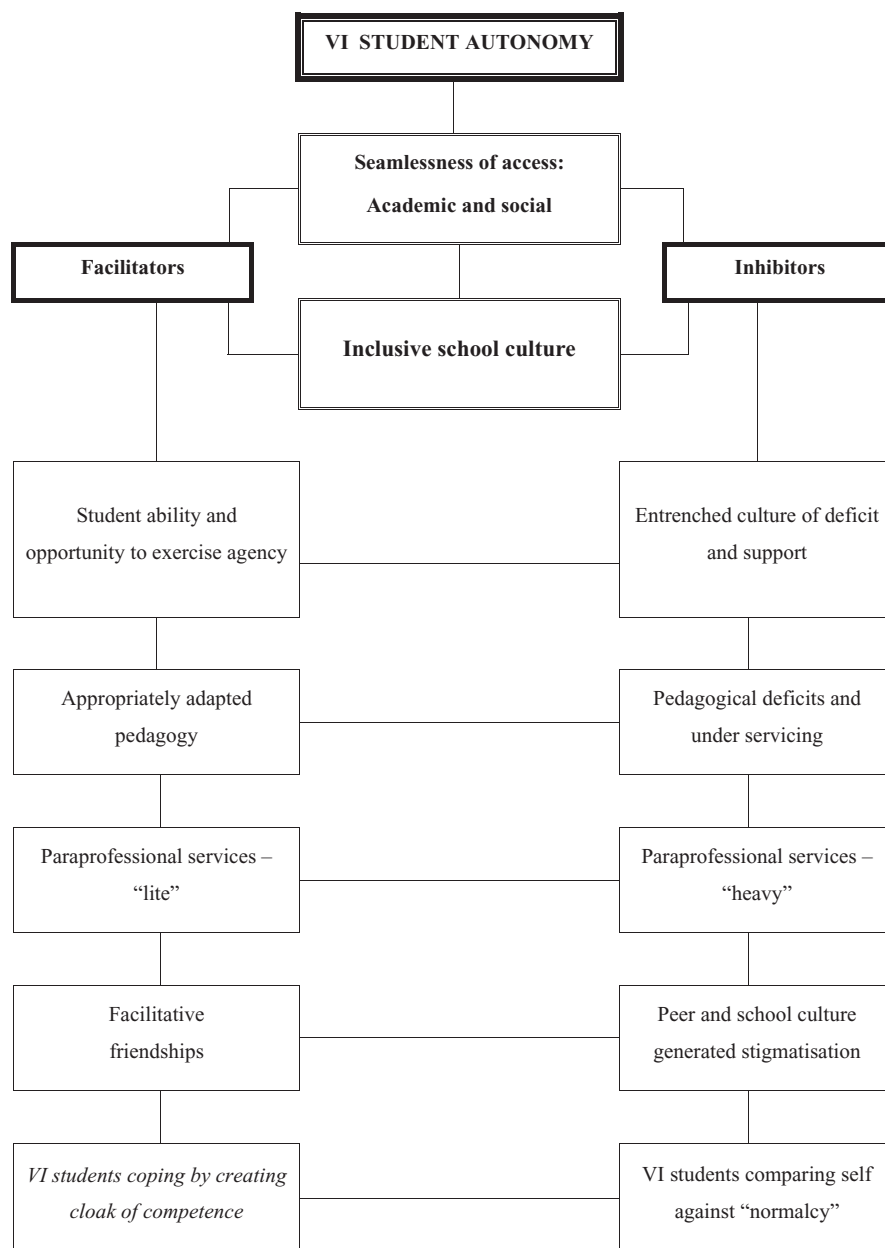
Seamlessness of access
The young people reported that having access to the academic and social dimensions of their schooling was central to their inclusion. This meant having appropriate access to learning resources, pedagogy and friends. My attention in

this paper now turns to the facilitators and inhibitors of the young people's access in the terms that they described them.

Facilitated academic access. Among participants, physical access to the school was varied. Four of the five participants commuted up to 1 hour each way to the school by taxi, which was provided through the School Transport Assistance Program for Students with Disabilities (Education Queensland, 2008). The other participant was able to independently catch the local bus, as he lived within the catchment area.

Each participant attended regular classes for some (if not all) scheduled lessons and were able to study any subject of their choosing from the core curriculum regardless of the complexities that they might encounter. Because of this provision, the young people were enrolled in subjects including physical education, cooking, home economics, physics, chemistry and complex mathematics. Paraprofessionals traditionally provided the students 'lite' support by preparing and distributing resources to them for use in their lessons. Most of the young people reported that support staff often also accompanied them to lessons to support them directly.

Figure 2: Conceptual model

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                    ┌─────────────────────────┐
                    │   VI  STUDENT AUTONOMY   │
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                    ┌─────────────────────────┐
                    │  Seamlessness of access: │
                    │   Academic and social    │
                    └─────────────────────────┘
      ┌──────────────┐          │          ┌──────────────┐
      │ Facilitators │──────────┼──────────│  Inhibitors  │
      └──────────────┘          │          └──────────────┘
                    ┌─────────────────────────┐
                    │ Inclusive school culture │
                    └─────────────────────────┘

   ┌────────────────────┐              ┌────────────────────┐
   │ Student ability and │             │ Entrenched culture  │
   │ opportunity to      │─────────────│ of deficit          │
   │ exercise agency     │             │ and support         │
   └────────────────────┘              └────────────────────┘

   ┌────────────────────┐              ┌────────────────────┐
   │ Appropriately       │             │ Pedagogical deficits│
   │ adapted pedagogy    │─────────────│ and under servicing │
   └────────────────────┘              └────────────────────┘

   ┌────────────────────┐              ┌────────────────────┐
   │ Paraprofessional    │             │ Paraprofessional    │
   │ services – "lite"   │─────────────│ services – "heavy"  │
   └────────────────────┘              └────────────────────┘

   ┌────────────────────┐              ┌────────────────────┐
   │ Facilitative        │             │ Peer and school     │
   │ friendships         │─────────────│ culture generated   │
   │                     │             │ stigmatisation      │
   └────────────────────┘              └────────────────────┘

   ┌────────────────────┐              ┌────────────────────┐
   │ VI students coping  │             │ VI students         │
   │ by creating cloak   │─────────────│ comparing self      │
   │ of competence       │             │ against "normalcy"  │
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The young people explained that being able to select subjects freely and to study them in regular classrooms alongside sighted peers exemplified academic inclusion in the school. One noted, 'It means I'm no different when it comes to learning than other students'. Another participant held that studying in mainstream lessons put him on a level playing field with other students, which would enable him to compete fairly for a future university position and scholarship. 'It's going to give me the bump up.'

The young people also reported that being able to attend regular lessons with sighted students added significantly to their social inclusion in the school. One noted that he derived 'pleasure' from being 'able to talk to friends in classes', in stark contrast with when he withdrew from lessons to attend specialist instruction in the SEU. Another participant added that attending lessons with peers was important because he could 'work with them as well; not just . . . by myself, or out of mainstream'. For Booth and Ainscow (2011), these findings imply full participation of the young people in the school, as they indicate that the young people were included both academically and socially.

Class teachers played a crucial role in fulfilling the young people's access needs to learning. The participants reported that some class teachers facilitated their access to lessons by using an array of inclusive practices including: (1) appropriate communication modes (e.g., verbal class instructions and modelling), (2) providing intuitive descriptions and/or

using three-dimensional models to represent diagrammatic material, (3) making accessible resources available to them in a timely manner, and (4) being approachable outside of classes for individual consultations. The young people each reported that class teachers who utilised a combination of these strategies enabled them to autonomously gain parity with sighted peers. Referring to verbal instruction giving in particular, one participant commented, 'I think it's a really good teaching strategy'.

Facilitative friendships. Social interaction with sighted peers at school was important to each of the young people. However, they gave contrasting accounts of establishing friendships, which appeared to be connected to the amount of vision they had. Participants with some functional vision related that class teachers had facilitated them to make friends in lessons. One noted, 'I suppose it was pretty easy [to make friends], because pretty much on the first day of school, you get paired up with someone'. This activity, he related, was the standard routine for all students in the school on their first day.

In contrast, other participants who had less functional sight and typically received paraprofessional support in lessons observed that teachers did not introduce them to peers through class activities. Instead, these participants failed to gain acceptance from others. One young person with severely impaired vision spoke of the considerable discomfort he had experienced at school because of apparent social isolation until late in his student career. He explained that he had faced considerable difficulty interacting with others on account of his impairment because of uneven social skills compared with sighted students. He also claimed that he had limited orientation of his physical surroundings, which impacted negatively on his social skills.

> *'I guess it's the vision . . . 'cause it's up to them [other students]. Well, no it's not up to them if they don't want a friend. But for someone who has no friends, because I came to this school with no friends, to make a new friend is hard 'cause you have to engage them. And I think it's hard to engage them when you can't find them.'*

Despite providing disparate accounts of forming friendships at school, each of the young people reported that they were friends with sighted students at the time that I conducted this research regardless of the severity of their impairments. One participant observed that his friends were 'not one of us', referring to our shared understanding (both his and mine) of being individuals with VI in a population dominated by sighted people. This too was important to each of the young people, as they endeavoured to detach themselves from the SEP whenever possible in an endless pursuit for normalcy. Exemplary of this, they explained that the close bonds they had with these students made them feel 'normal'.

Aside from the connection that sighted friends appeared to provide the young people to normalcy, participants recognised inherent qualities in their friends that set them apart from other students at the school. They reported that their friends were very helpful both inside and outside of school. As one affirmed, 'They help me more than they would if I could see I guess'. Another participant explained that his friends were able to 'get past' his impairment, which for him, embodied their distinction from others. He added, 'maybe they can comprehend that the blindness isn't so much as a definition of the person but rather something that they have'. Other characteristics of the young people's friends were less correlated with their impairments, although each considered them traits that characterised quality friendships. These included: openness, respect, humour, an ability to share common interests, and comparable intelligence.

Educational and support staff inhibiting academic access
The young people reported that some teachers at the school did not facilitate their inclusion. For example, two participants reported that they occasionally went to classes to find that their teachers had left handwritten notes on classroom doors indicating room or schedule changes. When this occurred, not only did they lose valuable lesson time while trying to find their classes but they also had their independence compromised. They were forced to seek assistance to decipher written messages and to orientate to alternative locations. Some participants also complained that teachers often gave them written feedback on their work, which they were unable to read. As one noted, 'Usually they write on the printed stuff I give them. So then I do need someone to read [it to me]'. Paraprofessionals usually fulfilled these roles.

Inside the classroom, some teachers also misunderstood the necessity for inclusive pedagogy. One participant noted, in contrast with those educators who effectively adapted their teaching practices to increase his inclusion in lessons, 'Other teachers, maybe they just don't compensate for me being in their class, they don't do anything'. Consequently, participants were often left unable to take part in lessons independently. To this end, another participant expressed his disappointment with a teacher. He described her actions thus:

> *'She thinks that I can see well enough to see the stuff on the board. And she tries to write bigger, or enlarge the print on the page, but I still can't see it, and it just gets to me, because she's doing it in front of the class for me, but I still can't see it.'*

The awkwardness that this participant experienced increased through the teacher's apparent inability to implement appropriate pedagogy that would increase his academic access. Moreover, she allegedly fumbled unsuccessfully for appropriate adaptations in a public way in front of sighted students, thus compromising the participant's tenuous link to normalcy in the social environment of the school.

When the young people experienced complications in lessons such as that cited earlier, they generally approached

the TVI for assistance. Typically, as the young people reported, the immediate response was to assign paraprofessionals to them to provide personal support. As all teachers seemed to overlook the young people's requirements for adjusted pedagogy from time to time, paraprofessionals became a permanent fixture in lessons. One participant explained:

> *'I probably do need a teacher aide [in most classes], because any notes written on the board, like [for example] . . . the teacher might write up the answer, or whatever, and do something on [the] spur of the moment, and I'm not getting that.'*

However, participants reported that although paraprofessionals facilitated them to gain access to their work, many of them were heavy-handed in their approach to support (Whitburn, 2013, in press).

Peer and school culture-generated stigmatisation
The young people reported that they had constrained access to the social environment of the school because other students appeared to judge them negatively on account of their impaired vision. One participant related, 'I guess, I feel that they don't think that I'm one of them'. The participants observed that young males were the demographic more likely to discriminate against them. One noted, 'probably the boys in year 8 are more judgmental. They judge someone by their cover, not the pages'. Others considered that immaturity pervaded all grade levels at the school and that this was causative of the students' behaviour. One contended however that although 'it takes maturity to accept vision impairment', many students had yet to 'grow up'.

The young people were under the impression that the various adjustments made to facilitate their inclusion in the school, including the provision of accessible resources, in-class support from teacher aides and organised transport, triggered much of the negative attitudes of other students towards them. Under these circumstances, participants seemed to employ tacit social comparison standards to conclude that having VI and requiring specific support were generally objectionable, leading them to undervalue themselves.

School culture
As shown in Figure 2, the young people sensed that the culture of the school was relevant to their experiences. Several participants explained that the school culture was not, on the whole, inclusive. Instead, it appeared that competitiveness was encouraged, and for reasons unexplained, their supposed deficits as special students in need of inexorable support were emphasised. One participant observed, 'they may guess that we're different some way, rather than [just being] the visually impaired. Maybe they consider us to be just different I guess'.

Additionally, when referring to the 'authoritative' power structure of the school, one participant explained: 'I don't like the school situation of being very structured. I think the

people in my class, like the kids in my class, would probably be a lot less antisocial if we weren't in such a structured environment'. This participant reasoned that the impersonal environment was at least in part responsible for his feeling socially outcast from the school community.

Carrington and Elkins (2002) define a school's culture as the beliefs, attitudes and collective understandings of members (e.g., teachers and students) about their specific roles. These cultural concepts, they contend, contribute to how organisations operate and resolve problems. That is to say, each actor within a school environment is agonisingly aware of their position within its hierarchy and is driven to maintain it (Varenne and McDermott, 1999). 'The properties of the cultural pattern are maintained by the activity of the people who are caught within it' (p. 14).

Inclusive schools, argue Booth and Ainscow (2011), must foster values of respect for diversity among all of their constituents. However, in the case of this research, the school culture was not respectful towards diversity. Taking the practices of class teachers as a case in point, these educators regularly underserviced participants by encumbering their access to appropriate pedagogy. Rather than catering to diversity, an entrenched culture of deficit and support appeared to exist at the school. Educational staff appeared unable to provide the young people with access to learning without specialist intervention. Consequently, the young people's autonomy was compromised.

Continuing the earlier thread about culture, each person appeared to accept his or her position within the cultural fabric of the school, that is, the participants appeared to accept that they were the disabled kids, the teachers were the mainstream educators, and the paraprofessionals were the principal support providers that bridged students' access. Tuttle and Tuttle (2004) write that the perceived dependency people with VI tend to have on others can impact negatively on their general self-esteem because they continually receive assistance from others, whether or not they want it. In the present case, as the school engaged 'heavy' support roles of paraprofessionals to make up for the shortcomings of teachers, the students' capacity to act autonomously was frequently inhibited. As a consequence, opportunities for the young people to enact agency and demonstrate their capabilities were haphazard. This also applied to the opportunities afforded them to interact socially with other students.

Coping at school by creating a cloak of competence
In his book, *The Cloak of Competence: Stigma in the Lives of the Mentally Retarded*, the anthropologist Robert Edgerton (1967) provides a detailed account of the lived realities of a group of people who have intellectual disabilities. Despite using abhorrent terminology and describing study participants as inferior beings – as opposed to the normal person without a disability – Edgerton observed that study participants felt compelled to 'deny the implication of their public defamation' (Goldshmidt, 1967, p. vii). They created cloaks of competence for themselves to hide their

impairments from others. This metaphorical protection mechanism provided them temporary security from the risk of being labelled inferior. But like under all sartorial dress, the wearer's tangible features are always evident to others.

Participants of the present study created a cloak of competence (Edgerton, 1967) in an attempt to hide their impairments, capitalise on their abilities and gain social traction within the school. This occurred in response to the stigmatisation they experienced. The young people reported that they were under pressure to prove their capabilities to both staff and peers. One participant commented, 'If I don't prove myself then they would assume that I'm not equal to them. So I have to prove that I'm actually equal or better to get their respect'. Another participant added that having VI meant that 'you've got to set yourself apart to look more as an equal'.

In an attempt to establish their identities as 'normal' students, the young people typically conducted themselves in one of several ways. Some tried to prove themselves by excelling academically or through conducting considerably visual tasks, such as playing cricket, tennis or chess. These participants conducted these activities either in or out of school, although they placed considerable importance on the scholastic community recognising their successes. Participants who had neither extraordinary academic nor competitive abilities generally turned to their social skills to demonstrate competency. They did so by surrounding themselves with supportive friends who were popular in the social hierarchy of the school. Whichever strategy participants used to gain social standing in the school, they each acknowledged that they could never break completely free of the seemingly negative attitudes that others perpetuated towards them. Each reported that some students continued to overlook their achievements and concentrate on their deficits, although teachers evidently did likewise.

Discussion

On a personal level, I undertook this research to explore current-day inclusive education as young people with VI experience it and to learn whether or not it might have improved since the 1990s when I had attended secondary school. Lamentably, I found that in spite of learning about the significance of autonomy and seamless access to the young people's inclusion, schooling had barely changed. Overservicing by paraprofessionals, if anything, appeared to have increased to make up for the perpetuated shortcomings of most teachers' pedagogical practices. Socially, the young people felt ostracised within the school by virtue of their impairments, and thus, they felt compelled to prove their capabilities in an endless competitive pursuit for normalcy. These findings indicate that although it was promoted as an inclusive school, for young people with VI at least, it failed to live up to these expectations.

But, if inclusive education is predicated on the advancement of human rights as originally envisioned by UNESCO (1994) in their formation of the Salamanca Statement, then disability still troubles this development. McDermott and

Duke Raley (2009) argue that democracy – in its present manifestation – fails those with disabilities because mere lip service is paid to justice and equality both inside and outside of schools. They suggest that this comes about because 'their bodies show less what they cannot do and more the marks put upon them by circumstances, by those seemingly not disabled at the time' (p. 433).

At school, the young people's subjectivities were constituted as special – in a way that extended far beyond the sum of their impairments. Youdell (2006) observes that within schools, an entanglement of discourses constitutes students' subjectivities. Over and above having impaired vision, the discursive practices within the school branded them as abnormal or, as Youdell (2006) would have it, impossible students when compared with normal, sighted learners. But through inexorable support, their inclusion, as far as the professionals were concerned at least, was rendered actualised or, at best, more stable. On the flipside of this, however, the participants themselves reported that it also rendered them socially inferior, making them feel as if they had to create a cloak of competence (Edgerton, 1967) to attempt to gain social traction within the school.

The wider implications of these findings point to the school's culture. For indeed as Kugelmass (2006) notes, sociocultural phenomena are central to inclusive schooling. There is, she concludes, no one specific organisational structure or particular practice that promotes inclusion; it is a whole-school commitment to inclusion that is required. Although this study highlighted the actions of stakeholders within the school's culture that were facilitative of the young people's inclusion, there were equal numbers of practices that inhibited it, thus constituting them as impossible students.

Further, it is incongruous that many of the practices that were aimed at increasing the young people's inclusion had the opposite effect, that is, they limited the young people's access as well as their autonomy. The practices that schools engender to increase student inclusion but inadvertently have the opposite effect are important factors that need to be better understood (Slee, 2012). Although this research has added the voices of young people to the inclusion debate, a more thorough exploration of how inclusive school cultures operate is required. This means seeking to learn qualitatively the discursive practices that come together to glue their cultures together, including policy mandates, and the voices of students, teachers and support staff.

Conclusion

Inhibited inclusion in schools, such as that highlighted in the current paper, can lead to further damaging effects for young people with disabilities. As McDermott and Duke Raley (2009) note, exclusion for students with disabilities in schools is perpetuated beyond the institution:

'A popular but risky way to play nature and nurture with children comes in two parts: the first describes what they cannot do at an early age; the second

assumes that the identified limitations predict directly what they cannot do as adults.' (p. 431)

However, the principal findings of this study suggest that by enhancing students' access to learning and social opportunities, as well as by stepping back and giving them greater autonomy, their inclusion can be increased.

Slee (2012) also registers his concern about the fate of people with disabilities both in education and outside of it. He observes that exclusion, on account of disability, 'has come to be seen as natural; it is a part of the order of things' (p. 3). The overbearing dominance of the special education discourse clearly contributes to this occurrence. An open research paradigm, such as that presented here, however, enables those with disabilities in educational systems to elucidate their concerns and offer solutions. In this way, they allow us to get a greater handle on how we might 'dismantle exclusion as it presents itself in education' (Slee, 2012, p. 11). In light of the power of qualitative research to open channels of communication in this way, it is glaringly apparent that we must continue the project of capturing insider perspectives in order to better serve inclusion in education and beyond.

Notes on contributor
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