Experiencing School: An Exploratory, Multimethod Study of the Perceptions of Secondary Teachers, Advocating Parents and Mainstream Students with Learning Difficulties

Thesis submitted by

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STATEMENT OF SOURCES

DECLARATION

I declare that this thesis is my own work and has not been submitted in any form for another degree or diploma at any university or other institution of tertiary education. Information derived from the published or unpublished work of others has been Acknowledged in the text and a list of references is given.

This research was conducted within the guidelines of "The National Health and Medical Council Statement on Human Experimentation and Supplementary Notes". The research received ethical clearance from the James Cook University Experimentation Ethics Review Committee.

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Finally, I would like to thank you, the reader, for taking the time to read this thesis. I hope that some aspects of it will intrigue your mind and touch your heart. If this is achieved, the story is not ending, it is just beginning.

I would like to dedicate this thesis to Sr Pam Thompson RSM who 'walked with me'.

ABSTRACT

Students with learning difficulties are those with, 'short or long term difficulties in literacy, numeracy and learning how to learn'(Education Queensland, 1996, Introduction). They are the largest group of special needs students and consistently fail and underachieve in secondary school. Students with learning difficulties are also disproportionately represented in the juvenile justice and mental health systems, and as the long term unemployed.

Despite these negative outcomes, little research has focused on this group either within Australia or internationally with the majority of research in the field concentrated in the primary school. Little comprehensive research has been undertaken with students with learning difficulties in the secondary school setting. The purpose of this exploratory, multimethod research was to address this gap. It aimed to examine the school experiences of mainstream students with learning difficulties in Queensland secondary schools by documenting the attitudes and understanding of secondary teachers together with the lived experiences of the students themselves and parents who advocated on their behalf.

This research was conducted within the transformative emancipatory paradigm of disability which emphasises advocacy, involvement and improvement of the everyday lives of the marginalised group (Oliver, 1996). Phase One utilised a web-based survey, which collected data from 280 secondary teachers employed in government and nongovernment schools. The sample reflected the proportion of teachers engaged in each sector. The survey instrument was constructed from previously administered surveys and was evaluated by three experts in the field. A five-point Likert scale collected attitudinal data, while a separate question evaluated teacher understanding of the characteristics of students with learning difficulties based on the literature in the field. Data were subjected to Rasch analysis and Rasch scaled values for individual demographic indicators were established. Qualitative data were linked to these same Rasch scaled values for selected demographic groups.

Findings indicated that the majority of teachers sampled had negative attitudes towards students with learning difficulties and no discernable differences were found among demographic groups. Teachers' understanding was also uniformly low across the sample with the exception of those with masters' degrees who exhibited more

extensive knowledge. No correlation was established between teachers' attitudes and teachers' understanding about students with learning difficulties.

Phase Two accumulated qualitative data related to school experiences using semi structured interviews of 17 participants including five teachers selected from the survey, six secondary students with learning difficulties and six advocating parents. Interview schedules were based on findings from Phase One and included questions related to school organisation, collaborative practices and pedagogy. Source material was analysed using NVivo and categorisation. Data were found to support the existing theory associated with students with special educational needs including those with learning difficulties.

Major findings from the triangulation of interview data indicated that teachers failed to recognise mainstream students with learning difficulties and that students experienced inappropriate pedagogy, assessment and curricula. Informants agreed that teachers receive inadequate preservice training and professional development while existing policies exclude most mainstream students with learning difficulties from receiving assistance. Generally, teachers' aides, who assist with some students, lack adequate knowledge and skills. Lack of commitment to collaboration and community characterised teachers' views. In contrast, parents believed that schools should practise collaboration and community, that teachers should have relevant knowledge and that all teachers have an individual responsibility for student outcomes. Students who participated in the study spanned the whole spectrum from disengaged to engaged with school. All students spoke of teachers who helped them at school and who treated them with respect and as individuals.

Consistent with the research paradigm, recommendations have been made to foreground the concerns of participating parents and students. As a researcher with a family member with learning difficulties, my voice has also been included. Recommendations include the encouragement of teachers, through financial incentives, to undertake higher degrees, the linking of an increased number of mandatory special education subjects for preservice generalist teachers with teacher registration as well as the implementation of more extensive and appropriate professional development for practitioners.

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In accordance with the policy of James Cook University School of Education, this thesis has been presented following the rules of the American Psychological Association (American Psychological Association, 2001), including the stance taken on prefixes.

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CHAPTER ONE

Beginnings

To unknowing eyes they seem dead
In November.

Shaped and bare-
Stark and poised-
They stretch towards Someone known
In their Being.

Someone worthy of yearning for….
Outwards, upwards, anywards.

Each tip is going Somewhere,
Sapped. Full and ready,
Impregnated and holding the Secret…..
Waiting….
(Frangipani Trees: Sr. Pam Thompson RSM)

1.1 Introduction

In 1976, the House of Representatives Select Committee issued a report entitled, "Learning Difficulties in Children and Adults" (Cadman, 1976, p. 28). This report contained submissions and anecdotal evidence from numerous sources within Australia including advocacy groups, educational and medical authorities. The report painted a picture of students who were failing and underachieving at school, struggling to reach their potential, and who did not suffer from any known physical or mental impairment. They were being inadequately served by the education systems and schools within Australia. Thirty years later, very little has changed (Beresford, 1993). The question arises as to why this situation still exists in schools and how do students with learning difficulties and their parents feel about it? This thesis attempts to give answers to these questions.

Researchers have previously studied issues related to students with learning difficulties in the Australian primary school setting with a national study being conducted in 2000 (Louden et al., 2000). However, no research has been undertaken at national or State level into the experiences of these students at the secondary level. This thesis responds to this need and reports an exploratory study of the experiences of mainstream students with learning difficulties and of parents who advocate on behalf of their children within the Queensland secondary setting.

My experiences both as a classroom secondary teacher in a Catholic secondary school and as an advocating parent for a mainstreamed student with learning difficulties, indicated that secondary teacher attitudes and understanding about the characteristics of these students contributed substantially to the academic failure and underachievement of these students. However, I also understood that other factors assisted in creating these outcomes. These included departmental and school policies, school leadership, organisation and ethos, funding and a lack of political will to recognise and to address the problems that confront these students and their parents. Many of my attempts at advocacy with teachers and principals on behalf of my child were unsuccessful and this led me to speculate about the perceptions of other parents in a similar position and especially those without my own knowledge about secondary schools and the pressures that exist within them. This research was born out of a desire to make a difference to the everyday lives of students with learning difficulties and to parents like myself. Congruent with this desire was the need to establish the attitudes of secondary teachers towards these students and to discover what teachers understood about their specific characteristics as well as the factors teachers perceived as affecting their capacity to provide appropriate educational experiences to students with learning difficulties? Finally, what do the students themselves, and their parents, think about school and their teachers and how they have impacted upon their lives?

1.2 Purpose

This study has a number of aims. Its first purpose is to explore the perceptions of Queensland secondary teachers about students with learning difficulties using the constructs of teacher attitude and understanding of their specific characteristics. For this research, students with learning difficulties are defined as those students, "who have short or long term difficulties in literacy, numeracy and learning how to learn" (Education

Queensland, 1996 , Introduction). The second aim is to examine the experiences of mainstream students with learning difficulties and advocating parents, related to the decisions which have been made by teachers, schools and educational authorities. This multimethod study (Morse, 2003) conducted within the emancipatory paradigm of disability (Mertens, 2003; Oliver, 1997), used the results from a survey of teachers and findings from interviews with teachers, students with learning difficulties and advocating parents to compare with the existing literature in the field (Lankshear & Knobel, 2004). The final aim of the study is to consider the findings of the research and to advocate for substantive change to occur in the fields of teacher education, school organisation, administration and policies at all levels.

1.3 Background

Is there a way forward to improve not only the academic outcomes of mainstream students with learning difficulties at secondary school but also to make the experience of school a positive engagement for these students and their parents? This question has received little attention from researchers and policy makers since the release of the Cadman report in 1976 (Cadman, 1976). The Council of Australian Resource Educators (2000) has indicated that most research into learning difficulties has occurred at the primary school level and little attention has been directed towards adolescents with learning difficulties in the secondary setting. A search of a number of databases including the Australian Education Index (AEI), Educational Resources Information Center (ERIC), Proquest and InfoTrac revealed that both nationally and internationally only about 50 studies specifically targeted secondary school students with learning difficulties. Of these, the majority explored inclusion and inclusive practices where students with special educational needs are included in regular classrooms. Very few studies specifically considered students with learning difficulties even though this group makes up the majority of special needs students.

The question becomes more vexing as there is no national definition of what constitutes a learning difficulty and the term itself is controversial. The term 'learning difficulties' has traditionally been used in Queensland, however, the term 'learning disabilities' is also used here, in some other Australian States and internationally. This inconsistent use of terms has produced controversy and confusion. The lack of a

nationally accepted definition of learning disability has also created significant differences between systems and educational sectors (Rivalland, 2002)

Despite the inconsistencies in definition, the Organisation for European Cooperation and Development (1999) suggested that over 10 percent of secondary school populations have learning difficulties and a recent Australian study indicated that this percentage might be considerably higher (Westwood & Graham, 2000). A number of separate studies showed that students with learning difficulties were disproportionately represented as juvenile delinquents (National Council of Disability, 2003), the long term unemployed (Rojewski, 1999) and in mental health institutions (Al-Yaman, Bryant, & Sargeant, 2002). Low literacy and numeracy levels, school alienation and significant school drop out rates were cited as the common factors for these outcomes (Beresford, 1993; Knight, 1985; Murray, 2003).

In this research project, adolescents with learning difficulties and those with learning disabilities are considered as part of the same group. Students with learning disabilities have been defined by Education Queensland as "a small group of students with learning difficulties who because of the neurological basis of their difficulties, have persistent, long term problems and high support needs in one or more areas of literacy, numeracy and learning how to learn" (Education Queensland, 1996, Introduction). All of these students with learning difficulties and learning disabilities are generally taught by the regular classroom teacher together with the rest of the class. Special Educational Needs (SEN) refers to students with any disability, including those with a learning difficulty. Some SEN students may have multiple disabilities, including a learning disability, however, there are students with special educational needs who do not have learning difficulties. It is only those students with learning difficulties, including the small group of students with learning disabilities, who are taught in general classes, who are the subject of this research.

1.4 Overview of Research Questions

There are separate research questions for Phase One and Phase Two of this project. They are presented here in their entirety and again, for the reader's convenience, in the chapter that details methodology and analysis as well as the results for each phase.

Phase One research questions address issues related to secondary teachers and are as follows:

1. How do demographic indicators relate to teacher attitudes towards students with learning difficulties?
2. How do demographic indicators relate to teachers' understanding of the characteristics of students with learning difficulties?
3. What is the relationship between teacher attitudes and teacher understanding about students with learning difficulties?
4. What factors do teachers perceive as affecting levels of support given to students with learning difficulties in the secondary school setting?

Phase Two research questions are focused on the perceptions of secondary teachers, advocating parents and mainstream students with learning difficulties. They are listed below:

1. How do teachers perceive the experience of education for students with learning difficulties in the secondary school?
2. How do advocating parents perceive the school experience of their children?
3. How do students with learning difficulties perceive their school experiences?
4. What are the similarities and difference of perception among the groups?

1.5 Definitions of Key terms

Definitions of terms used in this thesis are detailed in the text within context, They are also listed below for easy reference.

Appraisement:

Government schools use "appraisement" for students with learning difficulties in the primary school context only and it is not linked to funding (Education Queensland, 2004).

Ascertainment:

5

Ascertainment is a term used in government schools to determine levels of funding and resource support given to students with special educational needs. Catholic and nongovernment schools also use this term for students with low incidence disabilities (Education Queensland, 2002).

At risk:

In education, this term refers specifically to school failure or potential for school failure (McWhirter, McWhirter, McWhirter, & McWhirter, 1998).

Attitude:

A relatively enduring organisation of beliefs around an object or situation predisposing one to respond in some preferential manner (Rokeach, 1972,p.112).

Capacity:

The ability to promote critical learning and problem solving by all students ` (Darling-Hammond, 1994, p. 4).

Community:

Ties that bind students and teachers together in special ways, to something more significant that themselves, shared values and ideas (Sergiovanni, 1994 , p. xiii).

Coteaching:

Where a special education teacher and regular classroom teacher are both in the class and both responsible for its teaching and administration (Rice & Zigmond, 2000).

Gatekeeping:

The control of the availability and access to information (Denscombe, 2003).

Learning difficulties:

Students who have difficulties in literacy, numeracy and/or learning how to learn (Education Queensland, 1996).

Learning disabilities:

A small group of students with learning difficulties who because of the neurological basis of their difficulties, have persistent, long term problems and high support needs in one or more areas of literacy, numeracy and learning how to learn' (Education Queensland, 1996, Introduction)

Mainstream:

Students taught in general classrooms not in Special Education Units (Organisation for European Co-Operation and Development (OECD), 1999).

Multimethod:

Where the qualitative and quantitative components are relatively complete and used together to form the essential components of one research project (Morse, 2003 , p.191).

Protective factors:

Internal and external forces which modify risk (Fraser, Kirby, & Smokowski, 2004, p. 28).

Resilience:

An ability to recover from or adjust easily to misfortune or change (Werner & Smith, 1982 , p. 36).

Rasch analysis:

A probabilistic measurement model which transforms raw data into abstract, equal-interval scales (Bond & Fox, 2001, p.7).

School alienation:

A separation or distance among two or more entities and involves a sense of anguish or loss resulting in a student viewing life and school as fragmentary and incomplete (Brown, Higgins, & Paulsen, 2003, p.4).

School ethos:

A spirit which is elusive but which pervades the school community (Hargreaves, Earl, & Ryan, 1996, p. 22).

Social capital:

Networks of social relations characterised by trust and reciprocity which lead to outcomes of mutual benefit (Winter, 2000, p.1).

Social justice:

Social justice does not have a single meaning across all its usages (Taylor, Rizvi, Lingard, & Henry, 1997, p.119), however, in this thesis it is that teachers and schools be given the capacity to cater for difference (Rizvi & Lingard, 1993, p. 110).

Special Educational Needs (SEN) students:

Students may have multiple disabilities, including a learning disability, although some students with special educational needs do not have a learning disability.

State:

A pact of domination and set of self-regulatory institutional apparatus, bureaucratic organisation and formal and informal codes seeking to represent the public and private spheres of society (Torres, 1995, p. 273).

1.6 Researching in the Transformative Emancipatory Paradigm of Disability

Research that is undertaken in the transformative emancipatory paradigm of disability (Mertens, 2003; Oliver, 1997) has a number of features that distinguish it from other conceptual frameworks. It is primarily concerned with advocacy to improve the everyday lives of those who are affected by a disability. In this case, this is the students with learning difficulties and their parents. The researcher also needs to be personally involved with the disability group. My involvement has been detailed earlier in this chapter and entails many years of advocacy on my child's behalf and living with the decisions, often inappropriate, that have been made by individual teachers, in a variety of schools and by a number of educational authorities. A remaining feature is that generally there is a recipient for the results. One of the specific recipients will be SPELD Queensland Incorporated, an advocacy group for people with specific learning disabilities.

1.7 Overview of a Multimethod Design

The research reported by this thesis was undertaken by a multimethod design (Morse, 2003). The design itself is elaborated in chapter three and consisted of two separate phases which were complete within themselves. Phase One was a quantitative survey, which also included some qualitative questions. Phase Two was sequential and utilised a qualitative design involving structured interviews. Findings from each phase were triangulated (Jick, 1979) to determine final results. The study concludes with recommendations being advanced to improve the lives and educational outcomes of students with learning difficulties.

1.8 Significance of the Study

Although previous research in Australia has examined issues associated with students with learning difficulties at the primary school level (Louden et al., 2000), there has been nothing comparable at the secondary school level. As will be detailed in the review of the literature, the research that has been undertaken involves a single or a small number of schools. This study addresses this omission by conducting research across Queensland secondary schools. It extends the knowledge base by investigating

secondary teachers' attitudes and understandings about students with learning difficulties. It also incorporates the views of teachers, advocating parents and the students themselves about school into the same study and allows these viewpoints to be compared and contrasted. This makes its contribution to the field unique. The findings of this study will help to highlight the impact of teacher, school and educational systems decision making upon the lives of individual students with learning difficulties, their parents and their teachers. Adoption of the recommendations made as a result of the findings would indicate not only that difference is valued but would assist in delivering natural and social justice to the large numbers of marginalised and disadvantaged students with learning difficulties within our secondary schools.

1.9 Limitations and Delimitations

Discussion of the limitations of the study are to be found in the final chapter of the thesis which addresses the limitations of each phase separately. The delimitations of the research are as follows. The literature review undertaken for this thesis was extensive reflecting the exploratory nature of the research and the need to discuss many issues in schools, the family and society which impact upon this subject. It is recognised that some readers may find this unwieldy as it may distract from the main topic under consideration. The access to parents and students were limited by the scope of the organisations disseminating my requests for participants.

1.10 Organisation of the Thesis

This thesis is comprised of six chapters. Chapter One contains the background to the study, the need for it to be undertaken and the motivation for me to do so. There is reference made to the scope of the research questions as well as an overview of the research design including the paradigm that underpins it. The chapter closes with a determination of the significance of the study.

Chapter Two reviews the large body of literature which is pertinent to the issues being investigated by this exploratory research while Chapter Three explores the design of the research and the conceptual framework in which it is undertaken. Chapter Four presents the research questions for Phase One, outlines the methodology that is used and contains the analysis and findings from data collection. Research questions for

Phase Two are outlined in Chapter Five as well as a description of the participants, research protocols, data analysis and findings.

The final section of the thesis, Chapter Six, triangulates the findings from Phases One and Two and outlines the combined findings of the study. Recommendations are also made to policy makers and educational institutions to improve the outcomes for mainstream students with learning difficulties.

The chapter which follows is a review of the literature in the field associated with these particular students with special educational needs.

CHAPTER TWO

Review of the Literature

Among scientists are collectors, classifiers and compulsive
tidiers-up; many are detectives by temperament and many are
explorers; some are artists and artisans. There are poet-scientists
and philosopher-scientists and even a few mystics.
Medawar 'The Art of the Soluble' 1967.

2.1 Introduction

The purpose of this review is to explore the complex range of issues surrounding
mainstreamed students with learning difficulties in secondary schools. The majority of
research in Australia and internationally, related to this topic, documented experiences in
the primary school, but learning difficulties lie on a continuum which initially becomes
visible in the early years of schooling and extends into the secondary years.

The materials presented in this review are wide-ranging and interrelated and
begin with an initial discussion of the characteristics of students with learning difficulties
and the possible outcomes when they exit formal schooling. The literature examines the
complexities of the relationships between home and school as well as the nature of life
at school. It also investigates the provision of teacher education and professional
development to accommodate the requirements of students with learning difficulties in
mainstream classes.

This review provides an overview of the research and insights of many scholars
who have contributed to the understanding of the complexities of the problems that face
this particular group of students at school. It also establishes the context for the present
research and illuminates its contribution to the field.

In this chapter, students with learning difficulties are defined and their
educational experiences documented. Suggestions are made for ways forward to
overcome the complex range of issues that confront students with learning difficulties

and their teachers, so that students may be nurtured and thrive at school and begin to have faith in their talents and capacities.

2.2 Students with Learning Difficulties

2.2.1 Defining Learning Difficulties

Learning difficulties is the term used to describe students who have 'difficulties in literacy, numeracy and learning how to learn' (Education Queensland, 1996, Introduction). However, this term is not without controversy. Two terms, learning difficulties and learning disabilities have historically been used to describe students who have unexplained difficulties, particularly in literacy. In the United States of America (USA), the term learning disabilities was first used in 1963 by Kirk to describe people with unexpected difficulties in literacy and still continues to be used today (Hallahan & Mercer, 2002). The concept of a discrepancy between achievement and potential, first introduced into the discussion in 1965 by Bateman, remains central to this particular definition (Hallahan & Mercer, 2002).

Australia does not have a consistent way to describe students experiencing unexpected difficulties, with the terms learning difficulties and learning disabilities both being utilised. Despite calls for a national definition (Rivalland, 2002; Watson & Boman, 2005), this confusion still remains and has serious repercussions for estimates on prevalence, levels of support, programmes and funding that are available to these students (Rivalland, 2002; van Kraayenoord, Elkins, Palmer, & Rickards, 2002; Zammit, Meiers, & Frigo, 1999). The report of the House of Representatives Select Committee (Cadman, 1976) referred to students who had unexpected difficulties at school as experiencing learning difficulties and argued that learning environments, rather than labelling, was important. The committee adopted the position that these students exhibited no apparent disability and therefore, the school environment should be addressed. The perspective maintained in this thesis is that both issues presently remain problematic and need to be seriously addressed. An examination of the most recent Organisation for European Cooperation and Development (OECD) statistical data on students with disabilities, learning difficulties and disadvantage (Centre For Educational Research and Innovation, 2005) revealed that Australia did not contribute

any data. This is also an indication that Australia has not seriously accepted its responsibilities towards these students.

The report of the National Health and Medical Research Council (NHMRC) (1990) also used both terms with learning difficulties as a generic descriptor for students who showed developmental and academic problems, while the term learning disabilities was applied to those who showed a significant discrepancy, "below expectation for their age and general ability "(National Health and Medical Research Council, 1990, p. 4). This report clearly stated that these difficulties remained, "intrinsic to the individual and are not the result of intellectual disability, physical or sensory defects or emotional difficulties" (National Health and Medical Research Council, 1990, p. 3). Education Queensland (EQ) has followed the precedent established by the NHMRC with both definitions being maintained (Education Queensland, 1996). Students with learning disabilities in this jurisdiction have been defined as "a small group of students with learning difficulties who because of the neurological basis of their difficulties, have persistent, long term problems and high support needs in one or more areas of literacy, numeracy and learning how to learn" (Education Queensland, 1996, Introduction).

Despite this practice, this division into two distinct groups appears arbitrary. As Elkins (2000) noted that some students described as having learning difficulties might also have underlying difficulties which would indicate that they were part of the group of learning disabled students. For the remainder of this thesis, I have chosen to use the generic term, learning difficulties as defined by EQ to refer to students who might be part of either group of students, those with learning difficulties or learning disabilities.

2.2.2 Characteristics and Prevalence

Despite differences in terminology, scholars have reached consensus regarding characteristics typical of students with learning difficulties (Ashman & Elkins, 2002; Westwood, 2003). Throughout the literature (Ashman & Elkins, 2002; Treuen, van Kraayenood, & Gallaher, 2000; van Kraayenoord & Treuen, 2000; Westwood, 2003, 2004), student characteristics have been reported as generalised and include students being inactive and inefficient learners who are easily distracted and often off-task. They experience difficulties in integrating prior knowledge and their own experiences into what they are learning. Typically, these aspects are combined with learned helplessness and accompanying socio-emotional problems which often resulted in the development of poor self-esteem and expectation of nonperformance in academic areas. Some

researchers have specifically defined learned helplessness as a common response to continued failure. Howe (1999) and Werner and Smith (1982) found that learned helplessness occurred when students became conditioned to believe that one's past failures determined future failure, regardless of one's actions. Westwood (2004) cited environmental factors, including pedagogy and curriculum as the primary causes of underachievement or failure for students with learning difficulties, while the speed at which new concepts, skills and subject matter were introduced into secondary schools escalated the existing problems. While agreeing that these environmental factors were important, Christensen (1993) recognised that the specific effects of school organisation and the "highly constrained" organisation of the classroom (p.11) also had considerable impact.

McWhirter, McWhirter, McWhirter and McWhirter (1998) established that students with learning difficulties typically developed two distinct behaviour patterns in response to their experiences of failure and underachievement: either aggressive and disruptive behaviour or a withdrawn and apathetic manner. They concurred that students with learning difficulties did not have cognitive defects but instead the deficits existed in the schools and the ways in which these students were taught.

Estimates of prevalence of students with learning difficulties were suggested by a number of researchers in the field. Although an OECD report (1999) placed prevalence of learning difficulties at between 12 to16 percent, the first National Survey of Special Education (Andrews, Elkins, Berry, & Burge, 1979) suggested 11 percent with levels as high as 30 percent in some schools. This latter figure was confirmed in the latest Australian national survey of students with learning difficulties (Rohl, Milton, & Brady, 2000). Additional support for this higher figure also came from a number of separate Australian and international studies (McKinnon, Gordon, & Pruny, 2000; Wallace, Anderson, & Bartholomay, 2003; Westwood & Graham, 2000). These studies identified students with learning difficulties as the largest group of special needs students. Lack of a consistent definition of learning difficulties/disabilities affects prevalence estimates in Australia (Rivalland, 2002) as does the absence of formal assessment for some students (van Kraayenoord & Elkins, 1998). However, despite these limitations, estimates revealed that large numbers of students with learning difficulties were present in mainstream classes.

There is also evidence that many students with learning difficulties experience negative outcomes after they leave school. As a group, they have been

overrepresented as juvenile delinquents, as the long term unemployed and as inmates of mental institutions (Council of the Australian Resource Educators' Association, 2000). School failure appeared to be implicated in all these outcomes.

2.2.3 School Failure: Social and Economic Costs

School failure has been documented as being implicated in educational, social and personal disadvantage. This manifested itself in numerous ways including unemployment, poverty, delinquency, low self-esteem, and poor physical, mental and emotional health (Weare, 2000). School failure is characterised by low literacy and numeracy levels, school alienation and substantial school drop out rates. School alienation, as a construct, has been increasingly used to describe students who exhibit particular characteristics, including a sense of powerlessness within the school, and social isolation and/or estrangement within the school community (Brown et al., 2003; Jahnukainen, 2001). In one large scale study which surveyed and interviewed 1399 at risk students, including those who had left school early from metropolitan, rural and remote schools and communities across Australia, it was discovered that students were alienated at different times and within different settings. This study concluded that once alienation from school and its community was established, it was difficult to reverse, resulting in negative outcomes for these students (Australian Curriculum Studies Association, 1996). The results of this research appear to be robust as the findings resulted from the triangulation of quantitative surveys and qualitative interviews and the reliability was enhanced by the large size of the study.

Juvenile delinquency

School failure and alienation were also strong predictors of juvenile delinquency. Numerous international and Australian investigations, over extended periods of time, clearly established these links (Beresford, 1993; Knight, 1985; Murray, 2003). Researchers within the fields of health science, juvenile justice, youth welfare and education have consistently shown the links between school failure, learning difficulties and low literacy levels, and juvenile delinquency, dropping out of school before aged 15 and higher arrest rates of these individuals compared with their peers (Burrell & Warboys, 2000; Crawford, 1996; Juvenile Crime in New South Wales Report, 2000;

Morrison & Cosden, 1997; National Council of Disability, 2003; Select Committee on Youth Affairs, 1992).

Howell (2003) studied risk factors associated with juvenile delinquency and found that school and peer groups were two important factors in the potential for individuals to experience negative outcomes. A number of other inquiries examined the specific connections between school failure, disconnection between the student needs, especially if the student experienced learning difficulties, with the curriculum (Morrison & Cosden, 1997), poor school organisational practices and negative outcomes for students (Withers & Russell, 2001), including juvenile delinquency (Magium & Loeber, 1996).

In education, the term at risk refers specifically to school failure and embodies the deficit/disadvantage model where the student does not fit with the school (McWhirter et al., 1998). In this model, students with learning difficulties are at greater risk of school failure if their specific learning needs are not met. Swadener (1995) argued that although the responsibility for failure was placed on individuals and families, the problems were actually located in the schools themselves and were products of environment and society. Students who were "slow learners or learning disabled" were victims of, "educational abuse", subjected to inappropriate assessment which prevented them from showing their abilities (p. 12). Additionally McWhirter, McWhirter, McWhirter and McWhirter (1998) argued that this at risk behaviour by students, particularly by those with learning difficulties, could be anticipated in the absence of effective interventions.

Protective factors for these students have also been the subject of research. These aspects have been defined as, "internal and external forces which modify risk" and promote resilience (Fraser et al., 2004, p. 28). Werner and Smith (1982) defined resilience as an, "ability to recover from or adjust easily to misfortune and change" (p. 36). They identified its role has been identified as a major contributor to "hopefulness" in children and protection against "learned helplessness" (p. 157). Strong, positive relationships between teachers and peers, acknowledgement by families of their children's academic strengths and weaknesses, adolescents' self-awareness and high levels of self-esteem and effective mentoring, were also cited as protective factors in other studies (Fraser et al., 2004; Kirby & Fraser, 1997). In a 25 year longitudinal project by Werner and Smith (1982) which tracked Hawaiian children, aged from prenatal to 24 years of age from at risk environments, findings revealed that high quality schools were a protective factor. Good school performance, academic achievement and a positive

commitment to school were also seen as protective mechanisms. Although the self-report nature of this particular study was a weakness, its longitudinal nature delivered a depth of information not available in the Fraser (2004) and Fraser and Kirby (1997) research. Nevertheless the findings of all these previously cited studies consistently showed the roles that schools played in the promotion of resilience and protective factors for youth. Students with learning difficulties, who generally fail and are alienated by school, are part of this at risk population. In addition to their overrepresentation in the juvenile justice system, it has been reported that they suffer from mental health disorders and are overrepresented in mental health institutions (Council of the Australian Resource Educators' Association, 2000).

Mental health

Two recent studies which investigated the mental health of Australian children and adolescents (Al-Yaman et al., 2002; Raphael, 2000) revealed the overrepresentation of students with disabilities, including learning difficulties, in the mental health system and the need for a more appropriate response in schools. One inquiry (Al-Yaman et al., 2002) estimated that 92.3 percent of children with disabilities, including those students with learning difficulties, were educated in mainstream classes and that socioemotional problems accounted for their greatest difficulties. The highest rate of hospitalisation for mental and behavioural disorders was disclosed to be in the 10 to 14 age group with Attention Deficit Disorder (ADD) and Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) was the most common cause of hospitalisation (Al-Yaman et al., 2002). Students with ADD/ADHD are also clustered under the wider umbrella term of learning difficulties and exhibited many of the same characteristics that typified students with learning difficulties. These included being continually inattentive, lacking persistence, being easily distracted, talking incessantly, interrupting others and being constantly, 'on the go' (Raphael, 2000,p.49). Similarly, a recent Australian national survey (Raphael, 2000) acknowledged that Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) was the most common disorder among children and adolescents and could have a profoundly adverse effect upon both the life of the child and their family. Although ADD/ADHD does not necessarily coexist with learning difficulties, the findings of this research suggested that those students experiencing learning difficulties also exhibited these socioemotional problems which were cumulative and which could develop into both mental health problems and anti-social behaviour.

Both the studies previously cited recognised that schools were pivotal in providing supportive experiences throughout a student's school life. Findings also indicated that teachers lacked appropriate skills to deal with the special needs of students with learning difficulties (Raphael, 2000). Raphael (2000) also argued that school personnel needed to increase their ability and skill levels so that affected students could be identified and effective programmes implemented. This research was exploratory and further qualitative research needs to be undertaken to investigate the experiences of students with learning difficulties and their parents to strengthen these findings.

Goldman (1996) suggested that mental illness was the most common disability for adolescents in the USA and in other Western nations. He found that schools and societies were preoccupied with high Intelligent Quotient (IQ) levels and academic abilities rather than the concepts of emotional intelligence and health. This concentration on limited academic issues, Goldman asserted, created many subsequent emotional problems for youth. This was especially true for those who were already at risk, including those with learning difficulties. The Lamb and McKenzie (2001) study found that apart from the social and personal problems associated with learning difficulties, these students often experienced negative economic consequences including long term unemployment.

Unemployment

A number of Australian and international studies estimated that unemployment rates for adolescents with learning difficulties were between 20 and 60 percent and that two-thirds of employees with learning disabilities were concentrated in unskilled or semiskilled jobs (Lamb & McKenzie, 2001; Pearce, 1996; Rojewski, 1999; Sitlington, Frank, & Carson, 1992). An Australian project by Lamb and McKenzie (2001) which included over 2,000 Year 10 students as participants, documented that many students with learning difficulties did not enter the work force for the first seven post school years and experienced long-term unemployment throughout their working lives. Although this study was self report, the large number of participants increased the reliability of the findings. Another Australian study by Collins, Kenway and McLeod (2000) which focused on youth unemployment, claimed that although all youth were disadvantaged, those students who left school early or were juvenile offenders, often the same students who had learning difficulties, were the most vulnerable groups. School factors were

instrumental in developing this vulnerability. The research identified these as including poor performance in literacy and numeracy, lack of valuing of students and their families, intolerant school cultures, constraints on educational choice and flexibility, and the restriction of post school opportunities. Swadener (1995) observed that the position of these students in society was further compromised when they were labelled as culturally deficient when they failed to meet the needs of industry or business. Many of the negative outcomes for students with learning difficulties in schools or society are directly related to policy decisions which affect them in schools.

2.2.4 Policies on Disability and Learning Difficulties

There are two sections related to policy which will be examined. The initial discussion considers general polices specifically related to disability and students with learning difficulties while the latter section explores the effects of school policies on students with learning difficulties.

The general view of researchers and theorists in the field has been that policies related to disability and education were oppressive and have much wider ramifications than was generally thought (Fulcher, 1989a, 1989b, 1993; Oliver, 1996; Slee, 2003). All policy was recognised as having political constructs, including those on integration/inclusion which promoted or undermined particular educational or social practices (Fulcher, 1989b, 1993). Policy decisions had a number of characteristics which were endorsed by theorists and these included the tendency to deal with symptoms rather than to address the underlying causes (Beresford, 2000), the promotion of the interests or what is expedient to the dominate group (Taylor et al., 1997), and limiting debate on the issues by invoking the idea of political correctness (Oliver, 1996). Oliver (1996) and Taylor, Rizvi, Lingard and Henry (1997) postulated that educational policy did not evolve in a vacuum but reflected the inequalities that already existed within society. Other theorists claimed that educational debate and policy were increasingly being driven by "technocrats" and "managerialist ideology" (Fulcher, 1993; Giroux, 1981; Smyth, 2001, p. 205) rather than inequities in society and schools. Aiscow (1993) indicated the debate on how the diverse range of students might be accommodated and supported had been abandoned. Beresford (2000) believed that "non-decision making" often was a conscious government response on particular issues which were seen as controversial (p. 9). These insights were supported by an OECD report which found that schools and education systems resisted radical changes

because of the, "strength of the vested interests of the stakeholders" (Kennedy, 2001, p. 79). The general consensus of these aforementioned writers was that policy had replaced educational theory. Broad visions of what might be achieved were no longer expounded, rather it is what government believes is possible or expedient, which is implemented. Slee (2003) and Taylor, Rizvi, Lingard and Henry. (1997) also stated that policy was increasingly being developed in national and global environments rather than in departments of education.

There was also considerable discussion in the literature related to the policy of inclusion/integration as a political construct. Carrier (1983) Fulcher (1989a; , 1993) and Gore (1998) all claimed that this policy was primarily concerned with social control and surveillance rather than the provision of a curriculum which was meaningful and assessable to all students. This reference to a political agenda echoed Foucault (1991) with his references to surveillance and disciple to establish conformity and to achieve social control. Fulcher (1989a; , 1993) argued that the effect of this political discourse in disability took away the focus from the inadequacy of schools and curriculum, teacher pedagogy and competence and placed the responsibility for individual and collective failure on to the student. This was accompanied by the increasing attention to compliance to procedures and possible technical solutions to problems. This stance was supported by the, "discourse of professionalism" put forward by teachers and their unions who argued that teachers cannot teach for disability as they were not trained to do so (Fulcher, 1989a, p. 56).

Fulcher (1993) indicated that with mainstream teachers increasingly held responsible for all students with special needs, including large numbers of students with learning difficulties, the focus on technical issues, directly supported by formal and informal policy decisions, rather than the political nature of disability, aided the abdication of responsibility for the outcomes of these students by educational systems, schools and individual teachers. Dwyer and Wyn (2001) claimed that nationally in Australia, and in other Western countries, mainstream classes were promoted as homogeneous and successful, thereby relegating those who underachieve and fail as being responsible for their own problems although Westwood and Graham (2003) found that these students generally received little or appropriate support.

Australia, as a signatory of the Salamanca declaration (United Nations Educational and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), 1994) on inclusion had developed its own National Goals for Schooling (Department of Training and Youth Affairs, 1999).

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These goals stated that schooling must be socially just and that all students had the right to have their talents and capacities developed. Schools should also be learning communities with community partnerships. Within Queensland, both Education Queensland, the largest service provider, and Catholic Education have policies that are concerned with students with special needs. EQ has a specific policy for students with learning difficulties and learning disabilities (Education Queensland, 1996) and a formalised appraisement process for teacher identified students in primary schools. A plan to extend this into Queensland secondary schools was abandoned (Education Queensland, 2001). Catholic Education has a policy on inclusive practices (Queensland Catholic Education Commission, 2003) which allows for the modification of curriculum, school procedures, alternate pathways and the use of learning support for students with special needs.   Legal and educational accountability has been acknowledged as has the need for social justice.

Although some policies exist to promote socially just education in Queensland, historically, they were undermined by other policies which have been implemented previously and which had consequences for all students including students with learning difficulties (Meadmore, 1992). An example of this was the Radford scheme which replaced external examinations by internal continuous assessment, and has arguably continued to have negative impacts upon all students. Initially, the policy change was promoted to make secondary school more relevant to the majority of students. However the findings of two commissioned reports (Campbell et al., 1976; Scott, 1978) which examined the consequences of the implementation of the Radford scheme and the advent of continuous assessment in Queensland schools, found negative outcomes related to the change. Consequences of the Radford scheme included lack of accommodations made for individual differences, testing had become more important than any other aspect of teaching, limited types of assessment processes were implemented, teacher/student relationships had deteriorated and that there were increased levels of hostility, anxiety and frustration in students and increased levels of hostility between students (Campbell et al., 1976).

The recent Queensland School Reform Longitudinal Study (Lingard, Mills, & Hayes, 2000) indicated that many of these practices remained unchanged and that increasingly diverse school populations, including those students with learning difficulties, continued to be disadvantaged.

Life at school for all those associated with the school community is influenced by policies decided either at the school or classroom level or by others including governments, employing bodies and teacher unions just to name a few. A body of research and literature related to policy, emanating from competing discourses, has addressed its implementation, its effects as well as its shortcomings.

Although, as stated previously, policies of inclusion have been adopted by major education providers in Queensland: EQ (Education Queensland, 2005) and Catholic education (Queensland Catholic Education Commission, 2003) there remain significant gaps between policy and actual levels of support for students with learning difficulties. A study by Al-Yaman, Bryant and Sergeant (2002)revealed that educating the majority of students with special needs in the mainstream had become established policy in schools. Results of the van Kraayenoord (1999) study of 100 primary schools revealed unwritten school-based policies which often determined how students with learning difficulties were accommodated and treated regardless of overarching policy statements by outside administrative bodies. As a result of the findings of their research the Australian Curriculum Studies Association (1996) as well as Hayes, Mills, Christie and Lingard (2006) recommended that social justice practices be initiated in the classroom. They also recommended that collaborative whole school approaches be adopted as well as the establishment of alternative schools.

McLeskey and Waldron (2000) advocated for substantive change in the daily lives of teachers and administrators as well as changes to traditional attitudes and beliefs if inclusion for all students is to be effective. They criticised discussions of inclusion where the implicit assumption was that the, "student will adapt" (p. 14) while the approach and pedagogy of the teacher and classroom arrangements remained unchanged. They also found that teachers generally had not accepted responsibility for the learning of each individual. This was compounded in secondary schools where the designation of a teacher as a subject content specialist, rather than as a teacher with generalised skills to deal with the academic problems of their students compounded this problem. Tangen (2005) who reported on an in-service initiative in Norway with 2,000 participating secondary teachers, found that change within school so that they were more inclusive depended on the interest and knowledge of school administrators towards special education.

Fullan (1993) and Darling-Hammond (1994) also asserted that the position of teachers was central to improving schools. Darling-Hammond (1994) maintained that for

teachers to be effective in influencing policy decisions and outcomes in schools they must be," highly educated and well prepared and make sound decisions about curriculum, teaching and school policy" (p. 5). She suggested that school policies which utilised a, "democratic dialogue"(p. 16) created more inclusive school communities. This shared decision making would allow organisational change where time could be allocated for collaboration with peers, reflection and opportunities for professional development, all features of a community of learners.

In a more recent treatise by Parry and O'Brien (2000) they noted that teachers remained largely unaware of the implications of government policies which detracted from core teaching responsibilities and placed little emphasis on classroom skills, professional knowledge and collaborative practices. Instead, nonteaching skills and accountability measures were mandated and rewarded. They also advocated for teachers to become actively involved in influencing policy debates especially in the context of teaching and learning where pedagogy, curricula and assessment were socially constructed.

Hargreaves, Earl and Ryan (1996) recommended that schools be restructured to create a community that was welcoming and inclusive for all, not just for the high achievers in the mainstream. Other researchers concurred. In a case study of eight Victorian and South Australian secondary schools conducted by Bryce and Withers (2003) they demonstrated that if schools desired their students be committed to life long learning, this policy needed to central to the school and supported by the appropriate school organisation. An earlier review of full service schools to at risk students (Department of Training and Youth Affairs, 2001b), found that success required all stakeholders to be engaged both with policy and a vision. The school principal and deputy principal must provide committed leadership while teachers needed to be empathetic, respectful of their students and use imaginative pedagogies. Good relationships between all members of the community, including parents, were also essential.

Policies related to staffing levels affects most schools. Staffing levels have traditionally been linked with the number of students in a school rather than a staff student ratio which promotes a, "focus on learning" that teachers maintained was their core business (Esson, Johnston, & Vinson, 2002, p. 7). Smyth (2001) expressed concern over the insufficient numbers of learning support teachers available to meet the needs of students with learning difficulties. Evidence was presented of poor access to

these teachers, lack of training for learning support teachers and little continuity of support for students with learning difficulties in schools. Instead, schools and teachers' work were increasingly at the mercy of divergent interests of, 'policy makers, politicians and industry captains' (p. 39).

In considering policies at the classroom level and their impact upon the lives of students with learning difficulties, Westwood (2004) determined that the physical environment of the classroom could exacerbate learning difficulties: noise and distractions as well as seating and grouping of students might be problematic. In an investigation of school restructuring in three elementary schools in the USA Elmore, Peterson and McCarthey (1996), discovered that making classes smaller did not result in more learning and improved outcomes for students with learning difficulties. Teachers had not changed how they taught to maximise learning in the smaller group, nor had they altered seating arrangements to take advantage of the smaller numbers. Despite smaller numbers of students in classes, the status quo had been maintained

Although inclusive education policies have been mandated by major education providers in Queensland (Education Queensland, 2005; Queensland Catholic Education Commission, 2003) Hayes, Mills, Christie and Lingard (2006) maintained that these policies have generally not improved the teaching and learning outcomes for secondary students with learning difficulties. McLeskey and Waldron (2000) claimed that to affect positive outcomes, substantive changes across whole schools must be implemented. Both Parry and O'Brien (2000) and Smyth (2001) indicated that change should be centered on teachers who needed knowledge of the social and political context in which policies were developed and to be aware of the divergent interests that drove them. Both these researchers also found that although some schools have restructured to promote improved learning outcomes for students with learning difficulties, this result had generally not been achieved. Other persistent problems which impeded improvements in academic achievement for students with learning difficulties, included staffing schools on student numbers, rather than on a needs basis, insufficient numbers of trained learning support teachers and little continuity in support for students throughout different year levels. Smyth (2001) in this latter study found that these obstacles still remained largely unaddressed. A further examination on the present state of continuity of support for students with learning difficulties would appear to be warranted. Appropriate policies, including at school level, are required to facilitate this outcome.

There is also a need for social justice policies which address the issues that affect students with learning difficulties.

2.2.5 Social Justice and Equity

Policy documents in Australia concerned with social justice in education are expressed within three separate discourses which are largely incompatible and which result in different interpretations of the concept. A number of scholars have examined these discourses and their impact on students with a disability. The first discourse relates to distributive justice and focuses on the deficit model. This is associated with the work of Rawls (2001)and, in disability terms, it is demonstrated by the provision of basic skills classes and the withdrawal of students to help them to overcome their lack of proficiency particularly in literacy and numeracy (Gale, 2000). The second discourse relates to market individualism and encompasses the idea of equal access and reward based on merit and contribution. In terms of disability, this translates into generalised services provided in mainstream settings but this does not produce either equity or, necessarily, participation. This is the social justice framework which currently predominates in Australia at this point in time (Fulcher, 1989b; Gale, 2000; Taylor et al., 1997). The third discourse relates to recognitive justice as developed by Fraser (1995) and Young (1990). In this discourse, the moral worth of all young people is equally valued and difference is valued differently (Gale, 2000). This difference extends to the varied talents and efforts made by youth which is generally not recognised in schools or society (Gale, 2000). Recognitive justice acknowledged the reality of cultural and socio-economic disadvantage and injustice as well as the disadvantage and nonrecognition associated with individual difference and disability (Fraser, 1995). Taylor, Rizvi, Lingard and Henry (1997) noted that unfortunately, the meaning of social justice in policy documents in Australiawas not uniform and must be deduced from a reading of the document in question.

In this thesis, social justice is viewed as recognitive justice where difference is valued and the individual student with learning difficulties should be able to receive equity. This is in accordance with Gale's definition where equity reflected positive discrimination to alleviate injustice (Gale, 2000). Rizvi and Lingard (1993) argued that what constitutes social justice in the educational world is the requirement that both, "teachers and schools be given the capacity to cater for difference"(p.110).

A number of researchers and theorists wrote about specific groups marginalised by education. Young (1990) accused schools and education, in general, of not attending to different learning needs and depositing blame for nonachievement on students and their parents rather than examining the system that supported inequitable outcomes. For Young, challenging rules, procedures, practices or a cultural meaning which perpetuated, "cultural values and social norms" (Young, p. 206) should be the means for achieving social justice .

There has been continued discussion both in Australia and internationally related to the "commodification'" of education (Connell, 1998, p. 94) and the preoccupation with neo liberal reform which have shaped schools to fit with this ideology. A number of researchers and theorists Caldwell (2002) Connell (1998) Purpel (1998) and Teese and Polesel (2003) have commented on this discourse, where students had become clients, tests standardised, curricula and pedagogy remained restricted, and those who were advantaged in society received additional advantage. The parental choice discourse was cited as one example where it was assumed that all parents were equally able to choose an appropriate school for their child. The effect has been to legitimise injustice and disadvantage.

Young (1990) in her seminal work asserted that the transformation of this situation was possible if policy beccame enabling (Young, 1990). Literature in the field suggested that the teacher had a central role to play in this transformation with focus needing to be maintained on existing injustice combined with an ethic of care to achieve education for everyone (Heubner, 1998; Noddings, 1998; Purpel & Shapiro, 1998; Zeichner, 1993). Sturman (1997) also asserted that concepts of injustice and discrimination should be broadened by directing attention to the status of subjects offered by schools and vocational careers. Delpit (1988) in her seminal work, argued that to enable justice to be delivered in schools the voices of teachers, parents and students, particularly absent in schools and research, should be encouraged and facilitated (Delpit, 1988). McInerney (2004) concurred that only when this happened that the dominant policies that promote 'economic and political ideologies rather than egalitarian ones' (p. 45) could be effectively challenged.

The section which follows discusses literature related to relationships which exist in schools and examines the connections between school and home, how well the school provides a caring nurturing environment for students with learning difficulties, and

the importance of social capital for these students in developing relationships between students and teachers.

2.3 Relationships in School Communities

2.3.1 Teacher/home connections

Burrows (2004) and Hargreaves (2000) observed that in the managerialist mindset in which schools operated, the dominant discourse in education focused on accountability and outcomes rather than relationships within communities. However, there have been a number of studies that have explored relationships within secondary schools particularly those between parents, students and teachers (Avramidis, Bayliss, & Burden, 2002; Esson et al., 2002; Kolb & Hanley-Maxwell, 2003; McKibbin & Cooper, 1994; Sanders & Epstein, 2000; Teese & Polesel, 2003). Burrows (2004) undertook action research and documented the experiences of parents of students with learning difficulties at her school. She found a common denominator for parents was anger, grief and frustration. Although only a small study, it documented the voices of parents about their experiences with the school and its teachers. Similarly, in a number of other inquiries, large and small (Esson et al., 2002; Kolb & Hanley-Maxwell, 2003; Sanders & Epstein, 2000) parents were critical of the narrow parameters of school life for their children. Schools that focused solely on academic outcomes rather than the nonacademic aspects of school life were considered to be of little value to students. Parents in one study undertaken in the USA (Kolb & Hanley-Maxwell, 2003) wanted the skills associated with empathy, discernment and intuition to be actively taught. Parents in all these studies were also critical of the lack of consultation and collaboration with them by teachers. A large Australian study conducted in primary and secondary schools within New South Wales (Esson et al., 2002) confirmed the lack of parent consultation and collaboration in schools.

A survey of parents conducted in one inner city Brisbane high school by McKibbin (1994) discovered that only university educated parents rather than the parents of the students who were marginalised in the school participated in the research. This design weakness effectively silenced the voices of this group (McKibbin & Cooper, 1994) and did not illuminate the concerns of the most marginalised groups within the school. Avramidis, Bayliss and Burden (2002) conducted an indepth case study undertaken in a school in the United Kingdom among parents of students with special

needs. Although parents were happy with their children's academic progress they were critical of the lack of community within the school and how their children continued to be alienated and marginalised. The parents did not feel that their children were happy at school. Again although this was a small study and the results cannot be generalised, it did increase the body of disquiet by parents about the treatment of students with special needs, including those with learning difficulties in primary and secondary schools. Interestingly, a small study conducted by Kortering and Braziel (2002) in the USA that interviewed students with learning difficulties discovered that many of the students with learning difficulties appeared to have considerable social capital, primarily family and community support. This aspect will be considered later in this section.

One of the fundamental connections between school and home is through the setting of homework. Forster (1999), in her examination of policy statements on homework in New South Wales and in the United Kingdom revealed that homework was envisaged as a positive connection between school and home and teachers and parents: a partnership. However, a review of research on homework indicated that this positive connection only existed for those who were not in a disadvantaged group or who did not have special educational needs. This review also indicated that parents were critical of lack of clarity of teachers' expectations and lack of support from schools, especially for students who did not have the requisite skills to complete work. Mothers stated that homework became a source of friction within the household and between them and the school, that it was disruptive to family life and promoted negative behaviours and attitudes towards school and school work for those children who were unable to cope with homework demands.

In a review by Bryan and Burstein (2004) of studies into homework completion and academic performance, they observed that research projects were generally small, over one or two classes, and there were no studies undertaken systemically. Findings indicated that homework reflected an individual teacher's beliefs while the pressure for homework completion forced special education teachers to concentrate on completing homework rather than on addressing the skills students needed to improve their academic performance. No conclusive evidence was presented to indicate that completed homework improved the academic performance of those in disadvantaged groups.

A recent Australian project (Baird, 2004) investigated 53 teachers and 20 students, including 10 secondary students, regarding beliefs about why students did or

did not complete homework. The research was located in Victorian middle and secondary government and nongovernment schools and included students who regularly completed homework and those who did not submit work. Findings supported previous research which indicated that only those students not alienated by school were willing and able to complete homework. Teachers believed that the problems resided in the students, that they were lazy or had no interest in succeeding. Students who did not complete work indicated that if the work was interesting or fun, or if they liked the teacher, they would do it. No teaching of skills to assist in completing homework were apparent, apart from time management. Parent beliefs about homework or what assistance was provided by the school, if any, to help in homework completion were not examined. This research would have benefited from the inclusion of qualitative data. Other commentators such as Whitton (2000) questioned the value of homework and advocated its use only if it was thought provoking, uplifting and widened horizons, as homework disrupted families.

In addition to the connections between home and school, there are also relationships that exist within the school community itself. The nature of those relationships has been described as school climate or ethos. The nature of school communities is considered in the section which follows.

3.2.2 School Communities

Studies conducted by Avramidis, Bayliss and Burden (2002) and Kolb and Hanley-Maxwell (2003) indicated that parents of students with learning difficulties suggested that school climate, or ethos, was a relevant issue for them in evaluating the educational experiences of their children. School climate was also investigated by a number of studies and was the subject of discussion by researchers and theorists (Dinham, Ciarney, Craigie, & Wilson, 1995; Evans & Lunt, 2005; Hargreaves et al., 1996; Sergiovanni, 1994; Teese & Polesel, 2003). Hargreaves, Earl and Ryan (1996) defined school ethos "as a spirit which was elusive and pervaded the school community" (p. 22). They also characterised secondary schools as having a "culture of individualism" which applied to teachers, students and parents, rather than the collective responsibility which existed within a community (p. 31). Noddings (1992) argued that the sense of caring for each other and the physical environment, which was reflected in a community which shared collective responsibility, was undermineded by the school reform process. Evans and Lunt (2005) and Hargreaves, Earl and Ryan (1996) claimed that the reform process

implemented restrictive policies including standardised curricula and limits on alternative pedagogy and accommodations for marginalised students. Teaching competency was deemed to be based on specialised knowledge and technical skill, rather than on commitment to communities, individual learning or emotional attachment (Evans & Lunt, 2005; Hargreaves et al., 1996). Cox (1995) advocated that to restructure schools to establish a sense of caring, community and spirit, in other words, to evoke a positive school ethos and an "ethic of care" (p. 9), innovations needed to be implemented. A number of ways to move forward have been presented by the literature in the field.

Hargreaves, Earl and Ryan (1996) and Sergiovanni (1994) urged schools to act politically to challenge the status quo by implementing imaginative and relevant curricula and wide-ranging and authentic assessment to accommodate the needs of a diverse range of students. This political action must also include a shared vision, with a shared ideology and practices. Sergiovanni (1994) also believed that the vision of community needed to emerge from the values and shared visions of individuals: teachers, parents, students and principals. The importance of this vision was supported by the findings of a large research project into leadership and community conducted in western Sydney (Dinham et al., 1995). It found a shared vision was important and needed to be developed by consultation of all levels. This included senior executives, teachers, students and parents.

Oliver (1996) also established a link between a positive school ethos and the valuing of students including those with special educational needs. In a recent Western Australian project in five schools (Forlin, 2004) which used the Index for Inclusion (Booth, Ainscow, Black-Hawkins, Vaughn, & Shaw, 2000) to identify areas of marginalisation and ways to address them within the school community, Forlin (2004) recognised the importance of a positive school ethos in achieving change. It supported the findings of an earlier study by Rutter, Maughan, Mortimore, Ouston and Smith (1979) into school climate in 12 inner London high schools which established a, "causal relationship between school process and children's progress "(p. 180). Findings indicated that the atmosphere of a school was greatly influenced by the way the whole community operated. The study showed that school ethos could be improved by group planning, staff consensus, and an increased alignment between staff and student values by shared activities, student positions of responsibility, student academic success and by warm and caring relationships with staff in pleasant working environments. Similar findings have emerged from a recent study in New South Wales by Ayres, Dinham and

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Sawyer (2000) where classroom communities which elicited cooperation, sharing and respect as important aspects of their operation were frequently observed. The researchers also experienced a strong sense of community within the school.

Swadener (1995) advocated for nurturing school environments that included a positive school ethos, for students, particularly those failing to reach their potential, to make a positive difference in their lives (Swadener, 1995). Dinham, Cairney, Craigie and Wilson (1995) as well as McWhirter, McWhirter, McWhirter and McWhirter (1998) asserted that school climate ccould also be created by a positive working environment where teachers could exercise collegiality and collaborative practices, where community and parental support was forthcoming, where autonomy was encouraged and where strong leadership could be observed . One means of establishing positive connections within the school community, is through social capital.

The presence of social capital in schools has received attention from educational theorists. Social capital was defined as "networks of social relations characterised by trust and reciprocity which lead to outcomes of mutual benefit" (Winter, 2000, p. 1.). A longitudinal study conducted in the USA by Croininger and Lee (2001) of 11,000 high school students from 1,000 public and private schools, investigated the link between social capital and the risk of high school drop out. The project surveyed students every two years from 1988 to 1992 and evaluated risk factors, including academic risk and the social capital provided by teachers in ameliorating that risk. Findings indicated that if students at academic risk established effective relationships with teachers either by talking about their work or personal problems, this support lessened the possibility of non completion of high school. The study clearly established the importance of good relationships between students with learning difficulties and their teachers if students were to remain as part of the school community. Although the research relied on self report survey data, the longitudinal nature of the study and the large sample size enhanced the reliability of the results.

Evidence has also been presented that social capital may play an important role for students with learning difficulties and their families particularly in the promotion of collective and individual actions which can assist parents to empower those who have become marginalised in schools (Munn, 2000; Winter, 2000). Social capital was also apparent in the operations of parent advocacy groups (Elkins, 2001; Hallahan & Mercer, 2002; Wedell, 2001; Wong & Hutchinson, 2001). Hallahan and Mercer (2002) found that parents were also endeavouring to change the traditional relationships between

themselves and the school through the use of advocacy groups. They noted that parent advocacy groups for students with learning disabilities first appeared in the USA in the 1950s and have continued to be influential on policy matters. The largest and most influential was the Learning Disabilities Association of America which continues to operate today.

Lyons (2000) asserted that in Australia since World War Two nonprofit organisations, often government supported, were formed with the aim of empowering people, particularly their members. This also included advocacy groups. SPELD, as an advocacy group for people with specific learning disabilities, was one such group. Lyons maintained that these organisations utilised social capital to sustain and promoted the group but they also generated social capital. Cox (1995) argued that when advocacy groups represented students with learning difficulties, they presented alternate discourses based on, "a perception of fairness and justice" and "respect for diversity and recognition of our common humanity "(p. 71). Despite these sentiments, however, a study of advocacy and parents conducted in New Zealand (Brown, 1999) reported that relationships with parents were unequal and that many teachers viewed parents as a threat. Brown (1999) found that there was also little empathy shown by teachers towards students with disabilities or their parents. One interviewed parent expressed the feelings of the study in the following way, "until there is more money in advocacy and more advocates, schools will dominate what happens to parents and children with a disability" (p. 40).

Knight (1985) maintained that schooling would always be a social process which impacted upon those who were involved in schools including students and their families regardless of an outcomes based dominant discourse. In one small study Klein (1999) found that students, particularly students with learning difficulties, have shared negative experiences about school (Klein, 1999). One of the central relationships in this social process which needs to be examined, is the relationship between students and their teachers.

Student/teacher relationships

There have been numerous studies, both international and Australian, which have focused on student/teacher relationships including some which have specifically targeted relationships between teachers and students with special educational needs, including learning difficulties (Avramidis et al., 2002; Brooks, Milne, Paterson, Johansson,

& Hart, 1997; Brophy & Good, 1974; Cheng, 1994; Collins et al., 2000; Kortering & Braziel, 2002; Lingard et al., 2000; Martin & Marsh, 2005; McKibbin & Cooper, 1994; Rubin, 2003). Although these projects, both large and small over three decades, have examined many facets of the same topic, the findings have been remarkably similar. In particular, they underscore the importance of this central relationship in the lives of students and their families.

Two international studies, Cheng (1994) and Kortering and Braziel (2002) explored students' perceptions of school. In the earlier project, Cheng (1994) surveyed the perceptions of 21,622 Year 6 students from Hong Kong and their teachers. Findings indicated that students preferred teachers who were supportive, innovative, encouraged creative thinking and who were task orientated with clear management procedures. A more recent study by Kortering and Braziel (2002) in the USA which also surveyed 185 secondary students with learning difficulties, recorded similar results. These students wanted to succeed at high school, liked some classes and enjoyed socialising with their peers. They also identified good teachers as those who were caring, developed active programmes and gave individualised attention. Although both studies cited above were surveys the results obtained were similar, extended across countries and together included a large number of informants. This helped to generalise the findings. Interestingly, an Australian study which investigated students who were alienated from school (Australian Curriculum Studies Association, 1996) found that students wanted to succeed in subjects that had value to them. These same students also indicated that secondary schools were impersonal and unwelcoming and that teachers did not care about them individually. Those who were considered academically less able were stigmatised as were courses and subjects associated with alternative academic studies.

Kortering and Braziel (2002) also found that for students with learning difficulties poor teaching, negative attitudes of teachers and administrators, boring classes and difficult texts were cited as obstacles to high school completion. In an earlier Australian study, Brooks, Milne, Paterson, Johansson and Hart (1997) suggested that early school leavers identified school as being boring and irrelevant. Conflict in student/teacher relations and a lack of understanding by teachers were reported for their decision to leave school early. Students also indicated that the school environment was alienating, there was little rapport with teachers, and authoritarianism and regimentation was common. An ethnographic study by Zundans (2003) of one Year 11 Australian student with learning difficulties reported that teachers often followed preconceived judgements

often in the face of contradictory evidence leading to a sense of injustice for the student. The student also indicated that he could only be articulate about an issue if he felt personally concerned and involved in it. This study was different from all other studies considered in this literature review related to students with learning difficulties as it recounted a personal experience of teachers from the student's perspective thereby making its contribution to the field, unique. The findings of all the studies examined above clearly revealed the centrality of positive student/teacher relationships to student engagement.

Previous studies, both in Australia and internationally (Collins et al., 2000; Crawford, 1996; Sanders & Jordan, 2000; Trent & Slade, 2001), established that student/teacher relationships impacted upon students dropping out of school, their academic achievement and their attitude towards school. In a project conducted by Trent and Slade (2001) that surveyed 1,800 adolescent boys, the students indicated that, "good teachers" were the most important factor in staying at school (p.x). Good teachers were defined as those who listened, showed respect towards students , were flexible in teaching practices and expectations, made work interesting, did not humiliate students, showed justice, allowed fun in the classroom and did not make students do a lot of writing from the board. Results confirmed an earlier study in which students had identified good teachers as, "firm, fair and challenging" (Australian Curriculum Studies Association, 1996, p. 13) while bad teachers were thought to be, "authoritarian, partial and having low expectations of students" (p.13). Another Australian study by Collins, Kenway and McLeod (2000) which investigated poor academic achievement for students with learning difficulties identified poor student/teacher relationships, inflexible curricula and teaching strategies as major factors in these negative academic outcomes. Conversely, a longitudinal survey of 13,600 students with learning difficulties by Sanders and Jordan (2000) found that positive student/teacher relationships improved student behaviour, increased their engagement in class and related positively to higher academic achievement. Murray (2002) in a review of the literature on student/teacher relationships, supported all of the findings of the previous studies but also found adolescents with learning disabilities needed opportunities to develop problem solving skills, empathy and positive relationships with adults. Teacher pedagogy and attitude towards these students and their specific knowledge about them all appeared to be relevant to academic achievement and the building of positive student/teacher relationships.

A number of projects over a 30 year period provided insights into the dynamics of student/teacher relationships and indicated how these might become more positive. Rutter, Maughan, Mortimore and Ouston (1979) in an early study of 12 inner London secondary schools, found more positive student/teacher relationships occurred when teachers were well prepared for class, students were actively engaged in learning, praise was used extensively, teachers had high expectations of students, set work so that students could succeed and were readily available to students . The Brooks, Milne, Paterson, Johansson and Hart (1997) study of at risk adolescents suggested that low student/staff ratio contributed to better relationships and more appropriate learning situations for students with learning difficulties.

In a small study by Ayres, Dinham and Sawyer (2000) the student/teacher relationships of 25 expert New South Wales secondary teachers were examined. In this research where teachers were interviewed, observed and groups of past students of three teachers were interviewed, findings revealed that all teachers had similar qualities and relationships with their students. Teachers were found to be enthusiastic, knowledgeable about their subject, treated their students with respect, and had a personal knowledge of their students and a rapport with them. Students were considered by their teachers as, "good kids" and "motivated" (p. 7). Teachers focused on the specific needs of individual students. Students regarded these teachers as being both approachable and available to them. Classrooms were observed by the research team to be places of mutual respect. The variety of techniques used to collect data gave a robustness to this study although the definition of "expert" and how these experts were identified could be seen as a weakness in this research. A further extended study needs to be undertaken to confirm these findings. In a project with four year observation of 5,000 teachers in 96 schools, combined with case studies of three high schools Halia and Mulford (2002), also discovered that students wanted teachers who made them feel valued as individuals. This large study which also used a variety of data collection methods added strength to the findings of both the cited studies that students valued teachers who treated them as individuals and who were available to them. The latter study also recommended that students who were at risk needed to be given leadership roles and opportunities to develop decision making skills and to learn the importance of self control.

McWhirter, McWhirter, McWhirter and McWhirter (1998) also recommended that students should be encouraged to share the responsibility for their own learning.

However, it has been clearly shown by all of the studies cited above that, as Westwood (2004) noted, for learning to occur the student must like and respect the teacher. The study conducted by Melican (2001) also confirmed that the three most important things in the classroom were a positive relationship with the teacher, respect between teacher and student and the relevance of the work being undertaken.

Melican (2001) also found that teachers had a central role in developing relationships in school communities. Teachers not only had contact with students and parents but also with their colleagues. Rutter, Maughan, Mortimore, Ouston and Smith (1979) asserted that values, beliefs and behaviour towards others in the school community by teachers, had far reaching effects and impacted upon school climate or ethos. Both Cox (1995) and Noddings (1992) emphasised that teachers who showed a specific interest in individual students and especially those at risk, helped to create school communities which operated from an ethic of care. This was confirmed by the work of Halia andMulford (2002) which found that the valuing of individuals helped to establish an interdependent community where learning was encouraged.

The section which follows explores life at school particularly for students with learning difficulties. Although all of the issues already discussed also reflect upon the quality of life for these students in the secondary school, this section is more closely related to the effects of teachers' attitudes, the organisational aspects of school, policies that affect the students as well as classroom practices and support which students with learning difficulties receive.

2.4 Life at school

2.4.1 Teachers' Attitudes

A number of studies have investigated teachers' attitudes towards the inclusion of students with special needs including students with learning difficulties (Avramidis, Bayliss, & Burden, 2000; Avramidis et al., 2002; Clough & Lindsay, 1991; Cook, Tankersley, Cook, & Landrum, 2000; Levins, Bornholt, & Lennon, 2005; Pearson, Lo, Chui, & Wong, 2003; Praisner, 2003; Subban & Sharma, 2006; Wallace et al., 2003). Some projects specifically examined the attitudes of secondary teachers (Avramidis et al., 2000, 2002; Clough & Lindsay, 1991; Wallace et al., 2003), although findings of the

other investigations also offered insights into teachers' attitudes towards students with learning difficulties.

In research conducted by Clough and Lindsay (1991) Pearson, Lo, Chui and Wong (2003) and Westwood and Graham (2003) teachers indicated that students with learning and emotional difficulties were the most difficult ones to include into mainstream classrooms. Teachers also perceived that many students with learning difficulties had more school related problems than other nondisabled students, for example, with application to tasks and immaturity (Tur-Kaspa, 2002). One study of elementary school teachers in the USA by Cook, Tankersley, Cook and Landrum (2000) based on the previous work of Brophy and Good (1974) confirmed that negative student attributes, such as disruptive behaviour, apathy and disinterest, were good predictors of a negative teacher attitude towards these students. Teachers were either indifferent to those students or rejected them. Students with special educational needs, especially those with learning difficulties were disproportionately represented in both these teacher responses. In a recent project by Levins, Borholt and Lennon (2005) which investigated the attitudes of preservice and in-service teachers towards students with special needs, negative attitudes were apparent towards students with ADHD, a subgroup of students with learning difficulties. This contrasted with their positive attitudes to students with physical handicaps. The study also revealed that personal experiences with a student with special needs did not change the teacher's attitude. The profiles of both groups of teachers with personal experience and those without, were identical. This is in contrast with a small study conducted with Victorian teachers which found that having a family member with a disability or a close friend made teachers more positive towards their ability to include students with special needs in their classes (Subban & Sharma, 2006)

Avramidis, Bayliss and Burden (2000) presented evidence from a small survey conducted in a British high school, that previously successful experiences in including students with special needs improved teachers' attitudes towards inclusion. A number of demographic variables including age, gender, teacher experience and training were examined but of these, only experience and special education training were found to be statistically significant as well as previous success in teaching students with special needs. Although a survey conducted in only one school has limited application another small survey conducted into attitudes towards inclusion with 122 self selected mainstream state primary school teachers from across Victoria (Subban & Sharma, 2006) confirmed these findings. This study was also limited and included no qualitative data to

expand or clarify these results. However, a further in depth case study by Avramidis, Bayliss and Burden (2002) conducted in the same school as their previous survey confirmed the importance of positive teaching experience with students with disabilities and special education training to the existence of positive attitudes towards inclusion. Praisner (2003) also scrutinised the attitudes towards inclusion of 408 primary principals in the USA also through the use of a survey. Although surveys by their nature can only supply limited information the results confirmed findings of the Avramidis, Bayliss and Burden (2000) study that only those principals with positive experiences related to students with special needs were accepting of these students. Other researchers (Forlin, 1995; Rice & Zigmond, 2000) also identified negative attitudes by classroom teachers towards inclusion, although Forlin (1995) found that more experienced teachers had the lowest levels of commitment towards the policy. With the documented aging of the teaching workforce across OECD countries (Organisation for European Co-Operation and Development (OECD), 2003) this finding is a cause for concern.

Some projects have investigated how teachers might become more positive in their attitudes towards inclusion. Teachers surveyed in one study (Avramidis et al., 2000) identified teacher training and externally based training and professional development as ways to positively influence teachers' attitudes towards inclusion. Pearson, Lo, Chui and Wong (2003) in a large study of mainstream primary teachers in Hong Kong schools also identified teacher training and skills and knowledge about students with special needs, including those with learning difficulties, as ways to create more positive attitudes towards inclusion. The Vinson inquiry (Esson et al., 2002) conducted by the New South Wales Teachers' Federation in public high schools across the state, also discovered that secondary teachers were reluctant to be involved with students with special needs because of their lack of training in the area. Teachers involved in the interviews and surveys suggested that there were many more students requiring help than were receiving assistance. It would appear from the research already conducted in this field, that mainstream teachers struggle to accept students with learning difficulties as part of their classes and to provide appropriate learning experiences for them.

2.4.2 Classroom teaching

It has previously been established in this thesis that mainstream students with learning difficulties have experienced academic failure and underachievement. Both

McLaren and Westwood claimed that the rationalising of this situation as being the fault of the student rather than deficiencies in teaching practice, curriculum and student/teacher relationship served to absolve both teachers and schools from responsibility for this situation (McLaren, 2003; Westwood, 2004). McLaren criticised this discourse as a disincentive for teachers to critically examine their own pedagogy, as it, "indites the student and protects the social environment from sustained social criticism" (McLaren, 2003, p. 203). Evans and Lunt asserted this concentration of blame for failure on the student allowed teachers to feel a lack of responsibility for the learning of everyone in the class (Evans & Lunt, 2005).

Corbett and Norwich (1999) in their discussion on pedagogy for students with special educational needs, maintained that these students required a different kind of pedagogy, not just additional teaching by the same methods. They advocated for a "connective pedagogy" (p. 133) to be implemented. This was defined as teaching which resonated with the individual's needs and life circumstances. Connective pedagogy celebrated difference and adjusted teaching practices accordingly. They also noted that teachers needed empathy to be able to understand and to teach in such a way. A number of other researchers articulated more concrete ways to teach these students. Ashman and Elkins, Christensen and Westwood recommended a pedagogy that was explicit, direct and active (Ashman & Elkins, 1998; Christensen, 1996; Westwood, 2003). Recent meta analysis of classroom based research by Ellis and Purdie and Ellis (Ellis, 2005; Purdie & Ellis, 2005) confirmed these findings but also found that "robust" learning gains were made with a focus on "cognitive, metacognitive or self regulation strategies"(Purdie & Ellis, 2005 , p. iv).

A number of recent Australian and international inquiries highlighted the issue of teacher pedagogy for students with learning difficulties (Lingard et al., 2000; van Kraayenoord & Farrell, 1998; Wallace, Anderson, Bartholomay, & Hupp, 2002). The research conducted by Wallace, Anderson, Bartholomay and Hupp in the USA in which high levels of academic achievement occurred for all students, including those with learning difficulties, revealed high levels of student engagement. Teachers were observed to spend 75 percent of their time in actively teaching and interacting with their students (Wallace et al., 2002). This research used observational methods and relied on teacher assessment of students. Findings would have been more robust with researcher controlled pre and post tests to establish the level of gains made by the targeted individual students involved in the study. An earlier Queensland study of three

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high schools with a successful alternate English program by van Kraayenoord and Farrell found that teachers used extensive review, guided instruction, slow pace and a variety of teaching strategies to instruct their students. Curriculum and assessment practices were also modified and focused on student strengths successfully catering for individual student needs (van Kraayenoord & Farrell, 1998). Purdie and Ellis (2005) noted in their review of literature related to teaching interventions that the majority of studies conducted within Australia involved small numbers of students and schools which weakened their ability to be generalized although Ellis (2005) also stated that meta-analysis assisted in improving the power of these small studies. Despite these individual examples of high quality pedagogy, the Queensland School Reform Longitudinal Study (Hayes et al., 2006; Lingard et al., 2000) which included 12 high schools across the state, reported that examples of high quality teaching were not common. It was observed that few teachers used specific and appropriate teaching strategies for the diverse populations in their classrooms.

In the Ayres, Dingham and Sawyer study of three high schools in New South Wales (Ayres et al., 2000) ,where teachers who were regarded as experts by colleagues and students were observed, this study also documented high quality pedagogical practices. Each of the schools had a high proportion of at risk students in their populations. These expert teachers displayed high levels of content knowledge, used a large variety of teaching strategies, had high levels of classroom interaction, engaged in face to face teaching, were organised and planned and developed their own resources to supplement texts and materials. They built understanding in their students through sequential steps coupled with high expectations of their students' ability to learn. Observers noted that students quickly understood what they were being taught. New concepts which were introduced in lessons were interspersed with regular classroom routines and repetition, including regular revision of work previously covered. The researchers concluded that it was the quality of the individual teachers that made a difference to student learning, not the schools that the students attended.

This study also examined the profiles of these teachers to track any personal qualities that they might have in common. Profiles indicated that the teachers were very experienced, with a mean of 21 years, and had taught at their current school for a mean of over 13 years. There were also a high percentage of females in the teaching group. The researchers observed that all these teachers revealed an, "intuitive grasp of the teaching situation and performed in qualitatively different ways from the novice or the

competent performer" (Ayres et al., 2000, p. 5). Although this particular piece of research concluded that female teachers dominated as expert teachers, a recent Australian investigation by Martin and Marsh (Martin & Marsh, 2005) which interviewed 964 students, both male and female in five high schools, found no link between the gender of the teacher and student motivation and engagement. These qualities were dependent on two factors, the nature of the pedagogy delivered to the students and the relationship which had been established between teacher and student.

Researchers have also consulted with students and teachers about types of teaching practices. In the study by Briggs, Johnson, Shepherd and Sedbrook,students reported mainstream lessons as boring but this statement was regarded by the researchers as camouflaging inadequate pedagogy. They also (2002) cautioned teachers to translate this comment to indicate lack of understanding by the student. Teachers who were consulted in the Vinson inquiry blamed ongoing testing regimes as the cause of lack of time for, "reflection, innovative pedagogy or collaboration" and for an inability to provide engaging lessons for students (Esson et al., 2002, p.17).

Giroux (1981) asserted that classroom teachers must develop a critical pedagogy to link their lives and that of the students together. This pedagogy should include, "self-reflection and understanding with a commitment to change the nature of a larger society"(p. 58). Smyth (2001) concluded that the dominant discourse in education had positioned teachers as technicians who must be efficient, effective, and provide quality outcomes.

McWhirter, Mcwhirter, McWhirter and McWhirter (1998) noted that pedagogy, curriculum and assessment were inextricably linked and their combined effect impacted on the self-esteem and self-concept of at risk students who were particularly vulnerable. Westwood (2004) reflected that this vulnerability was evident in the unwillingness or inability of students with learning difficulties to ask for help from teachers (Westwood, 2004) McWhirter, McWhirter, McWhirter and Mcwhirter (1998) were critical of a standardised test curriculum which legitimised literacy and numeracy as the only source of academic achievement. They argued that this narrowing of focus caused other high quality work to be overlooked and devalued. This affected all students at risk but in particular, those with learning difficulties. Westwood (2004) reiterated that the curricula within secondary schools were often inappropriate for students with learning difficulties and not, "real, realistic, relevant or rational" (p. 58).

Dewey (1973), in a seminal piece, elaborated that educators had a responsibility to provide wide ranging experiences that suit all their students and which fostered learning at school and the disposition to continue learning in the future. He specifically identified the reluctance of teachers to adapt materials, including curricula and assessment, to match the individual needs of students as the primary cause of school failure.

Researchers have consistently maintained that students with learning difficulties needed a differentiated pedagogy which was explicit, direct and active (Ashman & Elkins, 2002; Christensen & Baker, 2002; Corbett & Norwich, 1999). Ellis (2005) advocated for the use of an eclectic model incorporating direct, explicit teaching, the teaching of strategies and the use of constructivist, student centered teaching techniques. The Queensland School Reform longitudinal study (Hayes et al., 2006; Lingard et al., 2000) indicated that appropriate pedagogy for diverse students' needs did exist across Queensland secondary schools. In studies which showed high student motivation, engagement and achievement in students (Ayres et al., 2000; Wallace et al., 2002) expert teachers were characterised as those who used a large number of teaching strategies, had high levels of interactions with students, had a good knowledge of content and who had positive relationships with their students. Researchers asserted that teachers needed to have empathy for students who were different from themselves (Corbett & Norwich, 1999), needed to be reflective (Giroux, 1981) and needed to provide wide ranging experiences that encouraged students to learn now and in the future (Dewey, 1973; Ellis, 2005). Regimes which created irrelevant curricula (Westwood, 2004) and a test driven assessment program that only values literacy and numeracy rather than a wide range of skills, created classroom environments and schools where students with learning difficulties failed and underachieved (McWhirter et al., 1998).

One method that has been suggested to widen teaching strategies and experiences for students with learning difficulties has been the use of collaborative teaching.

2.4.3 Collaborative teaching

Christensen (1993) asserted that the solution to effectively teaching students with learning difficulties, and those with other disabilities in the classroom, was to promote collaboration and meaningful dialogue between generalist and special educators. This included observation of the practice of each teacher combined with the willingness of

practitioners to engage in critical discourse. Opportunities for leadership should be made available to teachers as well as collaborative partnerships reaching beyond the school. Bair and Woodward (1964) introduced some aspects of this vision into classrooms by team teaching and later by the process of coteaching (Rice & Zigmond, 2000; Zigmond & Matta, 2004)

Bair (1964) envisaged team teaching as the ultimate in collaboration. It could only truly be said to occur when there was constant collaborative planning between teachers, a unity and commitment between them and a genuine sharing. The atmosphere would also be one of reverence and respect for the other. Whether this vision of team teaching has ever been achieved is debatable, but there were recent studies where coteaching was investigated.

Coteaching has been defined as, 'where a special education teacher and regular classroom teacher are both in the class and both responsible for its teaching and administration' (Rice & Zigmond, 2000, p. 11). Presumably, the same vision that inspired team teaching would apply to this form of collaborative practice. However the Rice and Zigmond (2000) study of coteaching in a number of high schools in Queensland and the USA, discovered that the relationships between special education teachers and subject teachers were unequal: the special education teacher occupied a subservient position (Rice & Zigmond, 2000). This project also reported that subject teachers were uncomfortable with different outcomes for the same subject matter and revealed that students with learning difficulties were a burden. A subsequent investigation by Zigmond and Matta (2004) which involved observation of 41 volunteer coteaching pairs in a total of 14 urban, suburban and rural high schools, confirmed that all of the special education teachers were in a support role, seldom took the lead in teaching initiatives, and rarely taught new content. This occurred across all pairs and within all the subjects observed which included Maths, English, Science and Social Science. The special educator was assigned a support role which included tutoring and taking over the class in the subject teacher's absence. Data indicated that although 70 percent of all interactions between the special education teacher and the students were substantive rather than procedural, the way in which the special educator was utilised in class would not make a significant difference to the academic achievements of students with learning difficulties. Concepts were not taught in a different way at a class level, that might be more appropriate to students with special needs. The investigation concluded that coteaching was not true collaborative or team teaching and served to continue the

status quo. Despite the small number of teachers involved in the study, it indicated the need for further examination of the relationship between special education and general teaching staff.

Noddings (1998) claimed that our views of collaborative practices were too limited. She suggested that collaboration should occur at all levels particularly between teachers and other teachers and between student and student. Teachers had an ethical obligation to, "convey the moral importance of cooperation" (p. 315). Students should be asked to help each other, not just to improve academic performance but to learn how to work together and to cooperate for the common good.

Collaborative practices implemented in an attempt to support students with special needs in mainstream classrooms, have been largely unsuccessful and remain problematic. The following section considers, in more detail, this whole question of support for students with learning difficulties.

2.4.4 Support

Milton and Forlin (2003) concluded that support for students with learning difficulties generally occured in mainstream classes, although the students were often withdrawn to work with the Learning Support Teacher (Learning Difficulties) or an aide under their direction. In a recent inquiry in Victoria (Bartak & Fry, 2004), where support was generally provided in mainstream settings, teachers were canvassed to provide their perceptions of the number and type of mainstream students needing support. Teachers in nine primary schools and five secondary schools participated in the study and reported on 1,005 students. Bartak and Fry (2004) confirmed that large numbers of mainstream students who experienced moderate to severe difficulties in more than one subject area were identified although these students were unfunded for support programs.

Ellert (1993) reported from research conducted in the USA with 293 high school teachers that despite the prevalence of large numbers of students with learning difficulties in mainstream classes, many teachers were reluctant to seek outside help in addressing the learning needs of the students in their classes. Instead they believed that they could supply all the necessary expertise and accommodations. The findings from Ellert's research were corroborated by Graham and Prock (1997) where students with special needs were required to be accommodated in mainstream settings rather than in a special education unit. In the schools investigated in this Canadian project, the

Learning Assistance Teacher was required to support and collaborate with the general classroom teacher as well as teach students coping strategies. Results demonstrated that some teachers were resistant to the change and that the special educator needed to provide professional development to classroom teachers. Teachers complained of not enough time to consult and the rate of attrition of Learning Assistance Teachers was high. They seldom remained in their position for more than one year. Reasons advanced were intensity of the workload and the administrative requirements associated with support. Hallahan and Mercer (2002) also reported that the documentation associated with Individual Education Plans (IEP) indicated that these plans substantially reduced the time left for teaching or individualising instruction for both special education and general teachers who were required to produce them.

A number of investigations have illustrated that with appropriate interventions, the academic achievements of students with learning difficulties can be improved (Crawford, 1996; Rubin, 2003; Wallace et al., 2003). Geisthardt and Munsch (1996) maintained however that many students with learning difficulties lived in a world of academic denial as their way of coping with academic demands that were beyond their reach. They also reported that when the experiences of high school students with learning difficulties and those without were compared, the students with a disability simply ignored their academic problems and they did not actively seek help. Delpit (1988) in her seminal work on silenced voices in classes, as well as Cook-Sather (2002; , 2003) argued that educational researchers had much to learn from students with learning difficulties. Students needed to learn how to speak their truths and to listen while researchers needed to value and recognise students' perspectives.

Rubin (2003) in a small example of action research which provided appropriate interventions to students and listened to student voices, documented teachers establishing a specific group to assist high school students at risk of academic failure. This group implemented timetabled support for students and those providing support were always the same people, therefore allowing effective relationships to be established. Out of school support was also provided by a teacher who knew what was required, as well as a place to meet where students could find community, where resources and materials were supplied and where students could also help each other. This gave the students some the experience of being experts in a field. Results for the students involved were positive, that is, they did not fail in assignments or subjects. The intervention addressed emotional and academic issues that confronted students as well

as dealtwith the logistics and pragmatics of material and resources needed to do what was required of them. Although this project was small it produced valuable insights and would warrant being expanded to include other schools as well as a longitudinal study.

A research project was conducted in Queensland which examined the effectiveness of interventions used for students with learning difficulties in primary government and nongovernment schools (Education Queensland, 2006). Although the research is complete, findings still have not been released. The study was part of a national project: Effective Teaching and Learning Initiatives for students with learning difficulties. Each state conducted its own investigation. In Queensland, 159 principals and 120 learning support teachers participated in a survey to establish what interventions were currently used in Years 2 to 7 in the primary school, and to examine their efficacy. Data for analysis also included results from the Year 2 diagnostic net, Year 3, Year 5 and Year 7 standardised test results and a number of case studies. Demographic information related to learning support teachers, including qualifications and professional development undertaken, was also collected.

Unfortunately, at the time of writing this thesis, the results of this project were not available and no interim reports issued. Discussions with researchers involved in the project (personal communication, 2006, July18) indicated that some of the results of the study will be surprising. The results from this project should create a national snapshot of support mechanisms across all sectors at the primary level and supply valuable insights and lessons which might be able to be applied to secondary schools to the ultimate benefit of their students with learning difficulties.

Milton and Forlin (2003) maintained that support for students with learning difficulties in secondary schools was dependent on the school culture itself which emanated from the policies and the management of the school. In their study, success or failure in support for these students was ultimately determined by the attitude of the principal of the school. The following section considers the concept of leadership in secondary schools and its impact upon students with learning difficulties.

2.4.5 Leadership in Schools

Findings from a number of projects have suggested that the leadership of the school has a direct effect upon the lives of students with learning difficulties (Rice &

Zigmond, 2000) and others who were disadvantaged within the school culture (Cuttance, 2001).

Rice and Zigmond (2000) in an investigation into coteaching in the USA and Queensland high schools, observed that if the principal and deputy principal provided strong leadership and support for inclusive practices and students with special educational needs, the entrenched negative attitudes towards inclusion of senior teachers could be ameliorated. School effectiveness literature reviewed by Cuttance (2001) also acknowledged that schools' effectiveness was different for different groups within the same school community. Schools tended to be the least effective for students with the lowest levels of achievement. This group included students with learning difficulties. Moreover, ineffective schools were characterised by ineffectual leadership.

Dinham, Ciarney, Craigie and Wilson (1995) in research conducted in three western Sydney high schools, established the link between the leadership qualities of the principal and positive school climate. Results indicated that the principal was required to be approachable and available to both staff and students and that delegation of duties allowed the principal time to fulfil the leadership role. The ability to delegate was confirmed as important in the Vinson inquiry (Esson et al., 2002) which acknowledged that principals were spending more time on daily administration rather than educational leadership.

Rutter, Maughan, Mortimore, Ouston and Smith addressed the qualities that made an effective school leader. Their study found that leadership should be firm but be marked by friendliness, kindness and caring qualities. Moreover, it should be empowering for all (Rutter et al., 1979). Staratt (1993) claimed that to transform schools, leadership must possess a moral dimension. This included a respect for principles such as freedom, equity, justice and community. To overcome resistance to change, teachers should be genuinely involved in the consultation process and effective principals were required to provide the leadership for this to occur.

Leaders with moral qualities who can consult and collaborate widely, as well as delegate, appear to be essential for a school to be effective and to serve the needs of all its students. Schools, therefore, should become communities where all are valued for their contribution. So what is this idea of schools as community and what are the policies that are required for community to be established?

2.4.6 Schools as Community

In recent years, there have been calls by researchers for schools to become communities. Although conceptions of community may be different for different writers, they have all envisaged schools as places, "where young people can grow and be nourished" (Kennedy, 2001, p. 214).

One vision advanced was that schools should operate as a community of learners. This community assumed responsibility for all its learners and would alter school organisation and policies for this to become a reality. Four studies, two in the United Kingdom (Avramidis et al., 2000, 2002) and two in the USA (Wallace et al., 2003; , 2002) were considered communities of learners and recorded positive academic outcomes for all students including those with learning difficulties. Collaboration and consultation was implemented, at all levels, to create a positive learning environment. In the study conducted by Wallace, Anderson and Bartholomay (2003) organisational changes such a block scheduling facilitated this and ensured that teachers had common times to meet and plan. In these schools, special education teachers had a significant teaching role in mainstream classes. Collaboration between teachers, as well as the acceptance and ownership of individual student performance, were regarded as being the crucial elements in the overall academic achievements of students with learning difficulties and in the creation of these community of learners.

Other schools that have successfully created community and retained at risk students have adopted a caring and a holistic approach to student welfare. These schools employed skilled, experienced staff who had energy, enthusiasm and commitment. This, combined with flexibility in timetabling, again engendered a positive environment (Department of Training and Youth Affairs, 2001a; McInerney, 2004).

McWhirter, McWhirter, McWhirter and McWhirter (1998) identified common elements for effective school communities. Features included effective leadership, especially strong instructional leadership, an emphasis on academic performance and a collegial and collaborative staff with a low turnover. Discipline that was consistent and perceived as fair was also a feature. Effective school communities were acknowledged as being rich in social capital and had active involvement by students, parents and members of the wider community.

A project conducted by the Australian Council of Educational Research (ACER) (McGaw, Piper, Banks, & Evans, 1992) which had responses from 2,325 schools across

Australia excluding Queensland, depicted effective school communities as having caring, committed and enthusiastic teachers. Responses to the questionnaire indicated that national curricula or national test results were not primary concerns but rather qualitative aspects associated with school, for example school climate and ethos, were seen as being most important. Students were also seen as needing to be respected and treated as individuals with individual needs. Respondents, especially from Catholic schools, emphasised the importance of a shared vision in establishing community. Despite the size of this study it was limited by the lack of consistency in whose views were represented in the response to the survey. Two hundred and four responses were completed by principals and twenty nine were completed with the input of the whole school community including students. It was unclear exactly whose views were represented in the remainder of the responses. This needed to be clarified and could be overcome in future research by the inclusion of interviews with focus groups in the data collection phase.

Secondary schools face additional challenges if they are to become caring, effective communities. Hargreaves, Earl and Ryan (1996) reported that secondary schools have consistently been shown to be, "distant and impersonal" (p. 19) communities with teachers isolated into departments and classrooms who had little contact with their peers. Bryce and Withers (2003) and Larson (1992) concurred and suggested additionally that students also were polarised. Darling-Hammond (1994; , 1997) asserted that rather than escalating these problems by mandating highly prescriptive national curricula and testing, schools needed to develop capacity. Capacity was defined as an ability to promote critical learning and problem solving by all students. She expressed that is could be achieved by developing the, "knowledge, skills and attitudes of teachers, administrators, parents and the community" (p. 4).

How could this caring community be achieved? Sergiovanni (1994) suggested that if all members within a school were to be valued, schools must change the basis of their existence from one of formal organisation to the encompassing concept of community. He maintained that schools which had successfully developed community possessed relationships that were caring, professional, collegial, inclusive, inquiring and innovative. These relationships engendered a shared and valued ideology which was actively enacted at all levels within the school community (Sergiovanni, 1994).

A recent study conducted by Carrington and Holm (2005) which used the Index for Inclusion as a basis for a series of interviews and focus groups in a Queensland

secondary school. It found that the process identified areas of concern to students in the school and gave them a sense of being part of a caring family when their concerns were acknowledged and acted upon. This result was encouraging but the study only involved small numbers of students from Year 9, a limited number of teaching staff, five, and one parent. It is difficult to ascertain and acknowledged by the researchers, whether this sense of empowerment and caring went beyond those who were immediately involved in the study. Case studies of teachers, parents and students as well as surveys of attitudes of teachers and students would be needed to establish if the process utlised in the research generated wider levels of empowerment, altered power structures and created overall perceptions of caring in the school.

Lynch and Lodge (2002) in a research project conducted in12 Irish secondary schools examined the power structures within these institutions. The study reported that unequal power relations existed in all participating schools. Difference was not respected and the organisation, pedagogy and curricula of the schools both reflected and perpetuated this situation. Teachers also had different levels of power on staff which was dependent upon their status in the school community. Status could vary in terms of employment, age, subjects taught or gender. These findings confirmed the work of Smyth (2001) which established that unequal power relations in school communities disempowered both teachers and students.

The sources of power in school communities were also highlighted in an Australian initiative by Dinham and Scott (1996) which surveyed 71 primary and secondary teachers from western Sydney. The sample included teachers from 19 secondary schools, who participated in a self-review of teacher satisfaction, motivation and health. Low levels of occupational satisfaction were documented. Although teachers were most satisfied with the core business of teaching and positive student/teacher relationships, dissatisfaction occurred when teachers felt that they had little control over outcomes. Sources of dissatisfaction included societal pressures, workload, employer relations, policy changes and status. Although primary, special education and secondary teachers participated, results did not differentiate between the levels of satisfaction in each group. Therefore, it was not possible to ascertain if secondary teachers had additional or specific pressures they felt were beyond their control.

A number of continuing debates exist in relation to school organisation in establishing community in schools. The Queensland Reform Longitudinal Study

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advocated that backward mapping, "from good classroom practice to complementary school structure" (Lingard et al., 2000,p.100) be implemented to promote social justice and equitable outcomes. Research by Braggart (1997) and the Australian Curriculum Studies Association focused on the desirability of establishing middle schools which concentrated on holistic, individualistic approaches, to establish community. The Australian Curriculum Studies Association presented middle schooling as a way of overcoming alienation within the 10 to 14 year age group which arose from conflict between values different from our own (Australian Curriculum Studies Association, 1996). Dwyer and Wyn (2001) suggested that student disengagement from school might be an indication that the student has been placed in an unbearable situation. The Australian Curriculum Studies Association (Australian Curriculum Studies Association, 1996) advocated that a holistic approach to school including a, "shared vision and commitment to young adults" needed to be established to overcome problems of alienation and disengagement for at risk students, including those with learning difficulties (p. 3). They recommended including cooperative planning, consultation between students and teachers, timetabling changes, active pedagogy and increasing the pastoral aspects of the school. Liaison between the school, parents and the community was also advocated.

Although the research already cited reported ample evidence of student alienation from school, a survey conducted by the Department of Training and Youth Affairs identified teacher alienation particularly in secondary settings (Department of Training and Youth Affairs, 2001a). Excessive teaching workloads and complex timetables were indicated as sources of teacher alienation. Concerns were also raised about the inequality in power relations between teachers and school management.

Kennedy (2001) and Sergiovanni (1994) suggested that effective schools, where students could experience nurturing, were required to transcend the ideas related to formal organisations. In order for this to become a reality schools needed to become communities. They also suggested that schools which practised community valued difference among its students and staff and practised collaboration and consultation between teachers, parents, students and the wider community. McWhirter, Mcwhirter, McWhirter and McWhirter (1998) and Sergiovanni (1994) recommended a shared vision and strong leadership . Dinham and Scott (1995) Lynch and Lodge (2002)and Symth (2001) also noted that teachers needed to become collegial to overcome the unequal power relations which fostered alienation . Both the Australian Curriculum Studies Association (1996) and the Department of Training and Youth Affairs (Department of

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Training and Youth Affairs, 2001b)indicated that schools needed to become communities to overcome student and staff alienation and disengagement .

The final section of this chapter examines literature related to teacher education and professional development.

2.5 The Teaching Journey

2.5.1 Teacher Education

Over the last decade extensive studies such as those directed by Louden and others (2000) in *Mapping the territory* which used interviews, case studies and the examination of policy documents, reported a lack of special education skills in general primary and secondary teachers. This study suggested that the lack of appropriate skills and knowledge hindered generalist teachers' ability to be effective teachers of students with learning difficulties. Other studies as discussed in the following section also contributed to the body of knowledge related to teaching skills and students with learning difficulties.

An Australian national review of the preparation of primary and secondary English teachers presided over by Christie (1991) found that 50 percent of teachers employed to teach students with learning difficulties at that time, had no additional training either in literacy or in special education. The later 1999 longitudinal survey of Teachers in Australian Schools (Department of Training and Youth Affairs, 2001c) documented a further decline in the number of teachers with special education qualifications. A Queensland study by van Kraayenoord and Farrell (1998) acknowledged that there was no mandatory requirement by the then Board of Teacher Registration for Queensland teachers to have formal training in special needs or knowledge about learning difficulties. Although the registering body has since evolved into the Queensland College of Teachers, registration requirements for learning support teachers have not altered.

Rohl and Greaves (2005) in their recent Australian study of the preparation of preservice teachers from preschool to Year 10 which used policy and curricula documents from teaching institutions, found no structural uniformity across the states and institutions. Additionally, results from surveys and interviews reported that both students and senior school staff were critical of preservice courses and their preparation of graduates to teach literacy and numeracy to diverse groups including students with

learning difficulties. In schools, many of these at risk students were taught by teachers' aides rather than teachers. Recommendations were made for preservice teachers to be involved with institutions where practical assessment and teaching occurred in the form of intensive teaching programs to learn strategies to effectively teach students with learning difficulties.

Other researchers and theorists have offered additional solutions and insights into how to create effective teachers for students with learning difficulties, and others with diverse needs. Giroux (1985) in his seminal work *Teachers as transformative intellectuals*, criticised teacher training as being behaviourist and not addressing the questions of what was taught and how teachers might teach for the larger good. He criticised the making of "technocrats" (p. 377) and the resultant de-skilling of teachers. He advocated that teachers' work was to transform both themselves and students to be, "active, critical citizens" (p.378). In an earlier paper, Giroux (1981) proposed that teachers were not trained to recognise the social construction of knowledge: that is knowledge was not free of values and that all classroom relationships had values that reflected those of society. Noddings (1992) Sergiovanni (1994) and Fullan (1993) also advocated that teaching, as a profession, must transcend competence and that teachers needed commitment to core values and beliefs that remained at the centre of their practice. This practice should be amplified by exemplary pedagogy and commitment: all located within an ethic of caring.

Laursen (2005) in a small study conducted in Denmark confirmed the veracity of the comments of the theorists cited above. Thirty primary and secondary teachers, who were considered to be authentic teachers, were interviewed and their classes observed. Authentic teachers were considered as those who related well to students and whose students achieved academically. Although the investigation had limitations in the number of observations that were undertaken, the findings reflected the views held by the theorists. All of the teachers treated their students with respect and as individuals. The teachers were all exemplary in their pedagogy and they all worked within a framework of ethical values.

Other studies have corroborated the importance of teachers' work in creating quality learning outcomes. An OECD (2001) report indicated that quality teachers were the cornerstone of success in schooling. The quality of learning and the success of innovation and reform were all dependent on teachers. McWhirter, McWhirter,

McWhirter and McWhirter (1998) have concluded that teachers needed to acknowledge their professionalism if the process of education was to be improved for all students.

With the policy of inclusion established within most schools in Westernized countries, teachers are required to teach the needs of a diverse range of students, including those with learning difficulties. A review of a teacher survey 1999, associated with the Educational Opportunity for All programme, (1994-1998) revealed that knowledge about strategies and inclusion were required by teachers as well as a belief in inclusion. Even these two aspects were not enough if teachers and administrators were unwilling and competent to act as agents of change in their school. This echoed the insights of Fullan (1993) who called upon all teachers to become agents of change.

In a recent study by Westwood and Graham (2003) into inclusive practices, a survey of 77 primary teachers in New South Wales and South Australia focused on attitude to inclusion and its benefits and the difficulties it created in the classroom. Results demonstrated that students with emotional and behavioural difficulties were the most difficult for teachers to accommodate. Teachers cited inadequate training and professional development as reasons for their inability to effectively teach this group of students. Negative attitudes towards inclusion were also held by 27 percent of teachers from South Australia and 11 percent of teachers from New South Wales. Although the policy of inclusion has been implemented in Australian schools, there appears to be both resistance to the policy itself and an inability for teachers to be able to effectively teach the more difficult categories of included students, particularly students with learning difficulties.

A recent qualitative project (Titone, 2005) conducted in one state of the USA, investigated perceptions of various stakeholders, teachers, administrators, students and parents, into barriers to inclusion. It also canvassed their views on what prospective teachers were required to know to enable them to effectively teach a diverse range of students. Barriers identified were inadequate preservice education, a medical model which encouraged teachers to think of students as deficits and a dual system of general and special education teacher training. Participants believed that this presented an implicit message to teachers, that students with special needs were the responsibility of the special education teacher.

Some of the findings had important implications for teacher education and a number of recommendations were made. Firstly, teachers must believe that they were capable of teaching all children and be receptive to the children's needs. They must

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also have a diverse range of pedagogy and know how to adapt a curriculum to suit individual needs. Teachers must actively promote community in schools and become involved in collaborative planning and consultation, including with parents. These skills should also be modelled at training institutions. The barriers between special education and general teachers should be dismantled with opportunities given for joint courses, fieldwork and placements. The findings from this study supported establishing an emphasis on the ethics of teachers' work and wide collaborative practice. In an earlier discussion of inclusion in the UK (Ainscow, Booth, & Dyson, 1999) the authors also indicated that the role of special education teachers in schools needed to change from one of individual and group instruction, into a leadership role for developing schools into effective learning communities.

Throughout all the literature examined on teacher education, a number of themes predominated: teachers should be caring, ethical and skilled professionals who recognised that education occurred in socially and politically constructed environments. Teachers required appropriate skills and competencies to teach for diverse needs in the classroom. They also needed to believe in themselves and their task and to approach it with commitment, enthusiasm and innovative practice. Collaboration and consultation were highlighted as important features of establishing a socially just and effective practice. Gonzalez and Carlson (2001) noted however, that despite its importance, teacher education and professional development generally paid little attention to collaboration in schools and in educational authorities .

The final section of this review considers the role of professional development in addressing the needs of students with learning difficulties.

2.5.2 Professional Development

Brooks, Milne, Paterson, Johansson and Hart (1997) recognised that professional development of staff was important especially in the development of effective teaching/learning and behaviour management strategies that did not rely on excluding students from classes. However a number of researchers have reported that opportunities for professional development, consultation and access to collaboration were limited and recommended that they should be extended (Hallihan, Hallihan, & Boulter, 1999; Kraayenoord, Elkins, Palmer, Rickards, & Colbert, 2002; Louden et al., 2000; Prochnow, Kearney, & Carroll-Lind, 1999; Treuen et al., 2000; van Kraayenoord &

Treuen, 2000). Additionally, Elkins (2000) reported that Queensland teachers were not accessing existing university and in-service programmes which provided training in teaching and assessing students with learning difficulties .

A large scale New Zealand Ministry of Education professional development initiative by Kearney and Poskitt (2001), documented that up to 50 percent of New Zealand teachers offered professional development either had not accessed opportunities or had not completed their contractual obligations. Although 50 percent of teachers responding to questionnaires, indicated that they felt improved confidence for teaching special needs students, a further 69 percent stated that the professional development did not reflect their needs in practical terms, despite a needs analysis being undertaken before the initiative was implemented. This study raised many questions that required further investigation particularly the representativeness of the respondents, the conditions and type of offer for professional development and the willingness of teachers to be involved. Although there was widespread agreement about the necessity for professional development in knowledge and skills associated with special education, there was little consensus about how to implement this initiative or how teachers might become willing participants in the process.

This research confirmed the findings of an earlier OECD report (Kennedy, 2001) which indicated that professional development available to teachers was brief and lacked cohesion or development. The report indicated that professional development was imposed from above and rarely was the result of teacher initiatives. Similarly, corroborating data was apparent from an Australian study by van Kraayenoord,Treuen and Gallagher (2000) into the provision of professional development courses . This research identified a shortage of experts in numeracy and lack of availability of staff in universities for literacy professional development courses, which compounded the problem.

There has been an Australian teachers' initiative, the Project for Enhancing Effective Learning (PEEL) (Baird & Northfield, 1992; Mitchell & Mitchell, 2005) that was implemented to promote professional development and collaborative practice among teachers. This project, which still continues primarily in Victoria, involves thousands of teachers, both primary and secondary, across 70 schools. It uses teachers to present innovative practices to other teachers. It has continued to be a grass roots response by practising teachers to the problem of obtaining effective and ongoing professional development.

The Vinson inquiry in New South Wales (Esson et al., 2002) indicated that teachers, as well parents and students all recognised the need for continuing teacher professional development to raise levels of awareness of students with diverse needs and their effectiveness in delivering quality educational experiences to these students

2.6 Conclusion

Despite the evidence of high prevalence in schools (Westwood & Graham, 2000), and contested definitions, a national definition to describe students with learning difficulties has still to be created (Rivalland, 2002; Watson & Boman, 2005). Although evidence has been presented that these students share similar characteristics (Ashman & Elkins, 2002) and have remained the largest group of students with special educational needs (Wallace et al., 2003) no further advances have been made in establishing a national definition since the time of the Cadman report in the 1970s (Cadman, 1976) and the later work of the NHRMC in the 1990s (National Health and Medical Research Council, 1990). Students with learning difficulties continued to experience school failure and underachievement and were largely alienated and disengaged from school (Brown et al., 2003). As a group, they were over represented as juvenile delinquents (Juvenile Crime in New South Wales Report, 2000), in mental health institutions (Al-Yaman et al., 2002), and as the long term unemployed (Lamb & McKenzie, 2001).

Although policies exist in the major Queensland education providers related to students with learning difficulties (Education Queensland, 1996; Queensland Catholic Education Commission, 2003), these policies have been consistently undermined by other discourses which have positioned students as the cause of their own failure (Fulcher, 1989a). This has contributed to the maintenance of the status quo (Hayes et al., 2006; Kennedy, 2001). Restorative justice was advocated by some commentators (Gale, 2000; Young, 1990) combined with an ethic of care in schools (Noddings, 1998) as ways of overcoming injustice and lack of equity for students with learning difficulties in schools.

Schools as institutions reflected the dominant discourses of society including their economic and political ideologies and where a managerialist mindset dominated. This has placed the emphasis in schools on outcomes and accountability (McInerney, 2004) rather than on providing caring and nurturing communities for students with learning difficulties (Kennedy, 2001; Sergiovanni, 1994). However, what parents of

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these students wanted from schools, was revealed as being in stark contrast to what was delivered. Parents wantedtheir children to be happy at school (Avramidis et al., 2002) and their children's needs to be recognised and accommodated (Burrows, 2004). Parents also wanted the question of homework to be re-evaluated as it was shown to be a source of friction in the lives of families (Bryan & Burstein, 2004). Parents remain more interested in the ethos and the valuing of their children in the school community rather than academic outcomes (Avramidis et al., 2000).

Evidence was provided to indicate that where positive school climates existed, student/ teacher relationships flourished and students with learning difficulties felt empowered to discuss their work and their personal problems with teachers (Croninger & Lee, 2001). Numerous studies confirmed that students at risk preferred teachers who were interested in them, treated them with respect, made the work interesting and relevant and made school work fun (Melican, 2001; Trent & Slade, 2001).

However, life at school for students with learning difficulties was consistently revealed by the literature presented in this review, to be a generally difficult and alienating experience. This was despite evidence of studies that a positive attitude by teachers towards these students combined with effective pedagogy and classroom management could alter the experiences of school failure for these students (Rubin, 2003; Wallace et al., 2002). Many teachers however, indicated their reluctance to work with students with special educational needs (Esson et al., 2002) despite inclusive policies in schools. Researchers documented that to successfully teach students with learning difficulties, a variety of teaching strategies should be utilised (Christensen & Baker, 2002) and that teachers needed to have empathy for their students (Corbett & Norwich, 1999). Additionally, classrooms needed to be organised in ways to enhance the students' learning styles (McWhirter et al., 1998).

Policies adopted by schools were also shown to be integral to the development of community (Bryce & Withers, 2003). However, many of the policies implemented weredriven by specific interest groups, for example, business and undermined the capacity of schools to become caring, nurturing communities (Kennedy, 2001; Parry & O'Brien, 2000).

Theorists and researchers consistently argued that the transformation of teachers remained the key to improving schools for all the students (Fullan, 1993; Giroux, 1985) including improving the academic outcomes of students with learning difficulties (McWhirter et al., 1998). Teachers needed awareness that schools were not neutral

political environments and that policies and perceptions of disability were socially constructed (Christensen, 1993; Parry & O'Brien, 2000). It was a necessity for teachers to become involved in policy debates associated with pedagogy, curricula and assessment practices (Parry & O'Brien, 2000) if transformative changes were to occur in schools (Giroux, 1985).

Evidence was also been provided that teachers lacked appropriate preservice training and professional development to effectively teach students with learning difficulties (Clough, 1998; Dimmock & Bain, 1992 unpub.). Additionally, teachers needed to adopt more positive attitudes towards students with special educational needs (Westwood & Graham, 2003) and to utilise collaborative practices at both the preservice and practicing teacher level, if at risk student academic outcomes were to be improved (Gonzalez & Carlson, 2001; Titone, 2005). This chapter revealed that the opportunities for teachers to acquire these skills and attitudes in any consistent manner were limited, hampered by the lack of availability of developmental professional development courses that were implemented over a substantial period of time (Kennedy, 2001; van Kraayenoord & Treuen, 2000). It was shown however, in one study, that teachers, parents and students all suggested that professional development for teachers was the path which led to increased teacher expertise and improved attitudes (Esson et al., 2002).

In conclusion, the factors which influence the academic achievement of students with learning difficulties in the secondary school have been critiqued. Rather than being intrinsic to the students, they were revealed through this review of related literature to be created by schools, educational policies and by a society which accepted the discourse of individual deficit rather than the need to address the issues and to implement the many innovative and compassionate solutions suggested.

Chapter Three, which follows, examines the research design and the conceptual framework that underpinned this research project which explores the experiences of secondary students with learning difficulties in Queensland schools.

CHAPTER THREE

In research the horizon recedes as we advance, and
it is no nearer at 60 than it was at 20. As the power of endurance
weakens with age, the urgency of the pursuit grows more intense…
and research is always incomplete.
Mark Patterson 'Issac Casaubon' 1875.

Research Design and Conceptual Framework

3.1 Introduction

This chapter examines a multimethod research design, underpinned by the transformative emancipatory paradigm of disability. The purpose of this research was to explore the experiences at school for mainstreamed secondary students with learning difficulties and for advocating parents. Consistent with the aims of the underlying paradigm, the results will be used to advocate on behalf of these participants to encourage a more supportive, structured and positive response to these students' needs by education systems and by individual schools. This chapter provides a brief overview of the research questions which guided the project, and establishes a justification for the use of a mixed methods approach, which includes a brief history of its development and use. The theoretical background to the development of the transformative emancipatory paradigm of disability is considered. Finally, the specific design of the project is outlined.

3.2 Research Questions: Overview

This multimethod research project incorporated two phases with separate research questions operational for each. The specific questions governing each are outlined in Chapters Four and Five. Research questions for Phase One related to secondary teachers' attitudes and understanding about students with learning difficulties in Queensland schools. They explored the relationships that existed, if any, between

these issues and selected demographic indicators such as gender, location and size of school, years teaching and educational qualifications. Factors which teachers perceived as affecting available support in schools were also targeted. Phase Two research questions were aimed at highlighting the experiences of each group, that is teachers, mainstream students with learning difficulties and advocating parents, to document their voices and to explore their perceptions.

Johnson and Onwuegbuzie (2004) argued that educational research could be strengthened by using mixed methods in generating data as it overcame the individual weaknesses of quantitative or qualitative designs used in isolation . In this research, where both an exploratory, broad overview was required, as well as depth, to explore the voices of particular groups directly affected by school and educational policy and decision making, a mixed method approach was desirable. The following section briefly reviews the history and use of mixed methods in research.

3.3 Mixed/multimethod Methodologies

3. 3.1 Developing a Methodology

Mixed method or multimethod studies first emerged in the 1950s in the field of psychology (Hunter & Brewer, 2003) and continued to develop into a separate methodology with an accompanying literature which addressed design, key definitional terms and underlying paradigms (Creswell, 1994, 1999, 2003; Johnson & Onwuegbuzie, 2004; Morse, 2003; Tashakkori & Teddlie, 1998, 2003a; Teddlie & Tashakkori, 2003).

The definition of what constitutes a mixed/multimethod study and their underlying paradigms are still only partially determined. There is broad consensus that studies of this type must involve both qualitative and quantitative components, although the way in which these elements are combined is still being debated. For example, Tashakkori and Teddlie (2003a) defined mixed method as, "more than one world view" (p.11) while Morse (2003) considered multimethod as being where qualitative and quantitative components were 'relatively complete and used together to form the essential

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components of one research project' (p.191). The present research project utilised Morse's multimethod perspective.

Although there is agreement about the use of quantitative and qualitative components in mixed methods, there remains substantive disagreement as to what paradigms, if any, underpin this methodology. A paradigm has been defined as, "what should be studied, what questions should be asked, and what rules should be followed in interpreting the answers" (Chafetz, 1978, p.36). Theorists have taken conflicting positions about this question. Patton (1990) argued that it was only necessary to work with methods that were appropriate to the research question, and, therefore, there was no need for a theoretical base, whereas Maxcy (2003) believed that pragmatism should determine the methodology. Greene and Caracelli (2003) have suggested that working within a single paradigm would present a partial worldview while Creswell (2003) asserted that multiple paradigms might apply to specific designs.

In practice, four main paradigms have emerged from these positions: the "dialectical", the single, "the consistent world view", and the multiple paradigm. However, the "consistent world view" has been the most frequently used (Tashakkori & Teddlie, 2003a, p.11) with pragmatism and the transformative emancipatory paradigm being employed to emphasise researcher values. Tashakkori and Teddlie (2003b) noted that in recent times, mixed/multimethod designs had become popular in the social and behavioural sciences as they were regarded as better able to interpret the complexities of societal issues .

Johnson and Onwuegbuzie (2004) suggested that mixed methods was a, "paradigm whose time has come" (p.14). This would seem to be the case as mixed method designs using emancipatory paradigms, have been increasingly used in both large and small scale social and educational research related to students with special educational needs, including learning difficulties. Mixed methods were utlilised in large scale Australian research projects about students with learning difficulties and other marginalised groups (Australian Centre for Equity through Education & Australian Youth Research Centre, 2001; Lingard et al., 2000; Louden et al., 2000) while international small scale studies (Avramidis et al., 2000, 2002) have also adopted this approach. The present project deployed a multimethod design within the emancipatory paradigm, to generate fuller understanding about the experiences of mainstream students with learning difficulties and advocating parents in a variety of Queensland secondary

schools. However there are both inherent strengths and challenges in choosing this design.

3. 3.2 *Strengths and Challenges of Mixed Methods*

Both Flick and Johnson and Onwuegbuzie claimed that The strength of mixed methods resided either in its capacity to collaborate findings across different approaches, therefore providing increased confidence to final conclusions, or in its ability to generate greater understanding about complex issues (Flick, 2002; Johnson & Onwuegbuzie, 2004). Mixed method designs aim to explore social reality from a number of perspectives: cultural, political, historical and economic and provide a way of addressing the diverse needs of multiple groups in an atmosphere of understanding and trust. This trust was primarily achieved through the relationship between the researcher and the participant (Teddlie & Tashakkori, 2003). A feature of all mixed methods research was the integration of results at some point in the design (Johnson & Onwuegbuzie, 2004). Triangulation was commonly used to combine separate results from quantitative and qualitative studies (Jick, 1979). Triangulation was used as early as 1928, where statistical analysis and case studies were combined to verify data, validate findings and to overcome inherent weaknesses in quantitative and qualitative methods (Erzberger & Kelle, 2003; Flick, 2004). In the present project, the results of Phase One and Phase Two were triangulated to validate data and to create greater understanding leading to stronger inferences. However, data gathered in separate phases, particularly if the participants were different, may produce divergent findings. Both Jick (1979) and Tashakkori and Teddlie (2003a) saw this as a positive outcome as it could be used to challenge assumptions, highlight issues and ultimately lead to more compelling accounts of the issues under investigation .

Creswell (2003) argued that a mixed method design required that the researcher be conversant with both qualitative and quantitative methods. In large scale projects, this issue was addressed by employing a research team where individual members have the requisite skills (Teddlie & Tashakkori, 2003). However, for small projects with only one researcher, as in the present study, mixed methods posed considerable challenges both in the knowledge base required and the extended time needed to collect and analyse both numeric and textual data. This situation however, provided continuity and

a closeness with the data which could not be achieved when studies had separate researchers involved in the quantitative and qualitative phases. Creswell (2003) argued that a small, mixed method project was also a personally and professionally enriching experience which extended researcher competencies. Certainly, this was the case for me.

In summary, a mixed methods design was often the design chosen by researchers using emancipatory paradigms to establish both the complexity and prevalence of a problem. The present research used a multimethod design supported by an emancipatory paradigm to investigate the complex world of mainstream students with learning difficulties in Queensland secondary schools. The methodology is demanding as researchers need to be conversant with both qualitative and quantitative methods. However, the design strengthens the inferences that can be made.

The following section briefly explores the theory leading to the development of the emancipatory paradigm as well as its derivative, the transformative emancipatory paradigm of disability which underpinned this project.

3.4 A Paradigm to Challenge the Status Quo

3. 4.1 The Development of Emancipatory Theory

Emancipatory theory is eclectic and its origins began with the work of early social order critics such as Aristotle, Socrates and Plato. Later theorists, for example, Machiavelli, Hobbes and Marx established a tradition of critical theory which aimed at understanding the social world both as it is and how it should be (Ewert, 1991; Harvey, 1990). Marx, the Frankfurt School, Habermas and Foucault, continued in this critical tradition recognising the power differentials among groups and particularly the silencing of the powerless (Fendler, 1999). Critical theory applied to the present study as it was concerned with challenging the existing social order within the institutionalised secondary school. Students with learning difficulties are positioned as academic underachievers and failures while their parents, especially ones who advocate, are positioned as powerless supplicants. This issue of power differentiation among groups

in Queensland secondary schools was discussed in ChapterTwo. The positioning of many students with learning difficulties as underachievers and failures has societal consequences leading to long term unemployment as well as their overrepresentation in the juvenile justice and mental health systems. These outcomes were examined in Chapter Two.

Although the work of Habermas was formative in the emancipatory paradigm, it was not considered specifically in this discussion as he did not write directly about education. However, his assertion that social structures and beliefs were socially constructed and can be changed by social action (Ewert, 1991) was an assertion which is central to this research project. In examining the attitudes and understanding of secondary teachers about students with learning difficulties and considering the perception of this group by teachers, advocating parents and students, the link to the role of society in constructing both structures and attitudes has been clearly made. This social construction of attitudes and perception is discussed both in Chapter Two and in Chapter Six.

Feminist theory made important contributions to the development of emanciaptory theory. The emphasis of feminist theory rested on the experiential knowledge of marginalised groups. These oppressed groups had common problems and possessed a different knowledge from the dominant group. These groups could provide an alternate view to the prevalent and dominant discourse which was heard in society (Davies, 1996; McLaughlin, 2003; Sprague & Zimmerman, 1993a, 1993b; Tuana, 1993). Feminist theory also argued that the act of being involved in research with positive values and being able to tell the story was both transforming and liberating. The theory supported the use of advocacy as a political act, on behalf of those who were oppressed and marginalised on a daily basis (Hesse-Biber, Leavy, & Yaiser, 2004; Sprague & Zimmerman, 1993a). Emancipist paradigms incorporated these ideas to develop concepts of participatory knowledge and patterns of dominance to challenge the status quo. This present research incorporates aspects of feminist theory, specifically the valuing of experiential knowledge of marginalised groups, in this case mainstream students with learning difficulties and their parents, who advocate on their behalf.

In discussions of theory related to dominance, power, knowledge and discourse, Foucault is generally considered a central figure. However, as Foucault did not present his theories directly related to education, his work is not discussed in any detail, rather a formal acknowledgement only is made. Instead, I have chosen to explore the work of

political theorists who were directly concerned with educational issues and the effects of institutionalised education systems on those who are both marginalised and oppressed. Nevertheless, Foucault's writings have direct relevance to education where power and domination can be both exploitative and alienating. Governance and intervention on an individual, systemic, state or national level could create unequal relationships which were self sustaining (Foucault & Rabinow, 1984; Popkewitz & Brennan, 1998; Simola, Heikkinen, & Silvonen, 1998). Foucault recognised that power, discourse and knowledge were inseparably linked and that schools disempower, socially and educationally, those who did not conform. He advocated that people should challenge the power, knowledge and language that supported the status quo. The focus of this current project is on a group of students, those with learning difficulties, who are disempowered socially and educationally. As Foucault indicated, it was imperative to advocate for this group to challenge the language and power of the dominant discourse associated with these students.

Although education is often perceived as being politically neutral, critical theorists dispute this as, increasingly, education has become a function of the State. Alienating State sponsored policies and practices such as tests, control of teachers and their work, and the escalating standardisation of curriculum and instruction have been instigated (Luke, 2004; Luke & Elkins, 2002). Political theorists also agree that while education appears to have neutral values, in reality, it serves to reinforce the dominant discourse and its values.

3. 4 2 Politicising Education

The ideas of two political theorists, Freire and Torres, are highlighted in this section as their work is set within education and the surrounding discourses. Freire (1985) emphasised that education, rather than having neutral values, was inextricably linked with political and sociological theory. Educational institutions used "social control" that not only reflected societal values but also was structured to benefit those in power (p.116). The dominant discourse within educational institutions dehumanised those who were oppressed and made them solely responsible for their position and for their inability to effect change (Freire, 1968). This aspect exists in the discourse surrounding students with learning difficulties in the secondary school. Their failure and

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underachievement are not seen as a result of the actions of schools, inappropriate pedagogies and policies, but as being the fault of the individual who is deficient (Fulcher, 1989a).

In Pedagogy of Hope (2000a) Freire asserted that in order to effect the radical change needed in power structures within schools and educational systems, people must question the values and discourses of both society and education. The real role of education was not to maintain the status quo but to challenge the dominance and the oppression generated by the few. In this way, he envisaged education as transformational (Freire, 1985). He also believed that teachers were an essential part of this transformation. It was imperative that they be prepared not only to fight for justice but also to speak out against the "intolerable" (Freire, 1998, p.42). He dismissed the idea that educational problems were only associated with pedagogy, but believed that problems confronting schools were also likely to be, "political, ethical and financial" (p.36). Freire envisioned the role of teachers as crucial to transforming education in schools and identified a number of characteristics, for example, tolerance of difference, which they must possess. It was essential for teachers to be prepared to fight to create the fundamental conditions which were "conducive to pedagogy" (p.10). One example of transformative political action was in a Brazilian disadvantaged schools programme, where peasants were previously excluded from education, reversed this decision as a result of their challenge to the dominant discourse (Gandin & Apple, 2003). The present research project seeks to transform the reality of secondary school for students with learning difficulties and their parents. It is hoped that by allowing their voices to be heard it might alter the dominant perception of deficit and allow the crucial educational issues to be addressed. It could also be transforming to individual participants who may become more aware of their own power to challenge what is intolerable in schools and educational systems.

In Queensland, as in the West generally, the State has become a major protagonist in the dominant discourse of education. It determines educational reform agendas and establishes what knowledge is seen as being legitimate as well as which groups are excluded from discourses (Torres, 1995). In his work, Torres has highlighted the role of globalisation and the all encompassing educational reform agendas of nongovernment organisations such as the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Bank (Torres, 2002), in establishing the dominant discourse beyond traditional national/political boundaries. This coupled with the present Western political trend to

adopt neo-conservative policies created a dominant discourse which embraces privatisation and market driven policies. In educational terms, this translates to discourses of accountability, school choice and parental rights and in doing so creates alienation among nonconforming groups, prejudice and feeling of increased powerlessness to challenge these ideas. He proposed that the purpose of education research should be to ask political and moral questions that empower and change. Certainly it would hope that in the current research those ideals could be attained.

In summary, political theorists, particularly Freire and Torres recognised education as being an efficient form of social control. They recognised that a critical dialogue needed to be established to challenge a dominant discourse which alienates, oppresses and dehumanises. Education for the excluded can only become transforming when the dominant discourse is challenged. Educational research which is both political and has a moral basis can assist in this transformation. The transformative emancipatory paradigm incorporated all the ideas which were discussed in the preceding sections and was the conceptual model on which the current research was based.

3. 4.3 Transforming Social Reality

Initially, the transformative emancipatory paradigm focused on the discrimination and marginalisation of particular ethnic/racial groups as well as by gender, moreover, the paradigm was expanded to include oppression by disability and age (Harvey, 1990; Mertens, 2003). Two theorists, Bauman and Tandon, made significant contributions.

Bauman (1976) suggested that the dominance of institutions distorted perceptions of social reality. It was therefore, only through dialogue with marginalised groups and by validating their authentic experiences, that the dominant perception of social reality could be altered. Research which uses this paradigm must, therefore, include the perceptions and experiences of marginalised groups. In this research, the authentic experiences and perceptions of representatives of two marginalised groups in secondary education, mainstream students with learning difficulties and advocating parents, were sought to validate their social reality by allowing their voices to be heard. This use of participatory research was further strengthened by Tandon (1988) who recognised the need to use research methods that challenged the status quo.

In this alternative paradigm, as the transformative emancipatory paradigm is sometimes known, subjectivity and involvement, not distance and objectivity, were essential to be able to transform ordinary people's knowledge to change and to challenge institutions within society (Merton, 1968; Tandon, 1988). The use of participatory research and methodology can allow the voices of those who have been silenced to be heard (Atkinson, 2005; Gitlin & Russell, 1994).

Tandon (1988) was concerned that appropriate data collection methods be used for participatory research. In Phase Two of the study, this was exemplified by changes made to accommodate student participants. As many students with learning difficulties experience low literacy levels, the transcript verification process included reading the materials to individual participants either in person or over the telephone. While recognising the prime importance of qualitative components in participatory research, Tandon also advocated the use of surveys to collect large bodies of relevant authentic information if this was seen as being appropriate to the situation. Phase One used an exploratory survey of secondary teachers to collect authentic information about their attitudes and understanding about students with learning difficulties across Queensland education systems.

The transformative emancipatory paradigm is an alternative paradigm which is politically motivated and is concerned with human rights. This paradigm has been adopted by social movements that wish to politicise their cause as it allows nontraditional voices to be heard to undermine the discourse of the dominant few. In this way, participatory research has been used to promote social change by becoming linked with broader social movements, for example, disability rights.

3.4.4 The Transformative Emancipatory Paradigm of Disability

Within the disability rights discourse, disability is seen as being both socially and politically constructed. Disability serves to isolate and to exclude these people from full participation within society (Fulcher, 1989a; Merton, 1968; Oliver, 1984, 1997). The purpose of research using the transformative emancipatory paradigm of disability is not only to make research relevant to the group but also to improve their everyday lives (Oliver, 1996; Shakespeare, 1996).

Fulcher (1989a) identified five discourses within disability, however, the medicalised model, that is the individual deficit, remains the dominant discourse within

education. It is this discourse which alienates and excludes students with learning difficulties from the full participation in education and ultimately, society. As there is no consensus as to what constitutes a learning difficulty, this medical model also serves to hide the social construction of this disability (Carrier, 1983; Christensen, 1993; Fulcher, 1989a). Carrier (1983) recognised that many students, especially those with learning difficulties, performed poorly in schools. However, ability is only a small part of what determines academic achievement. Teacher attitudes and understanding, school and classroom structure, school culture and societal values have a far greater impact.

Phase One explored the possible link between teachers' attitudes, their understanding about characteristics of students with learning difficulties, school structures and the failure and underachievement of students with learning difficulties in Queensland secondary schools. An Australian national study into special education identified boys were three times more likely than girls to be identified as having learning difficulties (Andrews et al., 1979). Other studies conducted in Australia (Martin & Marsh, 2005) and internationally (Coutino, Oswald, & Best, 2002) showed that boys were consistently identified more frequently by teachers as having learning difficulties or academic difficulties including negative behaviours and attitudes towards school and teachers. The dominant discourse in education was dominated by professionals, while parents of students with learning difficulties and other marginalised groups often come from nonprofessional backgrounds. These socially produced inequalities have created problems for parents trying to advocate for students with learning difficulties and disguised the real issues facing education and students with learning difficulties (Carrier, 1983; Oliver, 1984).

The educational researcher working within the transformative emancipatory paradigm of disability must include the life experiences of those with a disability as an integral part of data. There also needed to be involvement with the marginalised group (Mertens, 2003). My involvement with these students and parents was previously outlined in Chapter One. Legitimate research within this paradigm is expected to help to empower the target group and aim to make specific changes in policy and practice (Oliver, 1997; Shakespeare, 1996; Ward, 1997; Zarb, 1997).

Fulcher (1989a) argued that within the dominant discourse of education, disability was represented by those students who were considered special rather than normal. This discourse was a political one which positions a, "wide range of students that teachers find difficult to teach" (p.57) as being disabled. These included mainstream

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students with learning difficulties, and those with disruptive behaviour and socio/emotional difficulties even though no impairment can be established. This disability discourse became an easier alternative to questioning what should be taught and how it should be presented and assessed (Fulcher, 1989b). The project outlined in the remaining sections, sought to clarify the situation in secondary schools and to understand more fully the relationship of the students, their parents and their teachers to this political construct of disability.

3.5 Research Design

3.5.1 Brief Overview

This multimethod project was situated within the transformative emancipatory paradigm of disability. The paradigm rejects the individual deficit model of disability, which is accepted by the dominant discourse in education. Instead, this discourse is seen as being driven by social inequalities which are, "socially constructed" (Mertens, 2003,p.138). This research, congruent with the theory of the paradigm, privileged the viewpoints of the marginalised group (Creswell, 2003; Mertens, 2003; Morse, 2003), in this case, mainstream students with learning difficulties and their advocating parents. The study aimed to capture the lived experiences of the participants within Queensland secondary schools. To do this, a multimethod design was adopted.

The paradigm required that the viewpoints of the affected groups were represented (Mertens, 2003). This was achieved initially in Phase One by implementing a web-based exploratory survey of secondary teachers employed in government and nongovernment schools. The focus of this phase was on teachers' attitudes and understanding about students with learning difficulties. Phase Two, which was implemented after survey data had been analysed, used semistructured interviews with teachers, advocating parents and mainstream students with learning difficulties again from Queensland government and nongovernment schools. The interviews were based on the findings of Phase One and focused on the experiences of the participants. Although views of teachers were analysed, the lived experiences of mainstream students with learning difficulties and advocating parents, as the marginalised group, remained the focus.

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3.5.2 Project details

This sequential multimethod study can be represented diagrammatically in the following way.
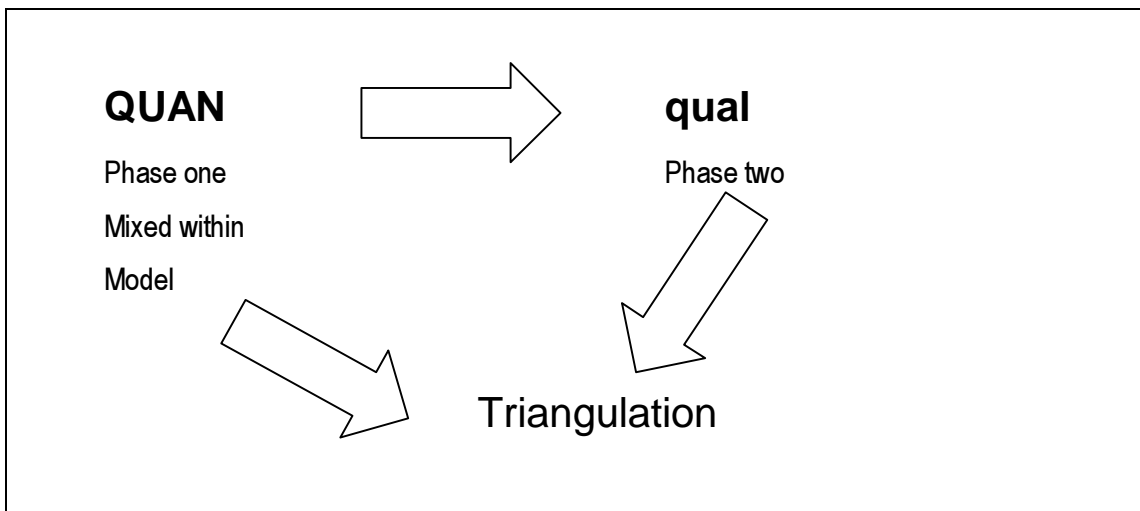
Figure 3.1 Diagrammatic Representation of this Sequential Multimethod Study (Morse, 2003)

Figure 3.1 details the design of this multimethod project. Phase One was a quantitative web-based survey of Queensland secondary teachers with additional qualitative questions which showed the research design as also being mixed within the model (Johnson & Onwuegbuzie, 2004). The data was analysed by Rasch analysis, a mathematical model used to measure latent traits such as attitude (Bond, 2005; Bond & Fox, 2001; Ingebo, 1997). As also shown in Figure 3.1, the qualitative study was sequential with interview questions based on the findings of Phase One. This component sought to illuminate and to bring a human dimension to the issues under consideration by the inclusion of data gathered from interviews with secondary teachers, who previously participated in Phase One, advocating parents and mainstream students with learning difficulties. Interview data were coded using computer assisted analysis

(QSR International, 1999-2002) and analysis compared with the existing theory outlined in Chapter Two, using categorisation (Lankshear & Knobel, 2004). The final phase was the combining of the results of Phase One and Phase Two. As illustrated in Figure 3.1, this was achieved by triangulating the data (Jick, 1979). This allowed stronger inferences to be made regarding secondary teachers' attitudes and attitudes and their understanding about students with learning difficulties in schools across Queensland. It also ensured a more complete understanding of the factors which impact upon these issues and, more importantly, how mainstream students with learning difficulties and their parents experienced education in Queensland schools.

In keeping with the aims of the transformative emancipatory paradigm of disability, I hoped that advocating parents would find participation in the research itself emancipatory and that the project would establish authentic information about the positioning of mainstream students with learning difficulties and their advocates within schools. This is further discussed in Chapter Six. My ultimate hope is that this research will help to transform some aspects of secondary education and to lead to an improvement in the everyday lives of students with learning difficulties and their parents. Research findings will be directed to SPELD Qld. Inc., a political advocacy group for people with specific learning disabilities.

3.6 Summary

In the social sciences, including education, mixed method research designs have been used to more rigorously investigate the complexities of societal issues. The present study used a multimethod design (Morse, 2003) within the transformative emancipatory paradigm of disability to investigate the complexities of mainstream students with learning difficulties within the secondary school. The paradigm itself was eclectic and had its initial antecedents in the work of Aristotle, Socrates and Marx to name a few (Harvey, 1990). The work of critical theorists such as Habermas and Foucault, incorporated the ideas of socially constructed beliefs and the links between power, domination, alienation and the dominant discourse (Ewert, 1991; Foucault, 1991). The belief that socially constructed beliefs could be changed by social action, was also fundamental to the work of critical and emancipatory theorists (Ewert, 1991). Feminist theorists emphasised the importance of including the experiential knowledge into

research of those marginalised individuals (McLaughlin, 2003; Sprague & Zimmerman, 1993a). Political theorists such as Freire and Torres recognised that those who were marginalised were also made to be responsible for their own position by the dominant discourse which was concerned to maintain the status quo (Freire, 1968, 1985). They advocated that political action needed to be taken, including educational research, to challenge and to change the status quo within schools and education systems (Freire, 2000b; Torres, 1995). This position was further strengthened by the work of Bauman (1976) and Tandon (1988) who insisted that the voices of the marginalised must be heard and legitimised by using appropriate research methodologies.

Students with learning difficulties fit within this disability paradigm. They were often marginalised and alienated in schools and they are also held responsible for their own problems (Fulcher, 1989a). There was a reluctance within the educational sphere, including schools, to acknowledge and to address the real problems facing these students which include teacher attitude, understanding, school and classroom structures, pedagogy and societal values (Carrier, 1983). This paradigm required that the researcher be part of the disability community so that the research can be authentic to legitimately challenge the status quo and help to improve the life circumstance of students with learning difficulties especially in the secondary school setting (Oliver, 1997). The chapter which follows outlines the method and findings of Phase One.

CHAPTER FOUR

Phase One: Teachers Talking

'The time has come,' the Walrus said,

'To talk of many things:

Of shoes-and ships and sealing wax-

Of cabbages and kings-

And why the sea is boiling hot-

And whether pigs have wings.'

Lewis Carroll, *Through the Looking Glass*

4.1 Introduction

Secondary teachers are affected by the presence of students with learning difficulties in their classes regardless of whether they recognise or accommodate to these students in any way. Phase One of this project offered teachers across Queensland the opportunity to talk about their perceptions of students with learning difficulties and related issues. This chapter outlines the methodology, analysis and findings of Phase One of this study. Results from this phase informed the development of the question schedules in Phase Two.

4.2 Research Questions for Phase One

The research questions that guided this phase of the study were as follows:

1. How do demographic indicators relate to secondary teachers' attitudes towards students with learning difficulties?

2. How do demographic indicators relate to secondary teachers' understanding of the characteristics of students with learning difficulties?

3. What is the relationship between teachers' attitudes and understanding about students with learning difficulties?

4. What factors do teachers perceive as affecting levels of support given to students with learning difficulties in the secondary school setting?

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4.3 Phase One Methodology

4.3. 1 Surveys

A survey was selected as the only viable way to collect exploratory data from teachers across Queensland. The survey has become a well utilised tool for collecting information in all spheres of modern life. Market research, the Gallup Poll for sampling political opinion and the census are all familiar examples of the modern survey (Marsh, 1982). Social scientists also employ this methodology to explore issues especially to establish the existence and the extent of a social problem at a point in time (de Vaus, 2002). Marsh (1982) documents the antecedents of the present day survey and I will briefly summarise them here. She established that a survey published in the United Kingdom by Graunt in 1662, set the pattern of statistical analysis until the early nineteenth century however, it was not until 1801 that the first official survey, a British census, was initiated. Throughout the early 1800s, surveys continued to be used by individuals for political purposes with the subject matter concentrating on the social conditions of the poor. By the 1880s the survey was being used differently, this time to determine the extent of a particular social problem. Booth's seventeen volume survey on life and labour in London was an example of this. Collection methods were also revised. Direct interview techniques and the use of standardised questions and definitions were introduced. In 1915, Bowley's work on the concepts of random sampling, reliability and confidence intervals was incorporated into survey methodology. The survey became more accepted as a legitimate research methodology when Lazarfield used data collected by surveys to answer questions related to sociology.

Today, surveys are most often used in descriptive and exploratory research and are characterised by their construction of a data grid where the same indicator is collected over a number of cases and provides the data to be analysed. This systematic collection of data is usually highly structured, typically through questionnaires, and allows for the comparison of cases using the same variables (Aldridge & Levine, 2001; de Vaus, 1990, 2002; Marsh, 1982). Information collected by the survey allows the original questions to be tested and accepted, modified or discarded (de Vaus, 1990, 2002).

Limitations associated with survey research are well recognised. Concerns have been raised about the self-report nature of questionnaires and the tendency of some respondents to anticipate the desired response, have been well documented (Aldridge & Levine, 2001). There has also been discussion on the motivation of participants and how to overcome resistance to completing questionnaires. Surveys that appear to be altruistic or allow respondents to express their opinion appear to be more acceptable to potential participants, as are ones which are not intrusive, do not take an inordinate time to complete and do not have either questionable motives or inadequate expertise directing the data collection (de Vaus, 2002). A major criticism that has been levelled against surveys has been the inability to control the variables. This has been countered by the argument that the analysis of aggregated data from individuals represents the view of the specific indicator or variable under investigation (Aldridge & Levine, 2001). Criticisms about the power and control remaining with the researcher and the inability to gauge the coherence of a respondent's views can be mitigated by the inclusion of open ended questions in the survey instrument. Researchers also need to be aware that some respondents might be quite dissimilar on criteria other than the selected variable under discussion (de Vaus, 2002). To overcome these limitations associated with surveys, the design of the survey instrument becomes crucial in gathering useful data to evaluate a social problem. The researcher also needs substantive knowledge about the target group to establish an effective survey instrument that will encourage participants and allow them to represent their views accurately. Today, the internet has emerged as an additional option for administering a survey to a targeted group.

4.3.2 Internet Surveys

Although the internet was first used for survey data collection in 1986 it has gained popularity rapidly and has become a popular choice for self- administered questionnaires (Crano & Brewer, 2002; de Vaus, 2002; Dillman, 2000). Reasons advanced for this rise in popularity included the saving of time and money through the elimination of intermediaries in the distribution and return of surveys, the automatic collation of data if required, or the storing of responses in a database for analysis. Software could be utilised to prompt respondents, for example, if a mistake was made in entering data (Crano & Brewer, 2002; Dillman, 2000). Although all these advantages have positive benefits to researchers, an internet survey was adopted for this project because of its ability to access secondary teachers who have multiple employers and

who work in diverse geographic locations across Queensland (Aldridge & Levine, 2001; Dillman, 2000).

However there are disadvantages in choosing this option. Coverage errors and sampling bias might occur as a result of exclusion of participants particularly through lack of access to computers, an internet connection or by limited computer literacy (Crano & Brewer, 2002; Dillman, 2000). There is also the potential to attract respondents who are interested in the topic or fraudulent responses including multiple submissions (Hewson, Yule, Laurent, & Vogel, 2003). When a third party is used to acquire participants, as was the case with this survey, this limits direct researcher access to potential respondents. Although assurances are given on confidentiality and complete anonymity, because an electronic trail is left, complete security of data cannot be absolutely guaranteed as the internet is always vulnerable to hackers (Aldridge & Levine, 2001). Choosing an internet survey also requires that the researcher either has programming skills or employs a programmer.

4.3.3 Internet Survey Response Rates

Generally, internet surveys take one of two forms, web-based or email, and response rates vary between the two. Email surveys have shown higher response rates than those delivered in a web page (Hewson et al., 2003) as the latter limited direct researcher access to respondents. Various strategies have been used to try to maximise responses including incentives, follow-up, short surveys requiring no more than 15 minutes to complete and guaranteed security of data and anonymity but it has not yet been established if these methods are effective (Crano & Brewer, 2002). However, De Vaus (2002) has claimed that, for specialist groups, if care is taken with implementing the survey, the number of responses achieved will be equal to the number of responses from surveys conducted in person or by telephone. If the questions were sensitive, response rates might be considerably better than with traditional delivery methods such as mail, because of perceived anonymity.

The research presented in this project consisted of a survey instrument embedded in a web page. It targeted a specialist group, secondary teachers employed in schools across Queensland. The survey remained on line for three months in first school term of 2004. The section which follows provides details of the development of the survey instrument, its delivery to teachers and the response rates achieved.

4.4 Implementing a Web-Based Survey

4.4.1 The Survey Instrument

The survey instrument (see Appendix 4.1) consisted of 46, predominately forced choice, questions. Of these, 13 were demographic while 17 were attitudinal questions answered on a five point Likert scale ranging from "strongly agree" to "strongly disagree". A question related to teacher understanding of the characteristics of students with learning difficulties as discussed in the literature (Ashman & Elkins, 2002; Louden et al., 2000; van Kraayenoord & Farrell, 1998; Westwood, 2003) was also included. Five open ended questions focused on school policy, organisation and factors impacting on levels of support given to students with learning difficulties were presented. A focus definition, including a diagrammatic representation of the students being targeted, was provided (see Appendix 4.2). Students with learning difficulties were defined as having, 'short or long term difficulties in literacy numeracy and learning how to learn' (Education Queensland, 1996, Introduction).

Initially, the survey instrument was created from teacher attitudinal surveys used in previous studies (Avramidis et al., 2000; Biggin, Clough, & Wigley, 1991; D'Aloia, 1981; Praisner, 2003; Van Reusen, Shoho, & Barker, 2000; Wallace, 2002), and additional researcher developed questions. As all of the earlier survey instruments originated outside Australia, apart from that of D'Aloia, and were used in one or a small number of schools rather than across a State and educational systems, changes were incorporated to reflect current practices in Queensland secondary schools. For example, postcode was included to establish location and a question on school sector was added to establish teacher employment affiliations. Reference was made to the possible presence of special education or learning support specialists, as well as the presence of Aboriginal Australian and Torres Strait Islander students or those who had English as a second language. SPELD Queensland Incorporated, an Australian advocacy group for people with specific learning disabilities was represented as a possible source of teacher information. Three independent experts in the field of learning difficulties and special education reviewed the draft survey instrument to establish content validity. Changes were made to reflect their suggestions.

The instrument was piloted in hard copy by 12 secondary teachers in government and nongovernment schools located in rural and regional areas. Minor

changes to wording of some questions were made as a result of the trial, for example, from "coteaching" to "team teaching" to facilitate teacher understanding. Responses on the pilot survey also indicated that the majority of teachers had focused on students with low incidence disabilities, that is, ascertained students rather than on the large numbers of other students who experienced problems with learning in the classroom who are the focus of this project. Ascertainment is the term used in Queensland government schools to determine levels of funding and resource support given to students with special educational needs. Nongovernment schools have also adopted this practice for students with low incidence disabilities. The government system uses appraisement for students with learning difficulties in the primary school context only and this process is not linked to funding. Generally, secondary school teachers appeared not to be conversant with this terminology and had little understanding of the difference between appraised students and those who were ascertained. To assist teachers in identifying the target group, a graphic representation of the definition of students with learning difficulties was developed and incorporated into the survey instrument. The completed survey instrument was embedded in a professionally constructed, university based web site.

4.4.2 The Role of Sponsors

Sponsors were utilised both to fund the construction of the web site and to promote the survey. In addition to hosting the survey instrument, the web site provided information about the survey, delivered the required informed consent request to potential respondents and invited participants to forward their email address to be included in a draw for incentive prizes after the close of the survey. Teachers were also invited to nominate for involvement in Phase Two of the project to be held in the following year.

The problem of access to teachers in three different sectors, state, Catholic and independent, as well as encouraging them to participate, was addressed by inviting sponsors to support this research project. Formal sponsors were the Queensland Independent Education Union (QIEU) the Queensland Teachers' Union (QTU), the Association of Independent Schools in Queensland (AISQ) and SPELD Queensland Incorporated. Three commercial sponsors, businesses in my local area, were also involved and provided holidays for two participating teachers. Although negotiations did not engage formal support from EQ, the largest employer of teachers in the State,

informal support was provided by EQ's Staff College which oversees inclusive education in government schools.

The participation of formal sponsors allowed access to the majority of secondary teachers employed in Queensland schools. QTU has a membership rate of 98 percent for teachers employed by Education Queensland, while QIEU represents 40 percent of teachers engaged in nongovernment schools. The inclusion of the AISQ allowed access to the majority of independent schools in the State including those outside mainstream religious bodies. SPELD Qld also informed their members about the survey. Sponsors promoted the survey throughout the data collection period. Although good coverage of all sectors was provided, teachers still needed to be aware of the research and motivated to log on. The response to the survey is discussed in the section which follows.

4.5 Response Rates

The survey was promoted by sponsors, the media, principals, individual Diocese, the university and by the researcher while the survey remained online. There were 280 replies submitted from a potential response base of approximately 20,000 secondary teachers. Teachers were initially slow, to respond with less than 10 percent of surveys being submitted in the first month of data collection. However, response rates increased in the second month. Over 50 percent of the responses were received in the final month of the data collection period. Two problems emerged throughout data collection period: making teachers aware of the survey and the perceived lack of authority to collect data. These issues are discussed in section 4.6.3 of this chapter.

Internet surveys have been documented as generating response rates from zero to 80 percent (Marcussen, 2001). The wide variation existed as a result of various factors including survey length, topic, specialised populations, legitimacy of the sponsor, perceived confidentiality and trust, whether surveys were intranet or internet based, computer literacy skills required as well as the hardware and software access of respondents (de Vaus, 2002; Simsek & Viega, 2001; Solomon, 2001). In a study of response rates for self-selected, web-based, well visited survey sites, response rates were two percent with an effective incentive, and 0.4 percent without an inducement (Marcussen, 2001). Using this method of calculation, this teacher survey which had an effective incentive but did not have a well visited web-site, received a response rate of 1.4 percent, within the range suggested by Marcussen. This survey also relied on self-

selected convenience sampling of a specialist population. The simple calculation of a percentage to establish response rates for convenience samples has been agued as inappropriate because of the absence of a sampling frame (Shonlau, Fricker, & Elliott, 2001; Simsek & Viega, 2001; Smith, 1997). Rather, it is the number of respondents, coverage of the group, completeness and honesty of the responses which were more important. Shonlau, Fricker and Elliott (2001) have also argued that convenience samples were most useful for generating theory in exploratory research. This reflected the purpose of this investigation. The characteristics of the respondents are outlined below.

4.6 Survey Participation

4.6.1 Characteristics of Respondents

Survey participants were self-selected and logged on in response to invitations issued by a third party. Generally, demographic data were complete and showed good coverage of locations in the State, of rural and urban schools and across different sized schools and sectors. Teachers in urban areas, including major coastal towns, made up the majority (60.5 percent) of the respondents while 33.5 percent of participants were employed in rural schools. This distribution is representative of the decentralised nature of Queensland where large, urbanised areas are located along the coastline. A relatively small number of respondents (6 percent) could not be attributed a location because of incomplete or erroneous data. Only 1.5 percent of respondents failed to supply data beyond demographics or provided obviously erroneous data.

Geographically, participants were dispersed across the State except for teachers from very remote areas of far north Queensland, who were not represented. Beyond Cairns, the largest city in the far north of the state, the areas are sparsely populated, remote and have few secondary schools or departments. School populations include high numbers of Australian Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students. Possible reasons for teacher non participation from these schools are outside the scope of this thesis.

Higher numbers of females (74 percent) than males responded to the survey. The 2003 Education at a Glance OECD report, indicated that in the majority of OECD countries, there were more female than male teachers (Organisation for European Co-Operation and Development (OECD), 2003). Although secondary schools tend to have

higher proportions of male teachers, females still predominate. Precise figures are not available for secondary schools in Australia however the proportions of females to males in Canada was 68 percent and New Zealand was 65 percent (Organisation for European Co-Operation and Development (OECD), 2003). Given our shared heritage, it is argued that the position in Australia would be similar to these two countries. The higher number of responses by females than males in this survey is unlikely to be outside what would be anticipated.

Percentages of teachers employed in the various sectors were also calculated. Of the teachers sampled, 64 percent were from government schools, 20 percent from Catholic schools and 16 percent were employed in the independent sector. These proportions reflect the overall sector distribution of teachers in the state.

Respondents were asked to indicate the number of years they had been teaching rather than age as this was thought to be more relevant to the investigation. Almost 60 percent of respondents were very experienced teachers having taught for over 10 years. Over half of this group indicated that they had had taught for over 20 years. This data reflects the situation in most OECD countries where students are taught by teachers over 40 years old and secondary teachers tend to be older. Again, there is no precise information for Australia but the percentage of older teachers in Canada is 63.8 percent while in New Zealand it is 63.9.percent. The proportions in the survey data reflect these same trends. Teachers under 30 years old in Canada were 11.8 percent of the workforce, while in New Zealand there were 16 percent (Organisation for European Co-Operation and Development (OECD), 2003). The survey figure of 23 percent for teachers with under five years experience is also in keeping with this figure. This information is particularly relevant as it indicates that the attitudes and the knowledge of students collected by the survey instrument generally represented the views of older, more experienced teachers.

In summary, the responses to the survey indicated that there was good coverage across all school sectors and generally reflected the characteristics of teachers employed in Queensland secondary schools. The question then arises, why did these particular teachers respond, and more importantly, why did others not participate, given that all principals in the state were notified about the survey? Further contact with some participants provided possible answers.

4.6. 2 Factors Influencing Participation

A follow-up survey was emailed to the 260 respondents who had indicated their willingness to be interviewed in Phase Two. This survey (see Appendix 4.3), requested contact details, school, location, the source of notification of the survey, reasons for participation and additionally, if the respondent was a learning support or special education teacher. Information was supplied by 83 of those teachers. All comments in this section refer to this extra survey. The majority of these respondents (47 percent) were emailed by the principal while an additional 24 percent were notified through multiple sources. The remaining 29 percent cited sponsors, school notice-board, university, media and friends as the source. This smaller survey would suggest that the support of the principal was instrumental in the response of teachers in the school. Some teachers indicated that they were actively encouraged to be involved by the principal or by a senior staff member.

Respondent motivation to participate revolved around a number of themes. Commitment and interest in the topic appeared to be primary factors in completions with 66 percent of teachers indicating that they had a specific interest in the topic, substantial knowledge to contribute, or had a personal interest. A further 10 percent expressed that they wanted to help, while five percent specifically mentioned incentive prizes. Similar motivations for participation have been advanced in the literature related to surveys as was the apparent ambivalence to incentive prizes (de Vaus, 2002; Dillman, 2000).

Another motivation was the nature of the research itself. Teachers expressed that it, "looked worthwhile" was "interesting and well thought out", was "meaningful" and was 'useful to students and teachers' or that they were 'intrigued by the questions'. The email that follows was indicative of comments received from respondents and members of the community during the survey:

As a teacher who is lucky enough to have almost 90 percent of her class made up of boys, I would like to thank you for your efforts in gathering information on a problem which is almost epidemic amongst the young men I teach. I hope this can make a real difference if not for my boys now but for the boys I will teach in the future. [personal communication 2004, July, 26].

Over 50 percent of the respondents who supplied additional information were engaged in learning support or in special education in their schools. Some respondents in this group indicated that they were advised by Staff College, an informal sponsor, about the existence of the survey.

The role of principals and sponsors appeared to be important in informing teachers about the existence of the survey. Interest in the topic under discussion also seemed to be the primary motivation for participation. However what were the reasons for teachers not participating in the survey?

4.6. 3 Nonresponse: Gatekeeping and Other Matters

Given that the prevalence of students with learning difficulties in mainstream classes is 30 percent (Andrews et al., 1979; Westwood & Graham, 2000), or even higher in some secondary classes (Wallace et al., 2003), it is pertinent to consider reasons why more teachers did not participate in this research. Dillman (2000) has suggested that apathy to research and antipathy to completing surveys might be factors in nonresponse. Other factors, such as gatekeeping and the political aspects of schools and education might also have been implicated.

Denscombe (2003) defined gatekeeping as the control of the availability of and access to information. In the promotion of this survey, gatekeeping occurred in a number of ways. In some schools that were approached directly by the researcher either by telephone or by email, school secretaries or the deputy principal refused to relay information to teachers about the existence of the survey. Generally, the reason given to me was that the school was not interested in a survey for teachers. Ultimately, these staff decided on the apparent worth of the survey and effectively denied teachers at that school access through this promotional pathway.

Emails received from some principals of EQ schools, revealed gatekeeping practices with their refusal to forward survey notification emails to staff unless specific EQ research approval had been granted. At the commencement of the research project university ethics approval had been granted. No further research approvals had been sought. A number of reasons prompted that decision. Because of the numbers of employers and the web-based nature of the research, it was deemed inappropriate to seek further research approvals from specific employing bodies. As I was not physically

entering schools to collect data and teachers could do this survey on any computer with an internet connection, further approvals appeared redundant. An analysis of participants' submission times revealed that the majority of respondents submitted their survey outside the general school hours of 9am until 3pm. This showed that the assumption made by some principals that respondents would complete the survey in the employer's time was erroneous. Submission times clearly established that the use of the internet allowed respondents to transcend the boundaries of time or space of school property to complete their questionairre. All principals of Queensland secondary schools had been contacted individually by email and fax regarding the existence of the survey. Additionally, EQ had previously indicated their unwillingness to be involved directly in this project making a research approval application problematic.

Ultimately, during the data collection period, some additional research approvals were gained. These were from individual Dioceses of Catholic Education. There are seven Dioceses within Queensland. One approval was sought specifically from the Archdiocese of Brisbane. The process however, as with other Dioceses, involved only the sighting of the university ethics approval. Although the approval granted by the Brisbane Archdiocese did help to secure the responses of Brisbane based teachers in Catholic schools, it also elicited the disapproval of an order owned school in the same locality. Order owned schools are not controlled by the Diocese but by a religious order. As such, they make their own decisions about what happens in their schools. They do not have to recognise or abide by decisions made by the Diocesan office although they often do. A personal conversation with the principal was able to resolve this issue and resulted in survey submissions. There are a number of these Catholic schools in existence across the state, however there were four order owned school that I had direct contact with and these direct approaches resulted in submissions from all of those schools. However the EQ research approval procedures involved an additional complex and lengthy process. I regarded this as impractical as the data collection period would have ended before the approval was granted.

Gatekeeping was a real problem for survey access and measures taken to overcome it met with mixed success. Moreover, a research project which relies on the internet to deliver a survey instrument will usually experience some technical issues. This was the case with this study.

4.6.4 Technical Issues Affecting Responses

There were also a number of initial and ongoing technical issues which might have impacted on the number of responses. Although the site and survey instrument were tested extensively by the web site manager and the researcher prior to the survey launch, this failed to replicate some of the situations that occurred in practice. Initially a number of controls had been installed, including a word limit on qualitative questions and controls to stop the resubmission of the survey or the raffle entry. Time out on the server was set for 20 minutes. Emails and telephone calls from some respondents revealed that they wished to write larger amounts of information and some participants were taking up to two hours to fill in the survey. Both these situations meant that respondents were unable then to submit the survey. Eventually, these problems were overcome by removing all limits, including timing out. When all limits were removed from the site, data collection proceeded without further problems and multiple submissions did not prove to be an issue. These issues might have been identified with additional online piloting by practising teachers and may have eliminated some participant frustration.

With the ever increasing problem of spam in email, some legitimate material which is delivered to schools, such as the survey notification might become classified as spam and deleted if the source was unknown. Some of my email notifications to principals were returned to me unopened while others, presumably, were simply deleted.

There was evidence that in some very small, religious schools, lack of computer hardware was also a factor in nonresponse. The principal of one such school informed me, in a telephone conversation, that the only computer in the school was in his office and used for administrative purposes. This situation was likely to be replicated in other similar schools.

Teachers involved in the pilot study and some principals also informed me that lack of computer literacy among teaching staff, particularly older teachers, would also limit the response to the survey.

4. 7 Summary

This exploratory web-based survey collected data from a specialist population: secondary teachers employed in diverse schools and geographic locations across Queensland. Data representing the views of 280 teachers, 1.4 percent of the Queensland secondary teacher population, were captured. Some respondents indicated

their willingness to be involved because of their intrinsic interest in the topic, the relevance of the research and the questions which were asked on the survey instrument. The project generally used third parties, sponsors, to recruit participants and provided incentive prizes as well as assurances of respondent confidentiality. This survey, in contrast to other internet surveys, attracted more respondents the longer that it was online indicating perhaps that problems with notification was the issue rather than disinterest in completing the survey. Computer access, computer literacy, the prevalence of spam, and gatekeeping were likely to be some of factors affecting response rates. Despite these limitations, the analysis of the quantitative and qualitative data collected by the survey instrument revealed substantive information about secondary teachers' attitudes and understandings about students with learning difficulties.

4.8 Results and Discussion

4.8.1 Data Analysis Using Rasch Analysis

Rasch analysis is a latent trait measurement model originally developed by Georg Rasch. I saw it as an appropriate way to examine the data related to teachers' attitude and understanding about students with learning difficulties. Rasch analysis is a probabilistic measurement model which transforms raw data into, 'abstract, equal–interval scales' and is particularly suited to the Likert-scale attitudinal data which is the focus of this survey (Bond & Fox, 2001, p. 7). This dissertation does not intend to discuss the mathematical formulae or assumptions which underlie this measurement model. Rasch analysis provides a measurement scale which embodies the principle that each additional measure is the same as every other measure on the scale, it is simply one measure more (Linacre, 2005). Rasch measurement is used specifically for measuring latent traits. These are aspects that influence human behaviour, such as attitude and understanding, but which are not easily observable (Bond, 2005; Bond & Fox, 2001). In this research, teacher attitude and understanding about students with learning difficulties represent the underlying latent traits. Rasch measurement can estimate difficulty for every item used as well as provide an estimate of error for every item. It provides person estimates for each latent trait being measured (Bond, 2005). The person/item fit indicates how well, 'each item fits within the underlying construct', while the person/item estimates are expressed in logits (Bond & Fox, 2001, p. 26). In this

project the Rasch mathematical model used equal interval scales to examine the person/item fit and person/item estimates for individual participants' attitude and understanding about students with learning difficulties.

The logit value of 0 is set at the average (mean) of the difficulty estimate. This means that the higher the person's location on the logit scale, the more positive is their response and, conversely, the lower the position on the scale, in negative numbers, the more difficulty the person has with agreeing with the statements (Bond & Fox, 2001). Together, the person/item fit and the person/item estimate allowed individual teacher's response patterns to be compared with those of other respondents in the sample. The appropriateness of the questions was examined and the questions that teachers found easier or more difficult to endorse were identified. This allowed a much fuller picture of teacher perceptions to be created especially when the responses were linked to specific demographic indicators. Rasch scales are based on the premise that people are more likely to, "answer easy questions correctly" and that "people with high ability will answer more questions correctly than those with low ability" (Bond & Fox, 2001, p. xix). In terms of Rasch scales, it would then follow that those teachers with more positive attitudes towards students with learning difficulties and more understanding of their characteristics would either endorse more items or answer more items correctly.

When examining teacher attitudes and understanding about students with learning difficulties in relation to Rasch analysis, it would then follow that all teachers are more likely to answer easier questions and endorse more obvious characteristics of students with learning difficulties than the more difficult questions and less obvious characteristics. More items will be endorsed by those teachers with more positive attitudes and more understanding about these students than those teachers who have more negative attitudes and more limited understanding of student characteristics. Rasch analysis maps both respondents (teachers) and items (endorsements) on the same interval scale. This allows the researcher to see which items are more difficult for teachers to endorse, which teachers were more positive towards students, and to identify where gaps exist and how well the difficulty of the question is matched to the attitudes and understanding of the teacher (Andrich, 1988; Bond & Fox, 2001).

All quantitative data was coded except for post code which was checked and plotted on a map, while qualitative data remained in the data base until analysed. Coding was conducted in the following way. For example, in data on the sectors, government schools were allocated a code of 1, Catholic 2, and independent schools 3.

This process was repeated for each demographic indicator listed on the survey instrument. The Likert scale attitudinal descriptors were also coded 1, for strongly disagree to 5 for strongly agree. Individual teacher endorsements for student characteristics were also coded with 1 being given if a teacher endorsed the statement and 0 if no endorsement was made. As two of the possible endorsements, "Students with learning difficulties have generally been diagnosed with ADHD" and "Students with learning difficulties generally have behavioural difficulties" are erroneous but are commonly held misconceptions, the allocation of the code for these two items was reversed. For example, these items were given 0 if a respondent ticked the box as this endorsement was incorrect and represented a misunderstanding of the characteristics of students with learning difficulties by that particular teacher. This reverse coding of items one and three have also changed their meaning as indicated in the student characteristics recorded in Figure 4.7. Item one now is interpreted as, "does not have ADHD" and item three means, "does not have behavioural difficulties". All analyses were conducted using the Quest program (Adams & Khoo, 1993).

Two separate scales were created. One scale represented teacher attitude while the other represented teacher understanding about the characteristics of students with learning difficulties. A scaled value was also calculated for each demographic indicator to allow each of these indicators to be compared. These were calculated by adding together the previously calculated individual value of each individual person estimate belonging in this indicator and calculating the mean. For example, the teachers in the government school sector had their individual scale values added together and the mean calculated. This created a specific Rasch scaled value to represent this indicator. This was done for each of the separate scales, teacher attitude and teacher understanding. For an easier comparison, these values were plotted on each person/item estimate map, one for attitude and the other for understanding. Qualitative data were then linked to individuals who had the same person estimate as the Rasch scaled value. Table 4.1 provides a summary of the Rasch scaled values for each demographic indicator listed on the survey instrument, expect for post code.

Table 4.1 Summary of Rasch scaled values

Demographic indicator	Attitude	Understanding
Urban	0.2 logits	0.7 logits
Rural	0.2 logits	0.3 logits
Under 150 students	-0.3 logits	0.1 logits
150 - 350 students	0.4 logits	0.5 logits
50 - 500 students	0.1 logits	0.8 logits
500 - 800 students	0.2 logits	0.8 logits
800 - 1000 students	0.2 logits	0.8 logits
1000 - 1500 students	0.4 logits	0.8 logits
Over 1500 students	0.2 logits	0.5 logists
State	0.1 logits	0.7 logits
Catholic	0.3 logits	0.6 logits
Independent	0.3 logits	0.8 logits
Female	0.3 logits	0.9 logits
Male	0.1 logits	0.2 logits
Under 1year teaching	-0.2 logits	-0.2 logits
1 - 5 years teaching	0.2 logits	0.6 logits
5 -10 years teaching	0.1 logits	0.5 logits
10 - 20 years teaching	0.2 logits	0.8 logits
Over 20 years teaching	0.3 logits	0.8 logits
Personal knowledge	0.3 logits	0.8 logits
No personal knowledge	0.3 logits	0.7 logits
Bachelor degree	0.1 logits	0.5 logits
Master's degree	0.2 logits	1.1 logits
Postgraduate diploma	0.3 logits	0.7 logits
	Mean = 0.3 logits	Mean = 0.6 logits
	SD = 0.3 logits	SD = 0.9 logits

As indicated in Table 4.1, there was very little difference between the attitude estimates when collated by demographic indicator. The groupings were clustered around the same value, that is the mean of 0.3 logits, with a standard deviation of 0.3 logits, indicating the uniformity of teacher attitude across the state regardless of which demographic indicator was considered. A fuller explanation of these scaled values and their significance in the study is outlined in section which follows. Table 4.1 lists the Rasch scaled values for demographic indicators associated with teacher understanding about students with learning difficulties. The teacher mean on this scale is 0.6 logits, with a standard deviation of 0.9 logits, and again there was little difference in average teacher endorsements across the range of demographic indicators. The only Rasch scaled value which was marginally above the average is the indicator for teachers with masters' degrees which showed a mean value of 1.1 logits. This would indicate that teachers with masters' degrees had a slightly better understanding of students with learning difficulties than do the teachers in the other categories. There is anecdotal evidence particularly from the parents and teachers interviewed in Phase Two about the positive effect of personal knowledge about students with learning difficulties influencing teacher attitude and understanding. However, these results do not support this view and indicate that there was no difference for this demographic group. A fuller explanation of the question on teacher understanding is given later in this chapter.

4.8.2 Teachers' attitudes

Seventeen attitudinal questions were rated on a five point Likert scale. One represented strongly disagree, 2, disagree, 3, 50/50, 4, agree and 5, strongly agree. These questions were analysed for their fit and for the thresholds of the item estimates. The threshold represents the cut off point between endorsement of an item and, "failure to endorse" (Bond & Fox, 2001 , p. 70). This allowed comparisons to be made between the statements teachers were most likely to agree with and the individual estimates of their attitudinal scores. These measures also allowed the reliability of the statements to be established as well as the probability of the cases agreeing with the questions that were asked.

Figure 4.1 shows the person/item map for the attitudinal questions. The left hand column of Figure 4.1 represents teachers' responses. The higher the teacher (x) is positioned on the scale, the more likely the teacher is to endorse the items below that point. The right hand column in the diagram, represents the items and the level of agreement. For example looking at the 2 logits level, two teachers are likely to agree with item 3 (3.4) two teachers strongly agree with item 7 (7.5) and two teachers strongly agree with item 10 (10.5). In this way the responses of the individual teachers are plotted against the logits giving a clear picture of the distribution of teacher attitudes and the items that teachers found easier or harder to endorse.

Figure 4.1 Person/Item Map for Teacher Attitude

```
  ------------------------------------------------------------------
    4.0                          |
                                 |
                                 |    3.5
                                 |
                                 |    6.5
                                 |
                                 |
                                 |
                                 |
    3.0                          |
                                 |
                                 |
                                 |
                                 |    5.5
                                 |
                                 |    2.5
                                 |
    2.0                      X   |    3.4    7.5    10.5
                                 |    4.5    6.4     8.5
                             X   |    9.5
                                 |
                                 |    1.5
                           X     |
                           X     |    11.5
                          XX     |
    1.0                    XX    |    2.4
                           XX    |    4.4
                  XXXXXXXXXX     |    6.3    13.5
                       XXXXX     |    5.4    12.5    16.5
              XXXXXXXXXXXXXXXX   |    2.3    7.4     14.5    17.5
                 XXXXXXXXXXXX    |    8.4
      XXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXX    |
                XXXXXXXXXX       |    3.3    9.4
      .        XXXXXXXXXXXXXXX   |    7.3    10.4    15.5
                XXXXXXXXXXX      |    1.4
     .0         XXXXXXXX         |    4.3    8.3
                 XXXXXXX   |
                  XXXX     |    11.4
                  XXX      |    9.3    10.3    16.4
                    X      |    2.2    5.3     13.4
                    X      |    17.4
                    X      |    12.4    14.4
                           |    1.3    7.2     16.3
                           |    6.2    11.3    15.4
    -1.0             X      |    13.3   14.3    17.3
                    X      |    12.3
                           |    3.2    15.3
                           |    4.2    15.2
                           |    12.2   17.2
                           |    13.2
                           |    5.2    14.2
                           |    9.2    16.2
                    X      |    8.2    10.2    11.2
    -2.0                   |
  ------------------------------------------------------------------
    Each X represents    2 teachers
  ==================================================================
```

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In Figure 4.2, the mean for the total sample of teachers is located at 0.3 logits and all demographic indicators are also clustered around the same value indicating the uniformity of teacher attitude across the state regardless of the grouping by demographic indicator. For example, when educational sectors are measured, the nongovernment schools are located on the mean (0.3 logits), while the state sector is just below that mean at 0.1 logits as are male teachers. Early career teachers, those teaching for under one year, are at -0.2 logits, are just below the mean while those teaching in very small schools with under 150 students, are at -0.3 logits. Differences between teachers' attitude from the highest to the lowest, as represented on this scale, were statistically insignificant. A range from 2.0 logits or above to -20 logits or below would have been considered statistically significant. Although the reported range was stastically insignificant, the distribution itself was important. It revealed a uniformity of teachers' attitudes about students with learning difficulties across the state regardless of sector, educational qualification or experience or any other demographic indicator that was sampled by the survey. However, there were teachers represented on the map who were well above the mean and who had more positive attitudes towards students with learning difficulties but they were not captured by any specific demographic indicator. There were also four student attributes that teachers in the survey could not strongly endorse, items 3.5, 6.5, 5.5 and 2.5. These were, "Students with learning difficulties are socially well adjusted", "Generally students in my classes have ADHD", "Students with LD have disruptive behaviour in my classes" as well as, "I have adequate preparation time to accommodate students with learning difficulties in my classes".

As discussed previously, Rasch analysis also estimates how well an item fits the underlying construct. Figure 4.2 represents the item fit estimates for the attitudinal questions.

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Figure 4.2 Item Fit for Attitudinal Questions

```
------------------------------------------------------------------
INFIT
  MNSQ        .63      .71      .83     1.00     1.20     1.40
-------------+---------+---------+---------+---------+---------
    1 item 1               .            |      *        .
    2 item 2               .            |         *     .
    3 item 3               .            |    *          .
    4 item 4               .            |   *           .
    5 item 5               .            |  *            .
    6 item 6               .            |  *            .
    7 item 7               .            |               *
    8 item 8               .            | *             .
    9 item 9               .           *|               .
   10 item 10              .         *  |               .
   11 item 11              .      *     |               .
   12 item 12              .        *   |               .
   13 item 13              .    *       |               .
   14 item 14            . *            |               .
   15 item 15              .  *         |               .
   16 item 16              .  *         |               .
   17 item 17              .     *      |               .
```

Items that sit within the two outer lines, the railway tracks, are generally regarded as items that fit the model. Items refer in these particular Rasch output diagrams to the questions which were asked of respondents. There was only one statement, item 7, "My lack of special education training hinders my ability to teach students with learning difficulties", which is located on the outer limit of fit. This item might have been difficult for some teachers to endorse as many respondents were learning support teachers or special educators and are likely to have had some special education qualifications.

As respondents also provided qualitative data, these were linked to high, medium and low Rasch scaled values to corroborate qualitative differences in the way in which each level of teachers viewed these students. Comments made were representative of the teachers in the particular group. Teachers in the high range (+1.1 to +1. 9 logits on Figure 4.1) indicated that levels of support for these students were declining and offered a reason for this situation, namely the, "systematic disadvantaging of students with learning difficulties because only ascertained students receive teachers' aide support". The use of ascertainment and its linked funding in Queensland secondary schools has been discussed previously. Teachers in the high range also had more positive attitudes towards students with learning difficulties. Teachers at the mid-range, (around the mean on Figure 4.1) saw the inevitability of school failure for these students, they, "had no option but to fail", while others advocated the need for an accepted process of student

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identification to be implemented, "we need appraisement". It is telling that those teachers with the least positive attitudes, those in the low range, (-5.3 to -2.88 on Figure 4.1), had nothing additional to say about any of the issues raised in the questionnaire. Only teachers with attitudes in the high and mid range offered additional qualitative insights into how they viewed students with learning difficulties in schools and the issues which affected them. A fuller exploration of some teachers' views about students with learning difficulties is undertaken in Phase Two and those concerns are discussed in Chapter Five.

4.8.3 Teachers' Understanding

Teachers were invited to choose up to 20 possible statements (refer to the survey instrument in Appendix One) about the characteristics of students with learning difficulties as identified by the literature in the field (Ashman & Elkins, 2002; Elkins, 2001; Louden et al., 2000; van Kraayenoord & Farrell, 1998; Westwood, 2004). Teachers' responses are indicated in the person/item map for understanding which is shown in Figure 4.3.

Figure 4.3 Person/Item Map for Teachers' Understanding

```
-------------------------------------------------------------
  4.0                         |          Student characteristics
                              |
                              |
                              |
                        X     |
                              |
                              |
  3.0                         |
                              |
                              |
                  XXXXXXX     |
                              |
                              |
                              |
                  XXXXXXX     |
  2.0                         |
                              |
                   XXXXX      |  Works well in cooperative groups
                              |  Does not have behavioural difficulties
                              |
               XXXXXXXXX      |
                              |  Doesn't learn from mistakes; Negative attitude
            XXXXXXXXXXXXX     |  to teachers
  1.0                         |
          XXXXXXXXXXXXXXXX    |
                              |
          XXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXX  |  Not ADHD; Intellectually able; Can't apply What's taught
                              | Unmotivated
            XXXXXXXXXXXXXX    | Poor short term memory
                              |
   .0       XXXXXXXXXXXXXXX   | Learnt helplessness; Disadvantaged by teaching methods
                              | Works well in practically based lessons
              XXXXXXXXXX      |
                              | Negative attitudes towards school
               XXXXXXX        | Have socio/emotional difficulties
                              | Low self esteem
                XXXXXX        |
                              | Poor study skills; Disadvantaged by assessment
 -1.0             XXX          |
                              |
                              |
                 XXXX         |
                              |
                              | Easily distracted
                    X         | Poor achievement in key curriculum areas
                              | Poor organizational skills
 -2.0                         |
                  XX          |
                              |
                              |
                  XX          |
                              |
                              |
 -3.0                         |
-------------------------------------------------------------
  Each X represents    2 students
=============================================================
```

As shown in Figure 4.3, teacher responses again were grouped according to important demographic indicators, for example, gender, urban or rural, qualification, school size, years teaching and educational sector. The average (mean) response

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estimates for each of these groups were calculated and plotted. An abbreviated representation of the statements appearing on the survey questionnaire has also been incorporated into the Figure to replace the item number so that they can be understood more easily. Amendments have also been made to item one and three to indicate the new sense in which they need to be interpreted as both these items were reverse coded.

This person-item map revealed a greater spread of teacher endorsement, (mean 0.6 logits, SD 0.9 logits) than did the attitude map in Figure 4.3 mean 0.3 logits/ SD 0.3 logits. This map in Figure 4.3 showed that overall, again there was little difference in average teacher endorsements, regardless of which demographic indicator is invoked. All demographic indicators (see Table 4.1) revealed that teachers in each of the sectors, Catholic, state and independent were either positioned at the mean of 0.6 logits or clustered around it. This was true for the indicators relating to rural and to males. Average values for teachers across the state employed in each of the sectors were placed at the mean or slightly above it and were likely to be split 50/50 as to whether students with learning difficulties "have ADHD", 'are intellectually able", "can not apply what is learnt'"and "are unmotivated to learn". This indicated that about half of the teachers sampled had fundamental misunderstandings about the characteristics of students with learning difficulties. This also extended to not recognising that these students were intellectually able.

There were two other demographic indicators that warrant particular attention as they were slightly outside the main cluster of demographic indicators. These indicators referred to teachers with masters' degrees positioned at 1.1 logits and early career teachers placed at -0.2 logits.

Early career teachers in this research were those who had been teaching for less than one year. In the timing of the delivery of the survey, some of these teachers might have been in schools for less than three months. Early career teachers were likely to agree that these students had the easily observable characteristics of students with learning difficulties and that they "are easily distracted", "are failing in key curriculum areas" and "have poor organisational skills". All of these items from the survey reflected the impression which is widely endorsed within secondary schools that difficulties experienced by these students are a result of problems within the child. This individual deficit theory and how it is reflected in school has been discussed in Chapter Three. Early career teachers were likely to agree with additional items such as students with learning difficulties experienced "low self esteem", "socio/emotional difficulties" and

"have negative attitudes towards school". Although they were likely to recognise that students with learning difficulties "are disadvantaged by assessment methods", only some of these early career teachers were likely to perceive that these students "have acquired learnt helplessness", "work well in practically based lessons" and that a teacher's "choice of pedagogy can cause disadvantage to occur".

In contrast with this, teachers with masters' degrees were likely to agree with most items but not with the idea that these students "work well in cooperative groups" and that "students with learning difficulties do not have behavioural difficulties". This indicated that teachers with a masters' degree generally had more complete understanding of the characteristics of students with learning difficulties than those teachers captured by other demographic indicators.

An examination of the total spread of teachers revealed some individuals at -2.0 logits and below, who did not endorse any of the statements. These teachers seemed to be totally unaware of any of the characteristics of students with learning difficulties. There were also a significant number of teachers who were likely to endorse all items on the survey. These teachers were the only ones who appeared to have a more sophisticated understanding about students with learning difficulties including the two different patterns of behaviour, disruptive or quiet, that typifies this particular group of students. Importantly, this group of teachers was not defined by any particular demographic indicator examined by this research. This result was surprising as anecdotal evidence had suggested that personal experience of students with learning difficulties in a family context would be linked with both more positive attitudes and more understanding about the students under investigation. This was not the case. Perhaps the factor which distinguished these teachers from others in the survey was their ability to feel empathy with the student. This idea is further discussed in Chapter Six.

The items from the survey were also subjected to an analysis of their fit to the model. Figure 4.4 represents the item fit for the characteristics related to teacher understanding.

Figure 4.4 Item Fit for Teachers' Understanding

```
---------------------------------------------------------------------
INFIT
MNSQ        .63      .71      .83     1.00     1.20     1.40  1.60
-----------+--------+--------+--------+--------+--------+--------+--
     1 item 1                 .                |              .         *
     2 item 2                 .       *        |              .
     3 item 3                 .                |              .           *
     4 item 4                 .                |        *     .
     5 item 5                 .            *|              .
     6 item 6                 .                |  *           .
     7 item 7                 .      *         |              .
     8 item 8                 .      *         |              .
     9 item 9               . *                |              .
    10 item 10              . *                |              .
    11 item 11                 .    *          |              .
    12 item 12                 .    *          |              .
    13 item 13                 .          *    |              .
    14 item 14                 .          *    |              .
    15 item 15                 .          *    |              .
    16 item 16                 .   *           |              .
    17 item 17                 .   *           |              .
    18 item 18                 .               *|             .
    19 item 19                 .            *|              .
    20 item 20                 .                |   *          .
=====================================================================
```

Figure 4.4 reveals good teacher/item fit for all questions asked of respondents
except for two items which lie outside the infit mean square of 1.00. This indicated that
all questions asked of teachers, with the exception of item 1 and item 3, fitted the model
well enough for these purposes. The erratic responses by teachers to these statements,
"Students with learning difficulties generally have been diagnosed with ADHD" and,
"Students with learning difficulties generally have behavioural difficulties" were likely to
have occurred because both statements were only partially true. For item1, some
students with learning difficulties have been diagnosed with ADHD, but the presence of
ADHD is not a prerequisite for learning difficulties therefore it is not a general
characteristic. Similarly in item 3, students with leaning difficulties generally present with
two distinctly different patterns of behaviour. Some students are very disruptive in class
and would be seen by teachers as having behavioural problems, while other students
with learning difficulties are very quiet and often tend to be overlooked. These latter
students do not exhibit behaviours in the classroom that would be considered by
classroom teachers as behavioural difficulties. These two items therefore, have been

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reverse coded as have been discussed previously. The characteristics of students with learning difficulties, as indicated by the literature, were discussed in Chapter Two.

Qualitative comments were again linked with the demographic indicators to further explore teachers' views about these students and the factors affecting their support in schools. Teachers from each demographic group had similar concerns although those with master's degrees (estimated 1.1 logits on Figure 4.3) referred to achieving student potential, "with the right teaching strategies, styles and activities". Other themes that were common across all groups were insufficient funding, "no external funding despite poor academic results", " too few teachers' or 'insufficiently trained teachers". One teacher noted that she/he has the position of, "Learning Support Teacher but had no formal training, 'just picked it up" and that the teacher had, "never had an in-service on learning difficulties". Teachers referred to the large number of students needing help: "Thirty percent of people in my school have learning difficulties", and that the "quiet ones are overlooked". Teachers also felt isolated and, "need time to meet". There was also a sense that teachers are overburdened, as in this example, "There is only one remedial teacher to cater for large numbers of LD students, teach classes and do ascertainments". All qualitative comments selected as examples were representative of the particular group under discussion. These and other issues are recurrent themes in the analysis of teacher interviews and are considered in more depth in Chapter Five.

Demographic indicators revealed that teachers were remarkably uniform both in their attitude and understanding about students with learning difficulties. The question then arises, what is the relationship, if any, between teachers' attitudes and their understanding of these students? It would be hoped that increased understanding about the characteristics of students with learning difficulties and how they present themselves in class would create more positive attitudes in teachers towards these particular students.

4.8.4 Relationship Between Teachers' Attitudes and Understanding

To examine the possibility of a relationship between teachers' attitude and understanding, person estimates were subjected to a product moment correlation. The co-efficient of correlation, a statistical formula developed by Karl Pearson, was presented as a, "means of expressing the magnitude of the relationship between two variables" ("Macquarie Dictionary of Australian Education", 1989). Correlation is

expressed as a range of values which extends from +1.0 for a perfect, positive linear relationship, through to -1.0 which represents a perfect, negative linear relationship, with a value of 0 indicating no relationship. The result, R squared = 0.0244, seen in Figure 4.5, was a shotgun pattern, which indicated that there was no relationship at all between the two variables of teacher attitude towards students with learning difficulties and their understanding about these same students.

Figure 4.5 Relationship between Teachers' Attitude and Understanding
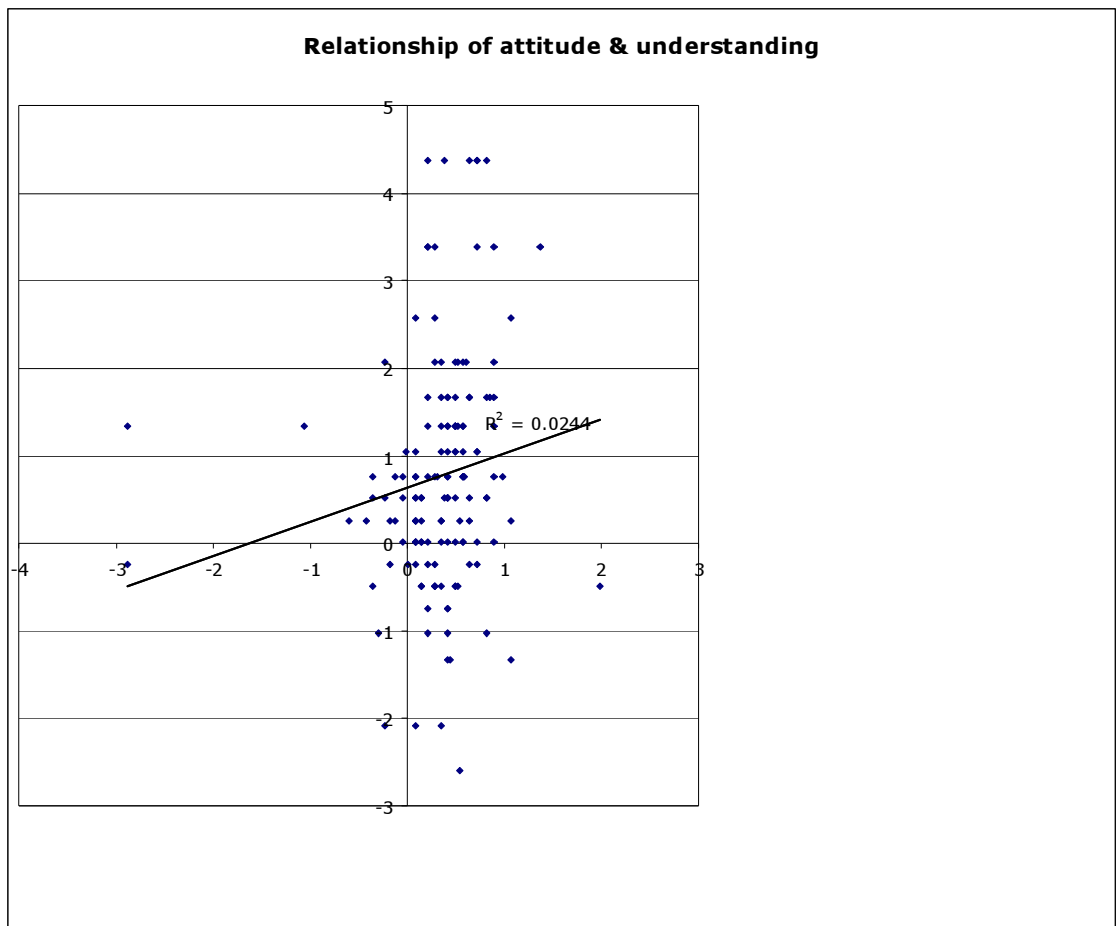
This result was both unexpected and disturbing. It would be hoped to see a positive correlation where increased knowledge and understanding about these students would coincide with improved teacher attitude. Instead, no relationship existed between teachers' attitudes and their understanding. Seemingly, other factors were at work including the social construction of attitudes (Briggs et al., 2002; Christensen, 1996;

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Elkins, 2000; Fulcher, 1989a; Oliver, 1984, 1996). This aspect has been more fully addressed in Chapter Three.

A number of qualitative questions were asked related to school life including policy for students with learning difficulties, student support, factors affecting support, organisational practices and any other comments teachers might like to make. Qualitative comments have been linked to both attitudinal and understanding estimates for the demographic indicators shown in Table 4.1. However, as the attitude estimates were generally homogeneous across all indicators, qualitative comments were sampled from participants with very low scores, with median scores and those with high scores. Those with low scores range from -5.37 to -2.88 logits, the mid range is at 0.01 logits and the high ranges from +1.16 to +1.98 logits. This allowed teachers with very positive attitudes, average attitudes and those with very negative attitudes to be compared and contrasted. Qualitative comments were sampled from the understanding estimates which were statistically significant, as well as from those participants with very low scores and those with very high scores. Comments from these various groups were compared and contrasted.

The lowest group (-5.37 logits to -2.88 logits) made no response to any question. The mid-range group (0.01 logits) was concerned that teachers' aides were used only if students were, "bad enough" and that these students had, "no option but to fail". High rated participants (+1.16 to +1.98 logits) were concerned with professional development especially in the construction of suitable programs, the lack of acceptance of the professional judgment of the Learning Support Teacher and that the number of ascertained students were continually rising at the expense of the large numbers of students with learning difficulties who need support. There was also concern that teachers' aides were unqualified and that only ascertained students have access to these personnel.

A number of other questions were included in the survey to determine if teachers understood which particular students were the focus of this research and if they accessed help in teaching these students with learning difficulties.

4.9 Identifying Students and Accessing Assistance

4.9.1 Identifying Students

In three separate questions, teachers were asked to identify the number of classes they taught, the number of students with learning difficulties in their classes and how many students they taught were on Individual Education Plans (IEPs). A number of teachers contacted the researcher to indicate that they taught one to one or very small groups. This option was not available on the survey instrument. Those teachers were told to consider these situations as separate classes. Although studies have shown that the number of students with learning difficulties in classes varied greatly among schools, for example up to 88 percent in some classes (Wallace et al., 2002) and less than 30 percent in others (Rohl et al., 2000), the majority of teachers statewide should generally teach high numbers of students with learning difficulties in their classes (Westwood & Graham, 2000). The prevalence of students with learning difficulties in mainstream classes was previously discussed in Chapter Two. Despite the limitation of the survey instrument not allowing the selection of teaching one to one as an option, approximately 80 percent of all respondents (N=280) identified substantial numbers of students with learning difficulties for the number of classes which they taught while 80 percent also identified a very small number of students who would be on IEPs. Students on IEPs generally have been ascertained and the numbers of these students present in mainstream classes is usually small. These results indicated that it was likely to be the same teachers who correctly recognised both ascertained, low incidence students with disabilities, and the more prevalent student with learning difficulties. It also implied that approximately 20 percent of teachers who completed the survey instrument were not focusing on the correct target group. This was a disturbing finding and underlies a lack of substantive knowledge by many teachers in Queensland secondary schools to enable them to recognise students with learning difficulties.

This point was further reinforced by qualitative comments which revealed some teacher confusion about which group of students were the focus of the survey. Despite the use of a definition and the inclusion of a diagrammatic representation, some teachers still referred primarily to ascertained students who were not the main focus of this research. For example, numbers of teachers spoke about bedridden students while others expressed concern about having to remove catheters. Other comments were

ambiguous. For example, one teacher stated that, "these students hijack learning" while another expressed fear of litigation because these students are receiving the bulk of the attention in class and that other students are being neglected. The survey did not elicit further clarification from these respondents.

4.9.2 Requests for Assistance

Teachers were asked to identify any assistance they received with these students both from within and outside the school. There were a number of questions which were designed to collect data on where teachers sought assistance in solving issues which arise in teaching students with learning difficulties. Over 60 percent of teachers indicated that they sought assistance from teachers' aides for students with learning difficulties while approximately 20 percent enlisted specialist help and professional advice. The sources of assistance most cited, in descending order of frequency, were learning support teacher, special education teacher, and guidance counselor. It would appear therefore, that the majority of teachers were seeking help and advice from generally unqualified teachers' aides rather than the professional expertise which might be available within the school. Only six percent of teachers indicated that they did not seek any assistance within the school.

Teachers were asked to indicate if they requested assistance from agencies outside the school. Twenty percent of respondents advised that they had not sought assistance from any sources outside the school, while less than 50 percent had sought assistance from parents. Less than 25 percent of teachers had consulted with educational psychologists or used information or assistance from SPELD Qld. Inc. A small number of teachers cited seeking assistance from medical personnel, pediatricians, speech pathologists and occupational therapists along with their own research and reading. Professional development, university courses, guidance officers and counselors and teacher networks were also cited but with less frequency.

The survey did not ask how regularly these sources were used although some respondents noted that they had, "occasional help" or "had received help once". A number of teachers advised that they received assistance from the Advisory Visiting Teacher. These teachers are generally designated to assist with students with low incidence disabilities and normally therefore do not provide information specific to mainstream students with learning difficulties. These responses would further suggest

that some respondents to the survey were referring to ascertained students, not the students with learning difficulties who were the focus of this research.

The relationship between parents of students with learning difficulties and teachers is interesting and is further examined in Phase Two which is outlined in the chapter which follows.

4.10 Summary

This web-based survey accessed 280 secondary teachers employed in Queensland government and nongovernment schools. The survey instrument collected data related to demographics, teacher attitudes and understanding about students with learning difficulties as well as teachers' ability to identify these students and to seek assistance in their teaching practices.

The survey was sponsored formally by teachers' unions, an advocacy group and an independent schools' association as well as business sponsors. It also had informal support by some principals and EQs Staff College. The survey was promoted by third parties. Media coverage through the data collection period was good and perhaps encouraged some teachers to participate. The survey had good coverage of the state and sectors thus providing a useful sample of the secondary teachers employed in Queensland secondary schools.

Data collected by the survey revealed that teachers' attitudes towards students with learning difficulties were uniform when grouped by demographic indicators. Teachers' understanding of the characteristics of these students was also generally uniform although some individual teachers had very high or very low understanding of students with learning difficulties. Although the predicted indicator of personal knowledge did not appear to be significant, teachers who held masters' degrees appeared to have a marginally higher understanding of the characteristics of students with learning difficulties than those revealed by other demographic indicators. Qualitative comments linked to Rasch scaled values revealed that those teachers with more positive attitudes had more concerns about the school failure and the negative school experiences of students with learning difficulties. The data also revealed that no relationship existed between teachers' understanding of these students and their attitudes towards them. It was evident throughout the data analysis process, that some teachers did not identify the correct students who were the focus of this research but

instead focused on students with low incidence disabilities in receipt of funding to assist them at school, that is, ascertained students. It was apparent that teachers were more comfortable consulting others within the school setting for assistance rather than those with outside expertise, including parents, other professionals in the field, advocacy groups, and generally did not access formal professional development to upgrade original teaching qualifications. As the majority of respondents had been teaching for over 10 years this was an important finding. The findings also suggest that perhaps many of the more experienced teachers who participated in the survey were unwilling or unable to access and incorporate different ideologies and pedagogies into their daily teaching practice.

Teachers generally appeared uninformed, indifferent and insular about the school failure of students with learning difficulties or in a more generous assessment, unable or unwilling to do anything about the situation in the macro environment or in the schools in which they teach. To further explore some of these issues, the responses of teachers in Phase One were used to construct the interview schedule that was used in Phase Two of this project. Chapter Five takes a closer view of the experiences of teachers but also includes the voices of advocating parents of students with learning difficulties and the students themselves.

CHAPTER FIVE

Phase Two: Diverse Voices - Methods and Results

'Strange the difference of mens's talk'
Simon Pepys Diary 1659-60

5.1 Introduction

This chapter outlines the method and results for Phase Two which used interviews with secondary teachers, advocating parents and affected students to explore the perceptions of each group about the school experiences of students with learning difficulties. The development of the interview schedules, characteristics of the participants, protocols governing data collection, transcription and verification are examined. Analysis of the data by categorisation of the theory in the field (Lankshear & Knobel, 2004) is also considered. Findings for each group are compared and contrasted.

5.2 Research Questions for Phase Two

1. How do teachers perceive the experience of education for students with learning difficulties in the secondary school?
2. How do advocating parents perceive the school experience of their children?
3. How do students with learning difficulties perceive their school experiences?
4. What are the similarities and difference of perception among the groups?

5.3 Methodology: Phase Two

5.3.1 Constructing Cases

The research design for Phase Two was based on the case study. The definition of what constitutes a case differs among theorists however, it centres on an individual or unit whether that be a person, an event, an organisation, a site or a role and always occurs in a specified social and physical setting (Knight, 2002; Miles & Huberman, 1994; Stake, 2005). Case studies generally have been seen as a process for conducting a study or they may be the result of a particular enquiry. Motivations to utilise case studies vary from interest in a particular situation, to clarification of a generalisation, or to provide insight into an issue. When increased awareness has been the aim, the inquiry has often been conducted through a number of case studies (Stake, 2005). Phase Two was designed to use multiple case studies to gain insight into the school experiences of students with learning difficulties from the perspectives of three groups: secondary teachers, advocating parents and the students themselves.

These collective cases provided increased validity for the findings and allowed for the development of theories although generalisations cannot be made (Knight, 2002; Miles & Huberman, 1994; Stake, 2005). All were associated with government and nongovernment schools. Although the physical and social circumstances surrounding each person were different, the use of multiple representations allowed similarities and differences to be explored. Four of the parents and students from independent schools formed two parent/child dyads, while one triad of parent/ child /teacher came from a Catholic school.

5.3.2 Interview Participants

Teachers

Teachers from Phase One, who had indicated their willingness to participate in an interview, were contacted by email. Teachers were ranked as potential participants on the basis of location and educational sector. Location was confined, for logistical reasons such as accessibility, cost and time needed for data collection, to the Townsville,

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Cairns/ Tablelands and Brisbane areas of Queensland. Selection was further narrowed by specific demographic features that matched indicators located either above or below the mean on the attitude and understanding person estimate maps of Phase One. For example, male teachers, schools in rural settings, very small schools and teachers with masters' degrees were indicators of interest. Only teachers who resided in the target areas, and who matched specific demographic indicators, were invited to participate. Two teachers from each sector were selected although only five teachers were interviewed. Participant details are outlined in the following section. Names of participants and schools were altered to preserve anonymity.

Fiona was employed in a large school in a low socio-economic area of a regional city. The coeducational school had many students with learning difficulties in its population. Fiona indicated that other government schools in the city effectively 'poached' any students who had either outstanding sporting or academic abilities. Fiona was an experienced teacher, worked as the head of the learning support department and held a masters' degree. She was involved in her doctorate in the special needs area. She had children, some of whom have learning difficulties, and was involved in advocacy on their behalf.

Lena also worked in a government school and had been teaching for five years at the same school which was small, coeducational and was located in an economically and socially disadvantaged rural area. She commented that literacy levels at the school were generally low and were among the lowest in the State. Lena was a head of department and held a Bachelor's degree. She began teaching after extensive travelling and living overseas in a non English speaking country. She was heavily involved in the behavioural management program for students with learning difficulties. She had a personal connection with these students. She drew on her sister's negative outcomes in life skills and employment as inspiration to improve the outcomes for her students. She had no formal training in relation to students with special educational needs.

Mark worked in a large, Catholic secondary school in a regional, urban area and was the only male teacher interviewed. This gender bias was justified by the small number of males who completed the survey, their location and the feminisation of the education workforce (see Chapter Four). Mark was responsible for pastoral care in the coeducational school which, he stated, attracted students from affluent and middle class areas of the city. He had wide ranging life experiences which have influenced his teaching life. Mark began his career in a religious order and served in remote and

disadvantaged areas in New Guinea where he was responsible for the building and accommodation maintenance of a teachers' college campus. After leaving the order, he was employed by a brewing company in Singapore, Hong Kong and Cambodia. More recently, he worked for an Asian company of bookmakers involved in building and property maintenance. He moved to north Queensland and has taught at the same school for the past six years. During this time he has upgraded his teaching qualifications to become four year trained. He has no personal involvement with students with learning difficulties other than his work in his professional capacity and no formal knowledge about their characteristics.

Megan was also a teacher at a large Catholic boys' school in a regional urban area. She identified the boys who attended this school as coming from both disadvantaged as well as affluent families. Megan was the head of her department and taught a specialist vocational subject. She held a Bachelor's degree and a number of graduate diplomas, one in education, one in library science and vocational certificates. Megan had no formal special education qualifications and no personal involvement with students with learning difficulties as a member of her family.

Sally taught at a small, independent, coeducational Christian P-12 school in a regional, urban area. The school attracted students of parents who wished their children to be educated in a specific faith. Sally suggested that the school had established a reputation within the city for having success and being supportive of students with special needs. This was attracting increasing numbers of these students into the school. She was the coordinator of the special needs department and held a masters' degree. Sally also had a son with learning difficulties who still needs support, to various degrees, in achieving goals after leaving school. For example, he found it difficult to find a driving instructor he could relate to and this hindered his attempts to gain his driving license. He also completed an electrical apprenticeship with outstanding practical results but he found it difficult to find an employer that he liked.

Parents

Parents interviewed were all involved in advocacy, to a greater or lesser extent, for their children who were being educated in mainstream classes in Queensland government and nongovernment schools. All the parents assessed their children as having long-term difficulties in literacy, numeracy or learning how to learn. Parents of children in nongovernment schools were recruited by advertising in the newsletter of

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SPELD Queensland and through their emails to a gifted and talented advocacy group for students with learning difficulties. These parents lived in urban areas in south-east Queensland. Parents in government schools were accessed by the direct invitation of SPELD Queensland staff who approached parents who had contacted them on their 'Advice' line. Only one parent from a Catholic school was involved and she indicated her willingness to assist after her son participated in an interview.

Shane was a primary school teacher of 26 years experience, with a daughter in Year 9 at a large, city, coeducational government school. He was divorced and his daughter lived with her mother but he had regular contact with his daughter each week and was the main contact with the school. He took his daughter to weekly tutorial sessions with a SPELD accredited tutor. He was recruited through the SPELD advice line. His daughter was also an interviewee. Both parents have advocated for their daughter in both primary and secondary school.

Mary had a son also in Year 9 at a large, coeducational government school on the outskirts of the greater Brisbane area. Mary emigrated to Australia in her twenties but was unable to have her child care qualifications recognised. Her son attended a school located in a socially disadvantaged area that was once a small, rural town but now has become a domicile suburb for people commuting to Brisbane. She had contacted the SPELD advice line for help in advocating for her son. She had other children with special educational needs.

Kathy lived in a regional, urban area and her son, Tyrone, was also an interviewee. Kathy left school after Year 11 and travelled overseas. After returning to Australia some years later, she completed Year 12. She commenced a diploma in business, which she did not complete, but has been involved in her husband's business for the past 12 years. She sought help from SPELD for diagnosis of her son's difficulties and was refereed to an educational psychologist. The psychologist advocated in the school for changes to assessment and curriculum for Tyrone. She also had another son with special educational needs.

Carmel had an adopted son who was a boarder in Year 11 at a large boys' school in a large, urban area. She was a member of the gifted and talented association for people with learning difficulties as well as a member of SPELD NSW, in the State where she lived. Her son, Alex, had attended an elite boys' school in Sydney until Year 9 but was asked to leave because he failed two subjects. Carmel recounted her search across Australia for a school that she believed would suit his needs. She held four

university degrees including a masters' degree and was a practising solicitor. She was prominent in the field of advocacy for academically gifted and talented students with learning difficulties and planned to establish a formal support group in the district where the school was located. Carmel was a regular guest speaker at the informal support group. She considered herself an expert in the field.

Doreen left school at 15, had pursued various careers and had a masters' degree. She lived in an urban area in south-east Queensland. She was encouraged to leave school and get married. She disliked school as she was bullied. Doreen participated in an advocacy group for gifted and talented children with learning difficulties and was an active advocate for her child. Damon, her son, was a participant.

Janet lived in a regional urban area and was the mother of Errol who was also involved in this study. She was a nurse in the intensive care unit of the major hospital in the city. She only liked school if she had a, "good teacher" or if they were, "interesting" and she had trouble making friendships until Year 9. She had another son in Year 8 who also had learning difficulties, but who attended a different Catholic school. She noted the difference in the way both of her children were treated. Errol, who was ascertained and had funding attached to him, received considerable help at school, while Jeremy received none.

Students

Student participants were the most difficult to find. As I am not directly involved with a secondary school, it was necessary to seek assistance in recruiting students from teachers and parents already involved. Teachers asked Blair, Denise and Errol to participate while three parents also provided access to their children. These were Tyrone, Emily and Damon. Students also attended government and nongovernment schools.

Emily and Denise both attended government schools. Emily was Shane's daughter and attended a very large coeducational school in the city. The school was located in a domicile area for a university and large numbers of international students resided in this area. Emily reported her school as being multicultural and it had adapted its uniform to accommodate its Muslim students. Emily reported it as being a harmonious school without racial tensions and she was happy there. She was in Year 9 at the time of the study.

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Denise attended a large coeducational school in a regional, urban area. It was located in an economically disadvantaged area. She was in Year 12 and had attended the school for two years. She previously went to an inner city state school in the same regional area until Year 10. She was reluctant to leave her former school however, as her family moved and the distance to travel to school became too great, a change became necessary. She was less than enthusiastic about her new school, particularly some of the teachers, but was happy with her friends.

Errol was also a Year 12 student who attended a large, coeducational Catholic school in an urban, regional area. His mother, Janet, and one of his teachers, Mark, were also interviewees. Errol had attended the school since Year 8 and was very articulate. He studied all Board subjects in mainstream classes, meaning that his subjects were eligible to be assessed for university entrance. He was ascertained at a level five, therefore he was provided with funding to assist with his learning needs. He received both time with a teachers' aide and had an Individual Education Plan (IEP). He was critical of the level of support he received in Year 12. He was not engaged in the school community and although he said he had friends, both his mother and Mark were concerned about his lack of involvement with the social aspects of school life.

Blair was a student at a P-12 coeducational, small nongovernment school in a regional, urban centre. He was originally at this school in Year 8 and left to go to a large government school in the same area. He returned in Year 10 but would still rather be at his former school. Blair was at risk of leaving school in Year 9 and was promoted, along with three other students, into the Year 11 vocational education and training strand (VET). He was keen to gain an apprenticeship and had every intention of completing Year 12. He was recruited by the learning support coordinator at the school who was also a participant. His mother was a teachers' aide in the learning support unit. Blair was initially reluctant to talk about his experiences as he had been taken out of his favourite subject, but after a second visit he imparted much more information about his life and experiences at school including how he came to be in Year 11 without completing Year 10.

Tyrone was Kathy's son, a parent participant, and attended a medium sized, coeducational, nongovernment school in an urban, regional area. He had attended this school since preschool. He was in Year 8 and, in the first interview, was very reluctant to share his ideas. In the follow-up interview, Tyrone was more forthcoming about his experiences at school. Of all the students that I interviewed, he was the most

disengaged and had no interest in the academic or community life of the school although he was interested in being with his friends. He was unhappy in his present situation.

Finally, Damon was the son of Doreen a parent participant. Initially he was in Year 7 at the time of the first interview but was promoted into Year 8 for socioemotional reasons mid year. He attended a very small, coeducational, nongovernment school. The school was located at the edge of a prosperous, urban area. He had only attended this school for a few months after his mother took him away from a government school where he was unhappy. Two hours a day, by public transport, were required to get to and from his present school. Although Damon had limited ability to read and to write his mother considered him to be academically gifted. He signed the consent form with difficulty. He was ascertained at a level six while attending a government primary school. There were questions surrounding how he received this level of ascertainment given the nature of his difficulties, his good command of oral language, his social competence and the reported reluctance of medical opinion to endorse the ascertainment procedure. However, this level of ascertainment ensured that he received time with a teachers' aide who was a qualified teacher. Although his family believed Damon to be academically gifted and talented, he appeared to his teachers as a child who could not read or write although he was very articulate, had a good command of vocabulary and an adult way of speaking and relating.

5.4 Interviews

5.4.1 Interviews in Research

Interviews have a long history for collecting both quantitative and qualitative data. From their first use by Charles Booth in 1886, for gathering data in his social survey, interviews were further developed to be used in psychological testing in World War One. Later, In-depth interviews were conducted with 250,000 United States soldiers in World War Two while, today interviews have become the basis of public opinion research conducted by the Gallup Poll (Fontana & Frey, 2005). The 1960s saw the introduction of grounded theory (Glaser & Strauss, 1967), which expanded interview techniques to include postmodern concerns such as voice, interviewer and respondent relationships, gender and researcher role. Interviews have continued to be utilised as a research method in all areas of social science and involve either individual or focus groups to explore issues. Interviews were essentially an artificially contrived conversation between

two parties where the participant's views are privileged (Kvale, 1996; Wengraf, 2001). To be successful and to elicit relevant and worthwhile information, interviews must promote a climate of trust where the researcher showed empathy yet appeared somewhat ingenuous, so that explanations could be sought (Hermanns, 2004). Interviews were shaped by social dynamics and were subject to interviewer effects (Denscombe, 2003). For example, researcher personal attributes such as age, sex, ethnic origin, professional status, and occupation can affect the relationship between interviewer and interviewees.

Interviewer effects were exploited in the series of interviews conducted. A relationship needed to be established with each individual participant. For example, my former role as a secondary teacher created a link with participating teachers, while my role as an advocating parent allowed me to establish a rapport with parents and students. Securing a connection with participants and belonging to the group which was being studied was integral to research undertaken within the transformative emancipatory paradigm of disability (Oliver, 1996). Although two students, Blair and Tyrone, were reluctant to talk at the initial interview, by the second contact, both revealed considerable insights into their experiences at school. This was tangible evidence of gaining participant trust.

As with any method of data collection, interviews have advantages and disadvantages. A major advantage was the high level of participant response and flexibility of delivery including the capacity to clarify questions, tease out sections and to verify and amend understanding. However, interviews can be expensive, time consuming and there can be interruptions to the collection procedures as well as unsuitable venues for recording (Denscombe, 2003). Interviews for this research were costly, both in time and money, because of the distance between the locations for the interviews and also for Doreen and Damon who agreed to travel long distances to be involved. Locations for interviews also proved to be problematic. Parents who wished to be interviewed at home generally had unsuitable venues for recording, therefore, reducing tape quality, while teachers and students who were interviewed at school often had timetable constraints placed upon them. Interviews followed a semistructured model and the schedules were created from issues arising from the teacher survey outlined in Chapter Four. However, sections were expanded with particular individuals to probe, to clarify, and to coax, especially with the students.

5.4.2 Research Protocols

Question schedules

Themes which emerged from the initial teachers' survey were used as the foundation for interview questions. Recurrent ideas included school organisation and teacher training and were the basis of questions for each group. Infrequent concepts that arose in the qualitative sections of Phase One such as pedagogy, collaboration and professional development were also incorporated as questions in the schedules. Additional questions were added to explore issues not raised by teachers, that is the silences that were found in teachers comments, for example mentoring, collaboration and school policy about students with learning difficulties. Inquiries related to relationships between groups were also included as this aspect was not generally discussed by teachers who participated in the survey. Parents and students were asked how comfortable they felt within the school community.

Three separate interview schedules were constructed. Although each group was asked questions in parallel, the students' questions needed changes in wording and some questions were eliminated as they were irrelevant. For example, queries related to involvement with SPELD, policies which affect students with learning difficulties, specific questions on school organisation, teacher education and professional development were deleted. The question schedules were trialled with a teacher who participated in Phase One, an advocating parent and a Year 12 student with learning difficulties not included in the study. Parent and teacher schedules remained unchanged and the student outline required minor changes to wording in accordance with suggestions made in the trial. Full interview schedules for each group, including thematic constructs, are included in Appendices 5.2, 5.3 and 5.4.

Interview sites

Teachers were interviewed at their respective schools within the timetabled day. All teachers refused the option of an out of school time interview. Three students attended interviews at their school in an interview room. One student was interviewed at an Education Queensland (EQ) office site, another in my university office, while another was interviewed at home. Two parents were interviewed at home while two others were

interviewed in my university office or one of EQ's. One parent was interviewed at home by telephone as an extended illness precluded her attendance.

For quality control of tapes, it was desirable that interviews be undertaken at a researcher nominated location but, logistics, that is, distance and time restraints were all factors in the interviews being conducted as they were. Interview locations were also in diverse locations across the state. Except for one parent, audio tapes were the method of data collection for initial interviews. Noncontroversial items such as grade level, employment and education levels were also included for parents and teachers as icebreakers and to gather some limited demographic data. For students, questions on year level, location of school and subjects being studied were also included. Audio tapes were transcribed and sent to all adult participants for verification. Subsequent changes were included in the data. For the students, a further personal interview was conducted with Errol, Tyrone, Blair and Denise where the transcript was read to them and alterations were made. Damon and Emily had their transcript read to them over the phone and alterations made.

Reliability

The reliability of data was dependent on the process of its collection and analysis being transparent (Coffey & Atkinson, 1996). To enhance reliability, I conducted all interviews face to face with the exception of one done by telephone. The reliability of the question schedules was further enhanced by presenting the questions in the same order. Although additional questions were added for some participants, these only occurred to elicit further responses on a subject or to clarify ideas that were being presented. For example, a student would be asked to explain themselves more fully or a parent asked to explain what happened at their particular school. The interviews were also transcribed by the same person. I was responsible for the verification of the data which, apart from the receipt of amended transcripts, often involved an additional meeting, email or telephone contact.

5.5 Data Analysis

5.5.1 Method of Data Analysis

The section which follows outlines the process of data analysis and its transformation from raw data to coded concepts, including examples from transcripts, into substantive theories (Flick, 2002; Ryan & Bernard, 2000). This procedure allowed the differences within and among groups to be discerned and established relationships between important issues and connections with theory (Charmaz, 2005; Coffey & Atkinson, 1996; Mason, 2002). Backward mapping from the data to a theoretical model was achieved by subjecting the material to rigorous coding which was designed to reveal themes embedded in the transcripts (Charmaz, 2005; Coffey & Atkinson, 1996).

In analysing the data relating to mainstream students with learning difficulties, the systematic identification of concepts was always informed by both the research questions and the theory. Categories that were developed, including the more abstract concepts, were directly related to the theory as identified in the literature reviewed in Chapter Two (Lankshear & Knobel, 2004). As Charmaz (2005) noted, it was the researcher who composed the story that unfolds and this interpretation will be subject to the beliefs and values that were held. This is particularly true of the 'transformative emancipatory paradigm of disability' which underpinned this research which was previously discussed in Chapter Three. In this conceptual model, the values of the researcher are paramount and the researcher is part of both the paradigm and the data itself (Oliver, 1996). The researcher does not remain aloof from the data but is actively involved in the selection of the material for the purpose of advocacy. The researcher constructs the narrative with the aim of allowing voices to be heard and ultimately to transform the educational situation which confronts students with learning difficulties and their parents. Details are outlined in the following section.

Transforming data

This phase used NVivo 2.0 (QSR International, 1999-2002), to analyse data and to develop theory in relation to the school experiences of students with learning difficulties. Material analysed included individual interview transcripts as well as researcher generated field notes. The analysis process was as follows. Transcripts were read line by line and participant concerns were coded. This same procedure was applied to field notes. Participant concerns were then combined to form a list of repeating ideas, for example, frustration, homework and dyslexia. Repeating ideas were placed under themes that were apparent, for example, how students with learning

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difficulties act in classroom situations. Positioned under this theme would be repeating ideas such as bad behaviour, frustration, socio-emotional problems, reading, dysgraphia and textbooks to name a few.

Once themes were identified, relationships between these and existing theory about students with learning difficulties were developed diagrammatically by superimposing the theory on to the concepts that had been established by the data. Mason (2002) suggested that diagrams assist in identifying connections, allowed for reflection and meaningful comparisons to be found, as well as indicating areas in which the data did not align with the theory. In this phase, when a diagram was constructed, it became apparent that the majority of the concepts expressed in the data were discussed previously in the theory. For example, theory spoke of the nature of disability, pedagogy, school organisation, social justice, as did the data which were collected from the interview transcripts and the field notes. Constructs, for example the nature of learning difficulties, policies related to students with learning difficulties, social justice and equity and student characteristics, were then developed based upon the theory. These same themes were discussed by the participants, often from similar and dissimilar viewpoints. These constructs provided the headings which were the basis of the discussion of the transcripts which follows. Finally, there were ideas which were presented by the participants, for example the feminisation of the teaching workforce, which were either not repeated by other participants or did not fit neatly into the theory. These items are discussed separately.

In any discussion about students with learning difficulties, many of the issues raised are interconnected and overlap making delineation difficult. Participating parents and teachers, for example, often had a number of roles other than the one assigned in the research project, making their views complex. For example, Fiona herself was a student with learning difficulties, a parent of children with learning difficulties, a teacher and a doctoral student researching in the area of special needs. These multiple roles were true for other participants who were also teacher, sister, friend, parent or a parent who had suffered from learning difficulties. The teachers involved in Phase Two, generally had a specific interest in the research and often, but not always, had a very personal connection with the issues under discussion as they had members in their immediate family who experienced learning difficulties.

5.5.2 Overarching Concerns

To assist the reader in navigating the discussion of themes in the remainder of this chapter, a quick reference table has been constructed so that the participants and their designated role in the research can be located.

Table 5.1 Designated Roles of Interview Participants

Names	Designated Role
Fiona	Teacher
Lena	Teacher
Mark	Teacher
Megan	Teacher
Sally	Teacher
Shane	Parent
Mary	Parent
Kathy	Parent
Carmel	Parent
Doreen	Parent
Janet	Parent
Emily	Student
Denise	Student
Errol	Student
Blair	Student
Tyrone	Student
Damon	Student

Participants in Table 5.1 are listed in the order in which they appeared in Section 5.3.2 of the discussion. It was a deliberate choice to keep the table minimal so that readers could easily refer to the designated role of each participant.

The nature of learning difficulties

Students, parents and teachers emerged as having different perspectives about disability. The students, generally, were silent about their learning difficulties. Tyrone spoke of undertaking specific tests to diagnose a disability although he seemed unaware of the connection between these and subsequent accommodations were made for him. Errol, however, did specifically state that he has a 'learning difficulty' but still felt that, "It is not really recognised in my classes." However, despite his openness about his learning problems, he lacked empathy, understanding and revealed prejudice about other students with disabilities who were different from himself. His mother, Janet, reported that Errol had responded negatively about being placed with other students with disabilities on a field trip to a local university. He insisted "I am not like that. Why did they send me to something like that? There is nothing wrong with me." His mother commented that he became more accepting of other students after she explained about visible and invisible disabilities. Errol's attitude exhibited both denial and a lack of empathy for people with similar problems even among the affected group.

Parents' discussion of disability was not homogeneous. Carmel and Janet were the only two parents who referred to the nature of disability. Janet, as noted previously, spoke of its invisibility, as did Carmel. She stated, "Disability for these children is invisible therefore there is a lack of respect and their issues are not taken seriously." For Carmel, the onus of proof resided with the schools:

> If a parent submits a psychologist's report to a school saying that a child has a learning disability, then the onus should be on the school to either (a) accommodate the disability or (b) call for their own expert's report to refute it.

Carmel also rejected the individual deficit model which she saw as being applied by the school to both child and parent. She remarked that she:

> Always felt that the school believed that it was the parent's fault that the child was not achieving and there was always this idea that it was the child's fault, not that the school needed to do things better.

Other parents shared the concern that schools were responsible to instigate appropriate action so that their child learnt but they also insisted that diagnosis was a priority. All parents wanted an early, accurate diagnosis and for recommendations to be implemented without prevarication. All parent interviewees had undertaken private testing for their children and all had experienced difficulties in having those findings accepted and the recommendations adopted by the school. When the diagnosis made was dyslexia, the diagnosis itself became problematic. Doreen complained: "There is dyslexia. We can't say that word can we", and this was echoed by Kathy who commented, "I think a lot of teachers don't believe in dyslexia." Kathy also regretted that she had placed her faith in the school to deal with her son's literacy problems. She reflected, "I found that [the diagnosis] was probably the most important thing and I would have done that when he was in grade one. I would probably [have] saved myself a lot of time and a lot of stress for the five years where we didn't know what the problem was."

Carmel condemned the rejection of professional reports by school administrators and individual teachers. She stated:

> I also find it untenable that reports from psychologists and other experts are dismissed by teachers who feel that these reports are not worth reading and that their own judgement is the only valid one.

The data clearly revealed that parents initiated testing and then returned to the school as supplicants to have the recommendations implemented. No matter how articulate the parent, their level of education and understanding, the power overwhelmingly resided with the school administration and teachers as to what action was taken. Carmel, with significant financial resources to move her son interstate in an attempt to improve his outcomes, reported that she still needed to remove him from individual teachers' classes if they did not teach and assess in an appropriate manner. Other parents interviewed did not have the financial resources, advocacy skills or involvement with the school to take similar action or even regarded this as a viable solution to their problems.

However, teachers interviewed did not speak about disability but Lena, and Fiona in her role as a parent of a child with a learning difficulty, commented on the importance of diagnosis. Lena was very confident about her ability to recognise a student with a

learning difficulty and sent students for diagnosis within her school. She asserted: "Four out of four. This one had this and this one had that."

All participants demonstrated awareness of the effect of a learning difficulty on their personal and/or professional lives however it was generally parents who openly spoke about the difficulty and its ramifications in their lives. An official diagnosis had a high priority with parents and some teachers, as well as the parents being concerned about the lack of implementation of recommendations that have been made. Existing policies within schools were generally regarded as a barrier to that occurring.

Policies on learning difficulties

Parents and teachers were critical about both the official and unofficial policies which governed the lives of students with learning difficulties in schools. Doreen, as mentioned previously, alluded to the lack of political correctness associated with the term dyslexia. One respondent also was influenced by the need to be politically correct. Her revised transcript was more politically correct and far less critical of the school and teachers than her initial response. For example a statement was deleted which noted that she needed to make teachers aware of the problems that her son was having in different subjects. She also deleted a reference to having problems with her son and his reluctance to do assignments because he, "couldn't make them as pretty or as nice as girls do." This information was valuable in analysis but this respondent seemed concerned about overt criticism of the school and teachers and how people would be perceived by her comments. Teachers similarly made references to political correctness. For example, Megan and Lena alleged that political correctness stifled both the discussion and implementation of strategies. Megan asserted that she supported classes which were, "to use a dirty, unpolitical word, 'streamed'". Lena interpreted both the mentoring and professional development program at her school as being based on political correctness rather than need:

> There are certain teachers who know that it is not really about them and it is
> about other teachers that are struggling and they blanket over all of us sort of
> thing. So instead of saying, I'll spend double the time with this person so it looks

good and looks politically correct and all that crap, they do the blanket thing and it doesn't really help.

Parents and teachers also expressed concern about overt and hidden policies that existed and which impacted upon their children. Carmel had experience of a school which excluded her son on the basis of failure of two subjects while Fiona was adamant that schools hide their exclusion policies. She substantiated this claim in the following way:

A lot of schools cut out students of their mainstream curriculum options. Especially high school, very early on because they can see that they are not going to get good results so therefore a student isn't allowed to enrol in subjects because they haven't done well in the Year10. Many schools are inflexible in terms of that and for some students there are reasons why they haven't done well that are not cognitive, not influenced by subject. Social/behavioural perhaps. There are lots of reasons. I think policies can be black and white.

Finally, both parents and teachers exposed shortcomings in all educational sectors, government and nongovernment. Both Fiona and Lena viewed the government system as being "underfunded" while Doreen believed that, "teachers honestly seem to care more in the private system than they did in the state." However, Janet, as the only parent in the Catholic system was negative about it, asserting that, "I don't think that you get help." She was also concerned enough to ask me if I thought that this research project would help to change Catholic schools. Carmel also was critical of a nongovernment system which allowed a school to possibly be in breach of the Anti-Discrimination laws through their policy of exclusion. Parents and teachers were disillusioned and critical of policies and attitudes, overt and hidden which determined the outcomes for students with learning difficulties. Participants also revealed different perceptions of social justice.

Social justice and equity

Parents had different perspectives from teachers about social justice and equity. Teachers were silent on these issues although they did relate, as seen earlier, to

examples of lack of equity and social justice. The only teacher who specifically mentioned equity was Fiona and she explained her experiences from the point of view of a parent:

> Whereas my son, who is gifted has been has been promoted through to Year 10 in the core subjects, Maths, Science, SOSE and so next year when he is in Year 10 he will be joining the Year 11 maths before he gets to Year 11. He has such an advantage in the way that the school has facilitated that.

However, those parents with children who were gifted and talented and had a learning difficulty made specific reference to additional disadvantage. Both Doreen and Carmel expressed disquiet about misunderstanding by school administrators and teachers. Doreen said, "My axe to grind is that you can be gifted with a learning difficulty" while Carmel articulated the specific disadvantage that besets her son:

> When a child who is gifted and talented has severe learning difficulties, their school achievement becomes average because their high IQ covers up their disabilities and their disabilities mask their intelligence.

Kathy suggested that for all teachers, "the hardest part is teaching fairly" although the survey results detailed in Chapter Four indicated that many teachers were unaware of the lack of equity in their teaching practices.

Participants also considered advocacy as important for achieving social justice, including the involvement of advocacy groups. Only two teachers, Fiona and Sally, were aware of the role of SPELD and their associated materials in schools, however all of the parents, with the exception of Janet, had utilised SPELD for referrals, advice and materials. All parents were also involved in direct advocacy with the school for their children although, not always with success. Kathy explained:

> Once he was diagnosed, the psychologist actually came to the school on behalf of quite a few parents who had been to her and talked to all the teachers and the principal about the recommendations and they were implemented straight away, which amazed me. I was talking to them and couldn't get anywhere fast and she came and it was all done straight away.

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Professional advocates were often regarded as essential to redress parents' lack of authority and their unequal position in their relationship with the school. Errol also commented on the difficulties that his mother faced in her advocacy on his behalf. "My mother has had to really fight tooth and nail to get me where I am at the moment. She really had to chase up my learning difficultly all through primary school." There was also the sense of parents wishing to help other parents and children in their quest for social justice. Kathy and Shane indicated their support for SPELD while Carmel and Doreen were actively involved in establishing and promoting support groups for gifted and talented students with a learning difficulty. Janet appeared to sum up the philosophy of the parents and their commitment to social justice for this group of students when she declared, "There hasn't been any difference to any other child, but I'm trying to change that."

Parents were committed to social justice and equity for their children but some were also prepared to become advocates to change school practices to help other students with learning difficulties. Parents and teachers also had views about the characteristics which revealed the presence of a learning difficulty in students.

Characteristics of students with learning difficulties

Socioemotional problems, including disruptive or apathetic behaviour, were indicated by the literature in the field as being characteristic of students with learning difficulties. Bad behaviour was one aspect which was referred to by all groups of participants: students, parents and teachers. Students spoke about their own bad behaviour and being in trouble particularly in primary school. Tyrone explained that he was always in trouble with teachers and the principal while Damon outlined his threatened suspension for "evil drawings" and his suspension from the school bus for talking to another student about Harry Potter. Clearly school, parent and student interpretations of bad behaviour were very different. Damon's mother, Doreen, chose not to confront his school but pronounced, "I wanted to ask them do they want custody of him because they want to make the decisions which are a parents'."

Parents and some teachers viewed bad behaviour in the students as indicative of learning difficulties. Kathy confirmed that, "behavioural problems are like a flashing light that there is something else going on" while Megan, a teacher, regarded learning

difficulties and behavioural problems as being part of a "vicious circle". Mary and Doreen perceived their sons as being angry both as a result of frustration with themselves and because of the school's response to their difficulties. Additionally, in Damon's case, teachers refused to answer his questions about why a particular activity was happening. Clearly, needs of the student were not being addressed. Kathy also noted the school's preoccupation with behaviour problems rather than concentrating on her son's difficulties with reading. She reported that Tyrone developed an aversion to primary school and he would ask, "'What day is it Mum?' And if it was Monday to Friday he would cry and if it was Saturday or Sunday, he was happy."

Denise and Errol also spoke of the pervasiveness of bad behaviour within their classes which stopped them from doing their work and concentrating in the way in which they needed to. However, some student participants were also regarded as compliant, withdrawn, wishing to avoid attention and unwilling to capitalise on school generated opportunities. Errol for example, did not wish to socialise with any other student in class and had few friends at school. This was also true of Mary's son. Most of the students interviewed appeared to have socioemotional difficulties particularly in relation to assertiveness, recognising their strengths and weaknesses, risk taking and initiating and maintaining friendships. This included Blair and Tyrone who, on many occasions, were inarticulate, failed to understand questions or were not sufficiently motivated by the topic to answer. Answers of, "I don't know" predominated on questions related to improving outcomes for students. As a teacher involved in pastoral care, Mark voiced the ongoing need for counseling for many of these students.

Students and parents also cited reading and writing difficulties as their most common problem. Shane indicated that a speech pathologist had taught Emily to read, while Mary's son learnt to read when he was ten. Tyrone and Damon were still struggling with basic literacy. Fiona also related the difficulty that she had in learning to read and how it had undermined her self-confidence. She expressed her amazement that she was undertaking a doctorate.

It would appear that the parents, students and teachers interviewed were aware, at some level, of the links between learning difficulties and the socio-emotional and academic problems which students experienced. Teachers, students and parents recognised the issues of disability, policy, social justice and student characteristics to varying degrees with parents having been closely involved in advocacy on their child's behalf in a generally unresponsive and unsupportive system. These aspects are further

discussed in the relationships which exist within the school community for students with learning difficulties and their parents.

5.5.3 Relationships with School Communities

The teacher/ home connection

Relationships between teachers, students and parents make up the fabric of the school community and the quality of those relationships affects all participants. Fiona and Lena both commented about parents from their schools, located in socially and economically disadvantaged areas, as being difficult to motivate to become involved in literacy and numeracy initiatives. Fiona observed that, "A lot of people don't see education as being a significant issue in their lives." Lena agreed and remarked that, "We have offered them everything other than money to come and still they won't come" and that, "The parents are so alienated." Lena also suggested that the parents themselves had problems with literacy and numeracy. "They feel that they are going to be flushed out. It is because they themselves have a problem." Similarly, Fiona concurred, that many parents had negative school experiences causing alienation.

Both teachers offered further clarification about alienation and suggested that parent values and concerns differed from teachers' assumptions. Fiona remarked that many parents from her school had been prison inmates and resented both the authority and establishment which schools represented. Lena expressed this issue powerfully when she addressed the issue of setting of homework for students in her classes:

> I had eleven boys in this classroom and I was setting homework and suddenly I looked around the room and I had one boy's dad had just got out of jail, another one's was in jail, a mother died of cancer last week and I'm going round the room and I'm thinking "What the hell am I setting homework for, this is ridiculous?" and it hit me like a brick wall, I don't know these kids. I'm thinking "Oh these kids are going home to mum and dad and mum and dad are offering them afternoon tea and the they are going off to a swimming lesson." And I'm sitting there going "These children don't even know if they are having dinner."

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Both teachers demonstrated empathy towards students and parents as they reflected how little they knew about the realities of families' lives and changed their expectations and demands accordingly. Megan also displayed empathy and she attributed this to her close friendship with the mother of a student with learning difficulties and being made aware of the problems experienced by her friend. This had influenced the type of assessments offered to students and how she explained them to parents.

In contrast with the situation presented by Fiona and Lena, the parents interviewed were all committed and motivated to improve the lives of their children at school and to enhance their academic outcomes. Mary, whose son attended a school in a socially and economically disadvantaged area, was generally happy with the attention her son received from teachers and mostly had established a positive relationship with them. She did suggest, however, that if a teacher knew that a parent was interested in the child, then, "the teacher will make more effort on behalf of the child." Although she stated that she hoped teachers would do the right thing by her son, she was critical of their lack of understanding of the results of their actions particularly in the setting of homework. She explained:

> Being a parent at home you can't give them all the support they really need. As it is about 11 or 12 o'clock at night, at times when you sit down finishing off assignments. He stayed up to 3 o'clock in the morning one morning, finishing. We also need more explanations, more details from teachers regarding assignments and less homework

This same problem was discussed by Janet. Both she and her husband had to type up assignments because of her son's inability to do so. Kathy also felt that much of the homework set for Tyrone was inappropriate as he could not do it. She viewed this as generating, "his habits of avoidance and his dislike of homework."

Shane, however, was proactive rather than reactive in his approaches to the school. He outlined that he saw his role and responsibility as a parent to approach the teachers and to organise meetings about his daughter. Although Carmel did not explicitly state this philosophy, she had searched for an appropriate school across Australia and had interviews with all classroom teachers and the learning support teacher. She initiated these procedures. Doreen, however, was reactive. She recounted, "If ever I have a problem I'm in your face." Janet and Mary also tended to be

reactive. Fiona, in her role as a parent, took exception to the inflexibility of schools to meet with parents at times that suited parents' work commitments.

A number of parents, Carmel, Doreen and Mary also specifically complained about teacher bullying and intimidation of their children. Doreen related how Damon was bruised when a teacher grabbed him while Mary spoke of her anger towards a teacher who was abusive towards her son when he sat out of a tennis lesson in which he normally participated enthusiastically. He had told the teacher he was suffering from asthma.

Finally, Kathy explained that she felt uncomfortable and alienated by teachers through their use of jargon and by their inappropriate ways of speaking to parents. She elaborated:

> I feel like I'm a bit out of my depth sometimes with the intellectual level. It is very difficult when you specialise in one particular facet of the education system and you are used to talking to teachers who use the same lingo and when you have got to actually talk to parents.

Parents who were committed to having an involvement with the school and teachers often found both the relationships and the way their children were treated as unsatisfactory. Teachers revealed a lack of understanding and perhaps, indifference, to the effects of their behaviour on students with learning difficulties and were unaware of how their decisions impacted upon the student and the quality of family life. While parents have cited examples of relationships with schools and teachers which were less than satisfactory to them, the focus of the following section is on the perception of the relationships between students and teachers.

Students and teachers

Only parents and students discussed student/ teacher relationships. Teachers did not comment on relationships with their students. This reinforced the idea that teachers did not reflect on the effects of their decisions or behaviour on students and their families.

Students made both positive and negative statements about individual teachers with Tyrone, the most disengaged of the students, commenting favourably and with amazement about a teacher who read to him even before his reading problem had been

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diagnosed. Other students offered insightful comments about their relationships with teachers. Denise spoke about a teacher who she considered almost like a friend. "She was like a friend. I would talk to her at Hungry Jacks." Denise worked at Hungry Jacks and this comment was in direct contrast to her reaction to the deputy principal when he came to arrange a party for his son. In this situation, she hid behind a post and hoped she would not have to talk to him. When she was forced to speak to him she just said, "Hello sir." Denise also remarked favourably about a teacher who helped her all the time in explaining class work and showing her how to do assignments. However, she was scathing about other teachers on staff including the teacher librarians. Of this latter group she pronounced, "They only want to stay in their office and do their own work. They are not interested in helping us or in teaching us how to do anything. They seem scared of us." The remainder of the teaching staff she characterised in the following way:

> There aren't any things that are organised outside of school time. The teachers don't organise anything and they only want to stay in their air-conditioned staff room. They don't want to have anything to do with the students.

She rejected teachers who are authoritarian and offered this advice:

> Don't just say, 'this is my classroom do as I say.' Look at the other side of it. See how the kids react. Try to interact with the students in a positive way, for example you can see me after class to discuss this issue. Then you might get your class under control.

Blair viewed teachers who were friendly and made work fun to do as the best teachers as did Damon, who remarked about a teacher who could joke, listen and explain. However, Damon also found it frustrating that teachers refused to answer what he saw as quite legitimate questions that were asked in non-confrontational settings. For example, he referred to walking back from class and asking a teacher about the reasons for a decision. He explained, "Like I may question why this week in PE we are learning square dancing. Why we had to dance with our own sex?". He showed frustration that his question remained unanswered.

Emily was the most articulate about the qualities of a good teacher and she spoke admiringly of her health and physical education teacher:

He is different from other teachers. He still teaches the right curriculum and everything but he just like he seems to love his job and loves working with kids and stuff. He doesn't act like some teachers that are like " Oh, kids are so annoying." Not annoying… there is a relationship. He keeps you in line but he is understanding. He is a good listener and uses different strategies to get you motivated.

She also related information about a primary school teacher who had a positive impact on her life:

She challenged me a lot. She made me more confident in myself and stuff. She was really like a full on teacher. She cared and was dedicated. She cared about the kids she taught and you wanted to do your best. She cared a lot about the students and she was passionate.

Errol wanted to feel comfortable with a teacher and reported favourably about a maths teacher who made the subject fun. However, he voiced his opinion that secondary teachers were generally too busy to be available to students. He said:

At high school I have found that teachers outside of class are really busy. Mum and dad have already said to me, '"You should always ask for help and always go and see them about something if you have the slightest little problem" and I have always tried to do that and I have found that it has been a bit tough to ask teachers because they are always so busy with their own things and I feel that even if I do go to the staff room to ask for some help or extra help on an assignment or something, it is always quite hard to get to them.

Students liked to be seen as being important to teachers. Their comments revealed that they approved of teachers who were caring, passionate about their subject and who could have fun. Relationships with the school community and the nature of school itself were also discussed by all participants.

School communities

Students and parents generally had similar needs but different perspectives about relationships in schools. Teachers predictably viewed their schools as generally inclusive and accepting. Megan's comments reflected the general view. "I think it depends on the students themselves but I believe our wider school community is quite accepting." Mark also remarked that the school as a community did the best that it could and accepted its failures and limitations. Both Megan and Mark, as teachers in Catholic schools, respected the role of pastoral care as being important in achieving harmonious relationships in the school community. Sally asserted that the relationships in her school community benefited by often having more than one family member on staff. It was common practice to have husband /wife teams as well as a son or daughter on staff. Sally referred to the school staff as a family. Lena, in describing her school community, insisted that students needed to be actively involved in community building to be offered leadership positions. She commented: "To be a leader in this school, you have to contribute to the school, you have to be involved in the arts, you have to be involved in the community. If you are an A student, well that is just a bonus." She reported that the school captain had learning difficulties but was a girl who contributed enormously to the school community.

However, parents and students had mixed perceptions about school communities. Trent's comments about school were the most damming. He condemned the school in the following way:

> I would like no such thing as school. If I had a magic wand. School wastes lots of your life. School is good for making friends, that the only thing it's good for. If I wasn't at school I'd watch TV, play computer games or ride around on my bike.

All of the students reported that there were students they avoided. For Denise these were students who were, "too cool for school." Emily expanded on this idea and described these students as:"Dead beats. People who don't seem to have a future or stuff. These people are without self respect. They don't care about anything. I find them boring." Tyrone found any student from an older class intimidating while Errol avoided the more popular boys. Like Mary's son, he spent his lunchtimes in the library. Emily commented favourably about her school community which she felt," tries to help people to be the best that they can be."

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Parents held mixed views of their school communities. Carmel felt comfortable in her school community where gifted and talented students were appreciated as much as those with sporting ability but was scathing about the previous school where she was involved. She suggested that the parents there were only interested in "social climbing". Mary also felt more comfortable in her present school than she had before. "I've been to two different high schools before but this one, I really like the ways they [the teachers] make you feel comfortable". She also found the teachers approachable. However, Mary claimed that her son had few friends and was bullied at school. She supplied an example:

> First week of school and we had to get a new school bag. He left it and went to get something for someone at the tuck shop and when he came back and his bag was in a puddle. He got really upset about that. It was twice something happened in the first week back at school.

Mary then commented that although there were rules to prevent bullying they were ineffective for her son.

Doreen was ambivalent about both the school her son attended and other parents. She found the school, "a bit wham it down your throat type" and she dismissed a parent she knows as, "nice but naïve." Despite all this she remarked, "However, I am pragmatic about it all and I will still continue to send Damon there."

Janet chose a Catholic school for Errol because he had trouble fitting in with boys at an independent primary school. She did not feel that his socialisation had improved but provided insights into her thoughts about choosing a school.

> He has never fitted in. We sent him to St… never realising he needed learning support. I sent him there mainly because it was a middle of the road high school. I was frightened if he went to one of the big public schools that he would get lost and I thought I had a little bit more hold or contact in the Catholic system.

Kathy indicated that in the 12 years that she had been involved with her son's school t she had learnt to navigate the school's social system and who "to say 'hello' to and be polite to." She also asserted that the parents with money had more control in the school.

I know that there is a set of rich parents who think that their children should be treated a bit different because they do more for the school financially, let's say. Which to me is their choice and I might not agree with it but I am tolerant with it.

Although Shane conceded that Emily was happy at school he expressed perceptive insights into what helped to make students acceptable in a school community. He explained that Emily:

is fairly social and she has quite a lot of friends, so I think that is good. I think that if she was maybe a loner who didn't achieve very well in sport, it might be a different situation.

It would appear that there were some student participants who did not fit into their school communities, although teachers believed that their schools were inclusive. It was clear that students wanted schools to be friendly, accepting communities that were free of bullying. Parents wanted their children to be happy and made choices to try to achieve that. Of concern to both teachers and parents was the training given to those employed in secondary schools.

5.5.4 The teaching journey

Training

All teachers as well as all parents, with the exception of Mary, and Damon commented on teacher training, the need for knowledge about students with learning difficulties and the role of professional development in improving outcomes for students.

Teachers and parents agreed on the inadequacy of preservice training however teachers recounted their own experiences and beliefs about teacher training while parents articulated the lack of teacher understanding about students with learning difficulties. Fiona was critical of the lack of essential skills found in graduating teachers, specifically behaviour management and classroom structure. Lena, who graduated five years previously, found her teacher training insufficient to meet her needs in a school in

a socially and economically disadvantaged area. Of her training in a large, city university she had this to say:

> They have the name but nothing that I learnt was of any practical
> use to me. Basically I learnt very little in four years, it was nothing, it didn't apply
> to anything. I remember my final paper was, " ten thousand words on your
> theory of teaching", well I had been teaching thirteen weeks, I don't have a theory,
> I just had survived".

Sally and Megan both agreed that some universities now are producing graduates better equipped to face classroom and school demands. Megan remarked that, "the new teachers coming through have a lot better understanding so I would say that universities are equipping new teachers a lot better than we were in the past." She felt that many academics were out of touch with the practical aspects of teaching and that she, "went out on pracs and learnt from the teachers." However, Fiona observed that this was a flawed process and recounted examples in her own experience where students were supervised by teachers without anything to offer to teachers in training:

> I've had teacher aides who were doing uni and they have been sent to
> somewhere and have got an absolute dud supervising teacher and they are
> meant to be teaching students, they have no idea what to do and they have (sic)
> biding their time, the students have to sit there and put up with it.

Fiona also asserted that all teachers needed specific skills especially the ability to teach reading:

> I think that everybody needs to be able to teach reading because they need to
> cut to the chase and run with the student no matter where they are on the
> spectrum of development. I think that teachers need to know what to look for.

Knowledge about learning difficulties

Parents and teachers concurred that teachers required specific knowledge to teach students with learning difficulties. Damon vocalised students' concerns about teachers' competence when he declared, "My thought is they didn't know how to actually handle someone in my state." His mother had specific concerns. Doreen declared:

They [teachers] need to know, not only the basic teaching skills, they need to realise there is such a thing as "gifted" and some kids just need that little bit of extension and on the other hand you have got a variety of learning disabilities. They are not given enough knowledge in particular areas. Maybe there should be more speciality teachers and also streaming. They should be, although they do three or four years, there seems to be a lot of things that need to be addressed. Very short term electives type subjects, like they spend what, one subject in training.

Doreen also felt that organisation within the school was integral for successful outcomes. School organisation is considered in a later section of this chapter. Carmel, as the mother of a gifted and talented child with learning difficulties, related that, "At his former school the lack of knowledge by his teachers, that is the ignorance that learning difficulties and gifted and talented can coexist, presented huge problems."

Janet agreed that teachers, including learning support teachers, lacked knowledge and expressed disillusion about the competence of staff.

I thought teachers would be given more training to understand lots of difficulties and I realise they don't. They get a very brief look at disability. We [including her husband] both feel that a teacher's training doesn't fully prepare them for the whole job, teaching, coping with behavioural and learning disorders and putting in that extra effort that is sometimes needed.

Kathy explained that every year she was required to tell teachers what they needed to do for her son.

I find every year you have to go and explain what you would like done. It happens once and then they forget it but every year you have got to do that, and they sort of go " Well I didn't know"…but they say "Next year you will have to tell his grade 9 teacher".

She also expressed concern about supply and contract teachers not knowing about Tyrone's learning difficulties and how her son should be taught. Kathy perceived that it was only teachers who had been touched by this in their own lives who showed any understanding or who teach appropriately. She remarked:

I think it is purely on a person level where they [teachers] are gaining their knowledge and that makes them better teachers. I found the teachers Tyrone had whose children were dyslexic, and he is a lot happier in their class, he does a lot better. It is not only that he is happier, but his achievements are better in their classes.

Shane continued with this theme of personal connection and how this had informed his own primary school teaching practice. He explained how his experiences with Emily had affected his work:

It has given me another perspective on a child who has reading difficulties and it probably led me to try the Reading Recovery, remedial reading program. I did that for two years. I may not have taken that role if I hadn't had a child with learning difficulties.

Fiona also noted how this personal connection influenced her work and knowledge. She recounted:

I wouldn't be the teacher I am now if my children hadn't had the problems that they do and I've never thought of myself as being anyone particularly special in terms of teaching but I keep finding I've got all these skills that other people haven't got that have been teaching the same amount of time. I am absolutely bowled over really because I think, "How could you not know that?" I think that I

assume that people should know and they don't …I think my own issues have made me read more wisely, [widely?] have made me search for a way to do it. And it is like driving to Brisbane, there are lots of ways to drive to Brisbane, the quickest way would be to go on the highway but you can navigate your way just as successfully going country roads.

Sally and Mark also perceived the need for further initial training with particular attention to students with learning difficulties with Mark suggesting that preservice teachers also required more training generally to teach special needs students and to master student management skills.

Mentoring

Teachers agreed that some form of teacher mentoring occurred in their schools and felt it was a necessity, although some had reservations about its implementation and effectiveness. Lena recognised a need for first year teachers to be mentored coupled with a mandatory lighter work load. She felt that these teachers did not have the time to reflect, "because they are too busy planning the lessons, getting through the lessons, controlling the kids, doing all that". She understood that her school subscribed to the, "sink or swim theory". She also observed that mentoring at her school was undermined on two levels, firstly that:

the management doesn't allow time in timetables for that [mentoring] to happen, and secondly some people feel a little bit threatened and they are not too, I don't know if it is like being outed, "Oh my God, I'm a bad teacher so I've got to be mentored" so they then try the blanket approach so everyone has to. The principal comes to every class twice a term, he comes to your class and watches you teach.

She found this ineffective and suggested that teachers should be selected as mentors while those teachers excluding children from their class should be mentored.

Sally, Megan and Fiona as head of departments, were all involved in teacher mentoring. Sally explained how it operated in her school:

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I do quite a lot of mentoring. The principal, who is excellent at teaching maths to people who have learning difficulties, is also involved and goes into classes to show teachers the strategies that they can use.

This was in complete contrast with Lena's school where the principal was seen as keeping teachers accountable and not there to assist them. Sally also explained that she helped out across the school, including in Year 2, when teachers became stressed, and showed them strategies. Other older teachers also mentored younger ones.

Megan commented that all first year teachers were formally mentored in her school while more experienced teachers had an informal structure. She described the process as follows:

I mentor the teachers in my department, assist them with behaviour management and students with special needs, give them other ideas on how to get the message across.

However, she also asserted that there should be formal teacher appraisals conducted by those outside the school to escape from "political "interference.

Fiona too was involved in formal and informal mentoring structures and was a mentor in the learning support and special needs area. However, she added that, "I also took on teachers that were just doing it really hard, were stressing." She recounted her mentoring of a first year out teacher and how she helped him with basic student management skills. When he finally had the class under control and the class was going well, he was then given three additional special needs students. She described the results. "It just all went out the door and he was just… it was so sad because he finally got it together and did such hard work." After this experience, the teacher left the profession.

Parents were unaware of any teacher mentoring that occurred in the schools that their children attended but the teacher participants regarded successful mentoring as an integral part of professional development. However, they also agreed that in its present form, it was without a coherent structure or purpose.

Professional development

Teachers and Carmel, in the parent group, offered insights about professional development. Megan and Mark both commented on the need for ongoing training and in-service while Mark suggested that networking was a viable means of service delivery. Megan acknowledged that she was involved in professional reading as a personal initiative. She called for regular in-services and giving teachers time to be involved. She also expressed the need for professional development to move beyond theory. "We need to walk away with something in our hands to use in a classroom." Lena agreed that professional development should be practical. She recounted her experience:

> We had an indigenous cross cultural PD session. I think it was two hours. It was historical. There wasn't one teaching strategy in there for these kids and I was thinking it was a waste of time. It didn't help.

She also claimed that many professional development models were examples of, "exactly how you shouldn't teach." She observed that teachers' attitudes became," 'Oh yeah, that sounds great' and out the door. 'I've done my bit, signed the paper' Gone." She also regarded the lack of financial remuneration by EQ as a factor in teachers' lack of enthusiasm for professional development.

Only one parent, Carmel commented on the role of professional development in her son's school. She reported that the gifted and talented coordinator was responsible for in-service of teachers in both areas of gifted and talented and learning difficulties. She found that the majority of teachers at the school were aware of both issues and could implement appropriate strategies for her son. Teachers were also given material to take away with them from the sessions.

Although teachers and parents expressed views on different aspects of training and professional development, all agreed that the status quo was unsatisfactory and that the needs of students with learning difficulties and teachers were not being addressed. Solutions included, increased emphasis for preservice teachers on students with special needs including those with learning difficulties, extensive mentoring of beginning teachers and those teachers struggling to deliver quality outcomes for these students and the need for appropriate and concrete professional development delivered in ways that reinforced the concepts being taught.

Schools have an impact on the lives of students, parents and teachers. The following section explores the effects of school organisation, including leadership, pedagogy, teacher attitude, the role of information technology as well as the transition from primary school.

5.5.5 Life at school

Leadership

Some participants in all groups commented on leadership. All wished to see positive leadership taken on behalf of students with learning difficulties although that did not always happen. Fiona defined this role: "It is very important how they [principals] see learning support or special education or students with special needs, how they sees them in relation to their school. How their school is going to accommodate those at risk."

Blair recounted an example of innovative leadership that he experienced when he was moved into a Year 11 Vocational Education course at the end of Year 9. Sally explained that a similar action was taken for three other students who seemed unlikely to complete Year 10.

Carmel referred to the principal at her son's school as, "enlightened and knowledgeable" however both Doreen and Kathy had unsatisfactory experiences with principals. Kathy had suggested that Tyrone should not study a foreign language. She was informed, "If we let Tyrone drop Japanese, everyone would want to do it." Doreen was also unimpressed by the principal at her son's previous school. She explained:

> I could see absolutely no excuse for it [lack of understanding that learning
> difficulties and gifted and talented can coexist] because the principal of the
> school had an arm long of qualifications in psychology, child behaviour and all
> this sort of thing that he should have been able to detect and/ or listen to the fact
> that I had other testing done to say that Damon is not strictly learning disabled.
> He is not to be put purely in that basket.

Lena accepted that the principal of her school was concerned about students with learning difficulties as he had a son with these issues and he was "pushing very

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hard". She also remarked that , "I don't think that they push in the right way. It is all policy and procedure not hands on."

Positive and enlightened leadership within schools creates nurturing environments, however, leadership is not the only aspect which impacts upon school organisation. Teachers, some students and a parent all considered the ramifications of school organisation on the life of students.

Organising school

All of the schools involved had heads of departments except for the very small school that Damon attended. Sally, the head of learning support, assisted teachers by providing them with "lists of students, their needs and teaching strategies to teachers. I will help the teachers if they need it. There is also help with accommodations and assessment." The school also had implemented vertical timetabling for additional flexibility. Megan, as a head of department, received similar help from the learning support unit and Mark outlined that his school had a similar arrangement but there was no specific reference to vertical timetabling at either of these schools.

Fiona suggested timetabling as a key element in accommodating students successfully. She explained:

> I was responsible for all the timetabling of special needs/ learning support
> students and I've tried to make it more structured to support the students. I used
> to sit down with the deputy and actually actively say " Who are the teachers you
> have got on this class? " and then I would choose who I thought who was the
> best operator out of those two or three teachers. "Ok, who is teaching Year 9
> maths? Right, well I'd like this student to go in there." So I used to manipulate
> the timetable to best suit the student. I am aware of a few people who operate
> like that but I think ultimately you need a certain flexibility in the school.

However, Fiona asserted that, "every student with a significant LD would need a case manager to advocate for him, to work with the parents and the school" and this would solve many present difficulties. She explained the necessity for this in large schools where the head of department would not know all students and where as many as five heads of departments could be dealing with the same student. She cited

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examples of behaviour management where this multiple approach was unsatisfactory and needed to be coordinated by one person. Denise, a student, also provided an example of this duplication in her school where she was required to contact each separate head of department to show them her rough draft if she needed to apply for an extension on assignments.

Megan felt that there were inherent structural problems with the organisation of secondary schools which conflicted with trying to provide a holistic education.

> We are trying to give the kids a holistic education and in some ways I think we concentrate so much on giving them extra things but we have a lot of interruptions in our school day. And I don't thing that is good for students. Especially for boys. Ours is a totally boys' school …Boys, in my experience need structure, they need routine. And as soon as that structure and routine goes out the window, then you introduce a lot of other problems as well.

She also was concerned that schools were asked and expected to do too much with the pressure coming from a number of sources, including the, "general educational structure, and in some cases I think it is what society is putting on us as well".

Two teachers spoke explicitly about classroom organisation and class size. Fiona insisted that open classrooms which house two classes increased learning difficulties, particularly in a primary school setting, for those children with auditory processing problems. She provided the example of her own daughter. "So no matter where Althea sat, she was then bombarded by the teacher's voice as one thing and by the students' voices as the other noise so she didn't learn anything."

Lena suggested that the size of her classes were too large (for example, 27), to make a significant difference to the outcomes for her students as half of these students had learning difficulties and very low literacy levels. She remarked:

> Being a high school teacher I would love it if the government would limit the number of primary school students in class to one to ten therefore guaranteeing that there are no children swept through, no children are starting so far behind their peers. And I could cope with twenty, I would be happy to have 25 kids in my class all day every day, because you have a lot better, or a lot narrower rate

of children. At the moment I've got some children that struggle to write their names to a child who is an absolute near genius, …all in the same class.

A teacher, Megan, and a student, Errol, spoke about the issues arising in Years 11 and 12. Megan indicated that in subjects such as hospitality and manual arts, the needs of students with learning difficulties could be met. However, Errol, taking all academic subjects, complained that in Year 12 fewer accommodations were made for him as he had lost his access to teachers' aide time because of school policy directed towards Year 12 students:

> last year…I would get all this help during sports lessons and now because they have said that all Year 12's must do sport and now I can't have that time and I have to go back in my own time to get extra help with the teacher-aide and it is a real bummer really. I find this very difficult in my Year 12 year.

Emily, Denise, Mary and Damon commented about the practice of withdrawing students from class. Emily, Denise and Mary all reported initial apprehension with the system but this was replaced by a positive attitude when it was found to help. Damon, however was negative which perhaps reflected his unhappy sojourn in the special education unit.

The action and decisions of the primary school also had significant impact upon the life of students with learning difficulties in the secondary school.

Impact of primary school

All parents were concerned about the impact of primary school on their children and viewed their children's learning as a continuum. There were no references made to the role of the primary school by teachers apart from those outlined in the previous section by Lena and Fiona. Half of the parents interviewed indicated that they were unaware of the extent of their children's learning difficulties until they reached high school. Janet explained, "Errol had gone all the way through primary school where it [his learning difficulty] had never been picked up" while Shane revealed that although interventions were implemented in primary school and that Emily received reasonable results in Year 6 and 7, "she just hit the wall the moment she got into Year eight. It was just too much for her." He was also critical of the primary school not

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passing on relevant information to the high school. Carmel's experience was similar. She indicated that, "At primary school he would get the highest mark in the class and then fail the test the next week". He also failed to cope with Year 8.

However, Kathy, Mary and Doreen all reported their children failing to learn in the primary school. Damon was placed in a Special Education Unit. Damon clarified his position. "I was in the SEU because they choose that as a good place to pigeon hole me." Doreen removed him from the state system and sent to a nongovernment school because the school administration refused to place him in mainstream classes. Kathy and Mary referred to their sons being unhappy at primary school and failing to learn. Neither boy's learning difficulties were diagnosed and no accommodations were put in place.

Part of the formal school organisation in secondary schools is the process of making contact with parents either formally or informally. Teachers and parents both commented on the procedures.

Parent/teacher meetings

All participating parents attended school organised parent/ teacher meetings as well as being involved in additional meetings initiated by themselves. Kathy and Shane also utilised informal meetings to promote the welfare of their child, with Kathy making additional use of school social occasions to speak with teachers. There was no uniform opinion amongst parents or teachers about the effectiveness of parent/teacher meetings. Mark and Megan, both teachers in Catholic schools, accepted that facilitation by the school provided sufficient contact with parents and support for students. These meetings were facilitated by the learning support coordinator through the pastoral care structure.

Other teachers found these meetings between teachers and parents, unsatisfactory. For example, Lena was frustrated by lack of parent attendance at parent/ teacher interviews at her school. She reported: "I wrote 120 reports and I guarantee you there will be five parents. And they are the parents I don't need to see." Lena and Fiona also cited instances of parents in their schools not wishing to be involved with schools or teachers. This aspect was explored in the home/school connection section of this chapter. There was often a mismatch between parent and teacher expectations from

these meetings while students appeared to have no official outlet for views on policies which impacted negatively on their lives. Parents involved in this study were prepared to go to extraordinary lengths to help their children and initiated meetings. This is further discussed later in this chapter and in Chapter Six.

However, all teachers, students and parents interviewed were concerned about pedagogy and expressed a desire for flexible and innovative teaching practices to be implemented to teach students with learning difficulties.

Classroom teaching

Lena and Fiona were convinced that innovative practice was the key to success with students with learning difficulties. Lena asserted:

> To teach children like that you need more than a whiteboard and more than an overhead projector. You need a lot of paper, worksheets and the computer, they like the computer and you need smaller groups.

She also preferred to teach the students outside, for example, chemistry on the handball court. She understood that generally these students, "might be hands on, visual." She promoted active learning rather than, "chalk and talk" as did Sally. Mark felt that many classrooms are environments for passive learning and that, "there is a degree of boredom among students." Lena also argued that students needed challenges:

> I don't lower the bar, in fact sometimes I make it a little bit harder for them because they have to push themselves, they are behind, they have to catch up."

She explained what she meant:

> I tell them' Let's go, go give it your best shot'. I don't let them off but you have to hold their hand a little bit and sometimes, you have to push them a little bit.

Fiona was convinced that many teachers lacked appropriate strategies and had preconceptions about students. She asserted:

I think as a teacher you have to be a really good 'kid watcher' in inverted commas. You know, you watch every single student in your class to see what their ability level is, no matter how they look. They [teachers] said they had no idea what to do when they had a student in their class who couldn't keep up.

Fiona and Megan indicated that they were overloaded with work. Fiona explained:

A lot of teachers feel so overloaded by curriculum that they can't stop to use new strategies. They feel, especially in secondary, it is almost like, "Well, I have got this huge unit to get through and if we stop now, I'm going to be a week behind. So I'm just going to keep giving you all this content and I'm not going to care."

Megan also felt the pressure of content and time. She outlined that she spent long days at school and home in preparation. She indicated that she did:

a whole range of things, preparation, marking, making sure that the learning experiences that I am offering students fit that particular group. I can do preparation for one year, carry it over to the next, but I never teach in the same way because every group differs…My biggest problem is time and you know, the fact that we have to teach x number of classes, we have to have x amount of contact. It is time and money. That's what it all comes down to.

Students also spoke of their experiences in class. Errol and Denise found that teachers lacked control in their classes and that made their task of learning even harder. Errol also articulated his concern that "substitute" teachers are unaware of his learning difficulties. He expressed the need to feel comfortable with a teacher in order to learn. Blair and Denise preferred, "hands on" lessons while Damon and Emily tended to be visual learners. However, Damon, Tyrone and Blair complained that they were constantly asked to copy from the board which they disliked. All students only mentioned one or two subjects which they liked and these were generally practically based subjects. However, Tyrone emphatically stated:

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I would rather do art than French. I'd rather do nothing than art. And tech arts is the same. I just don't like school. If I had a choice I would rather be outside riding motor bikes.

Teachers and students were divided in their opinion of group work as a teaching strategy. Emily liked both group and individual work while for Blair, it was his preferred way of learning. However, Errol was "most uncomfortable" with this type of learning. Of the teachers, Megan was the only one to use this strategy regularly but felt its use was dependent upon the "socialisation of individual students." Lena used it occasionally while Fiona was opposed to its use. She voiced her reasons:

I think group work is an absolute waste of time for so many kids, because I don't think they are mature enough…I'm being really honest and frank and I'm going against established thought. I don't think they are mature enough to have the fantastic social skills that they are supposed to have. I look at the teachers I've got on staff and some of them as adults cannot work in a group…I think the stuff we are requiring kids to do is beyond their level of ability.

Parents also had views about pedagogy and teachers' attitudes toward their children. Both Carmel and Doreen indicated that their children were visual/spatial learners while most teachers used an auditory sequential approach. Kathy, Shane and Mary also spoke about the need for a "hands-on approach " for their children. Parents were dismissive of the feedback coming from teachers which positioned their children as being responsible for their difficulties rather than the school. Carmel remarked that, "teachers tend to dismiss their flashes of brilliance as flukes" and that "needs to try harder" is the standard comment on school reports. Janet agreed that comments such as, "if he tried harder he would get better marks and he's a lovely boy" revealed a lack of understanding by teachers. Kathy and Janet both related incidents with teachers who refused to believe in learning difficulties. Janet was told that, "he should be getting old enough to cope with it".

Shane recounted his experience in a meeting with Emily's Year 8 science teacher when she was failing the subject. The teacher had previously told him that Emily was incapable of passing science. When he produced a psychologist's report which stated, "that children with a disability are often labelled as stupid, lazy or not able

to achieve, the woman got highly irate and left the meeting." In Year 9 semester one science, with a different teacher, Emily received the highest marks in the grade.

Teachers also related examples of disappointing attitudes by their peers towards students with learning difficulties. Lena remarked that teachers at other schools referred to her students as "…ferals" and that they received condescending letters from other principals when their students achieved academically. Megan felt that many teachers lacked ownership for the group while Mark professed that, "the coal face of our work is the students. And we must keep that in mind. Not just worry about our own needs or what is in it for us."

Both Fiona and Kathy commented on the inappropriateness of textbooks for students with learning difficulties. Fiona related that at her school:

> We tested all of Year 8. Something like 80 percent of our students were below a reading age of 10, so when you compare that to a textbook, we don't use textbooks any more,… yet a lot of high schools run with textbooks."

Kathy was also critical of the use of science texts for Tyrone. She explained how setting homework from texts impacted on their lives:

> I find especially in grade eight where they give him five pages of science book. They want you to read and answer two questions overnight. Its not the two questions, they take no time at all, but you have got to read five pages…he has got to sit there and read five pages which would probably take about five hours with coming to ask every five minutes about words.

She alleged that the taping of texts, "would give him independence." This would be instead of, "I can't do it now, I've got to go to the bank. When I come home we'll do your homework." Parents and teachers also discussed computer technology in relation to homework. This and other issues related to information technology are discussed in the section which follows.

The promise of information technology

Although information technology (IT) was often used to assist students with learning difficulties with the mechanics of writing, there was evidence from teachers, students and parents believe that the use of computers were generally problematic for these students.

Mark noted that schools, "having teachers that are computer literate and teaching computer skills was useful for students with learning difficulties." No other teachers specifically mentioned the issue of teacher computer literacy, however there was evidence from Phase One, that an undetermined number of secondary teachers themselves might not be computer literate. When conducting the pilot study for the teachers' survey using hard copy, a number of participants revealed that they, and some of their colleagues, would not have adequate computer literacy to complete the survey online. Sally expressed a belief that her school provided adequate skills in computer literacy for students, as they were taught from Year 1. Provision was also made for incoming students arriving without computer skills to be accommodated in Year 8 classes.

Fiona and Lena expressed doubts about the effectiveness of the IT curriculum for students with learning difficulties. Lena realised that a computer could give these students, "an initial sense of achievement and can get them involved", but ultimately: "they still need literacy. They still have got to be able to read off the screen to decipher the words."..Fiona remarked that many secondary schools were committed in curriculum to:

> programming, making games and using "Dreamweaver" whereas putting
> students into a commerce class where "Word" is taught sequentially using a big
> screen is more appropriate.

Lena and Fiona suggested that using voice recognition programmes for students with learning difficulties was advisable. Kathy, Tyrone's mother, indicated that he used such a program because he, "dislikes typing on a computer as much as he dislikes writing." Tyrone, however, had little patience with the program and felt that it, "takes forever to recognise your voice" and "it turns 'uh' into 'that'". Kathy was a strong advocate but stated that many of Tyrone's teachers viewed it as cheating.

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However, students were generally not enthusiastic about IT, especially word processing. Errol was the only student who expressed his ease with working with computers for word processing. Blair, from Sally's school, found that, "keyboarding lessons didn't help" and he "kinda taught myself." He indicated that the way keyboarding was taught through the use of software packages using games, did not help him. He just became angry and frustrated when using the programs. Denise complained about the lack of access to computers at her school because of the practice of timetabling the computer room as a classroom, making it unavailable for Year 12's use. She relied on her home computer to complete her work. As indicated in previous sections, parents, or other children in the family, needed to word process their children's assignments on the computer. They found this both time consuming and generally unsatisfactory. IT was one method of supporting students with learning difficulties within secondary schools, however, it appeared to be ineffective in the way it was utilised. Teachers, parents and students also discussed other support mechanisms that were used in schools.

5.5.6 Support

Data collected from teachers and parents considered the role of the learning support teacher, accommodations, the effects of ascertainment and teachers' aides, administrative attitudes as well as personal involvement with students with learning difficulties. Students commented on only some of these issues.

Learning support teachers.

Teachers and parents agreed that the learning support teacher had an important role in providing support for students with learning difficulties. Interestingly, students made no comments about learning support teachers apart from acknowledging that they received help. They cited class teachers, tutors from outside the school system and teachers' aides of being of particular assistance.

Teachers generally had a positive view of learning support teachers. Lena was confident that a new learning support teacher, who was, "flagging and identifying students in the primary grades" will ultimately impact positively on the secondary section of the school. Megan found her learning support teacher proactive in organising meetings to give specific details about a student and to provide information from outside

experts about the student's needs. These visiting advisory teachers only supplied information about ascertained students, that is, those with a medical disability such as cystic fibrosis or autism, not students with learning difficulties who generally were not ascertained. Mark also envisaged the role of the learning support teacher to supply teachers and aides with information about students' needs and to liaise with parents.

Parents' experiences with learning support teachers varied among schools. Carmel was very happy with the collaboration between the gifted and talented coordinator, the learning support teacher and the parent. Shane also was positive about the level of support given to Emily despite the number of students in the school needing attention. However, Janet's experience varied between the two different Catholic schools that her sons attended. She was relatively satisfied with the support that Errol received however, this was not the case for her other son. She articulated:

> The learning support teacher will see me at any time and talk to me at any time, if I ring her up with any problems about Jeremy. She is really wonderful except that nothing seems to be getting much further down the line at the moment. This is really quite frustrating. There are quite a few things that could be done that would make everybody's life a lot better. He is going to turn out at the end how he really should. So there is going to be a fight on my hands for a while.

Kathy's experience was also negative. She was unsure of the role of a learning support teacher and found that the school only placed her son in learning support when a psychologist advised them that he should have help with literacy and numeracy rather than attending a japanese class.

Apart from the additional help from learning support teachers, the ways in which students with learning difficulties needs are catered for in class and in examinations are crucial for successful academic outcomes.

Accommodations and assessments

Accommodations and assessment were discussed by some teachers, parents and students. All agreed on the necessity for appropriate interventions if students with learning difficulties were to succeed academically. Fiona recounted examples of some teachers' ability to be flexible and to provide appropriate accommodations but she also

detailed instances of teacher resistance to changing established patterns. She substantiated this claim with the following:

> I used to encourage teachers to look at: "What is it that they are actually wanting to teach?. Was it that wool was a natural fibre, or was it about writing down whether it was or not?"

She also detailed how students with learning difficulties were discriminated against in traditional testing regimes. She provided an example from home economics:

> And the stuff they had to do was on how you thread up a sewing machine. You had to write how to thread up a sewing machine. Now these kids can't read so for them to do that test and get a good mark, they might have been able to thread up a sewing machine, but if you asked them to write it down, then they are going to fail.

She also insisted that innovative processes, where students were asked to give hands on demonstrations or to present material orally, were resisted in the senior school. Errol agreed. He explained: "I need changes to be made. I find that teachers and aides are quite negative about this." Damon also had problems with tests. He said he found tests easy, "After I get past the reading." Emily also spoke about problems reading the questions. She elaborated, "If they read the questions to me I don't have to concentrate on reading the questions, I'm concentrating on the questions." She generally had a reader and extra time for exams. Carmel indicated that her son failed maths in Year 11 because, "He can't do maths communication as he performs complex maths problems in his head and cannot reproduce the workings." She felt that it was imperative to design assessment:

> to show what he can do. In assessment if he has oral talks and multiple choice he does better. On the National Maths, Science and English competitions that are multiple choice he is at the 99 or 98 percentile.

Lena demonstrated how appropriate assessments could have positive impacts on the outcomes of students with learning difficulties.

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Well, that kid then, suddenly, you know, all he wants to do is this class, because suddenly he has never had an A in his life. And I said, "It is not that you suddenly grew a brain overnight, we just did things a little differently."

There appeared to be a one size fits all mentality for both assessments and accommodations. Kathy complained that in technical arts: "he actually needs to calculate things. I want him to use a calculator" but this is not allowed.

Megan and Mary both agreed that assessable assignments given to students required particular attention. Mary felt that teachers needed to support students more, "in helping them understand it properly." Megan also understood the frustration of both parent and student with inappropriate assignments through her personal experiences with a friend whose child had learning difficulties. It had impacted on her setting of assignments in the following way:

I make a really conscious effort to make sure that before an assessment is given out, I go to the learning support people and make sure that it doesn't have to be modified.

Accommodations varied among schools and teachers however, students who were ascertained received more attention than most students with learning difficulties who do not have specific funding attached to them.

Ascertainments and teacher aides

Two students, Damon and Errol had ascertainments and their parents regarded this positively as the funding provided allowed things to happen. Doreen was initially reluctant to have Damon ascertained especially as he was placed in the Special Education Unit. In his new, independent school, she claimed, "that he gets the extra help and I can't impress how many leaps and bounds he has made in his reading." Janet also felt that having an ascertainment was beneficial in a Catholic school. "It is fine if you have got an ascertainment under way but if you haven't, it is not really good. " Her other son was not ascertained but still struggled with literacy and numeracy. Lena, however, working in the state system also concurred that only ascertained students

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really received assistance and provided a specific example of how, in her school, only ascertained students were eligible for assistance with computing.

Parents, teachers and students also considered the role of teachers' aides in relation to student support. Both Damon and Errol had aides who were teachers and both Doreen and Janet were happy with the level of support being given. Errol also spoke highly about his aide. He had spent many out of school hours working with her. He had sessions lasting an hour and a half three times a week in Years 10,11 and 12 and in Years 8 and 9 he attended sessions four times a week. Janet was critical of the school on two counts, one that some of the aides in class had been "woeful" and that the school administration did not allow Errol to have tutoring in sport time or that of other social events. Out of hours tutoring caused significant hardship for the family as collecting Eric from school required Janet to make a two hour return trip each time tutoring occured.

Mary, a parent, and teacher, Megan, also spoke about the support given by aides. Mary found, "that teachers can not cope" and that "aides are needed" while Megan admitted that student access to aides were limited by "time and money."

Impact of student support

Finally, students, parents and teachers commented on support levels in their schools and how they impacted on their lives. As a student, Emily felt that school support helped her academically and she, "now feels much better." Errol was also grateful that the school had finally taken over the support role from his mother. He remarked, "She has had to fight tooth and nail to get me where I am at the moment."

Teachers perceived things differently. Fiona indicated that lack of funds was the greatest obstacle to support while Sally suggested that the, "reputation of doing a good job" meant increasing numbers of students with learning difficulties were being sent to her school. She observed that as a small, independent school in a regional city, this influx of students with special educational needs had placed increased pressure on staff and resources and it was becoming increasingly difficult to sustain the level of support required. Megan felt especially frustrated by a school administration and other teachers who had no particular interest in the outcomes of students with learning difficulties, while Mark was adamant that school administrations must be active in supporting these students and that teachers must be required to have appropriate knowledge of how to teach them effectively.

Parents such as Mary and Shane were critical of attitudes and levels of support given. Mary found it "very sad" that her son only received learning support in Year 8 and this was withdrawn in Year 9 when he was just beginning to improve. Shane also indicated that the high levels of support that Emily received at primary school in Years 6 and 7 helped her to cope but she was abandoned when she entered Year 8. He found that the attitude of the teachers was, "if you can't keep up, well bad luck." It was apparent from these examples that Fiona's call for a case manager to advocate for each student with learning difficulties, discussed in a previous section, is well founded.

Student outcomes

Parents, students and teachers also commented on the outcomes that they wanted from schools. Teachers, Lena, Mark, Sally and Megan agreed that schools offered opportunities to students with learning difficulties particularly through choices between traditional academic or vocational education programmes. Mark felt that his school offered guidance plus many other opportunities to be involved in extracurricular activities. Lena indicated that her school, which provided "cattle leading", as her school was a working farm, provided unique opportunities for these students to experience success as cattle judges. She supplied examples of two students with learning difficulties who had excelled in this area and it had spilled over into other areas of school life. She explained in some detail what cattle leading involved:

> They have to come to training, they have to take care. I don't do anything. I organise it all but I refuse to be hands on. But part of that is they judge cattle. To lead the cattle, you have to judge the cattle. To judge the cattle means you have to talk into a microphone, sometimes in front of a few thousand people. This is a big task but from that and they are in a group, they are in a very special elite group in the school. These kids are successful. If they win, they win money, they wear a special uniform. When they put on that uniform, their shoulders woof. They have beaten private schools, they have actually kicked arse. Private schools that thought these kids were just a joke. And from that confidence and from that I guess winning or being successful and being able to handle the animals, train their animals, feed their animals, they are involved in other things.

There was only one student, Emily who was involved in any extracurricular activities. She listed choir, learning a musical instrument, debating and being a student representative on the school council and involved in representative sports as her interests. She was different from the rest of the group. Errol did not attend even school based commitments. He explained his rationale:

> There are a lot of social activities at school, camps and retreats and we lose so much school time that it makes it hard from me because I have a learning difficulty. Most of the time I take a day off and do school work.

Errol was very focused on his academic outcomes and indicated that these extra activities undermined his chances of academic success.

Students also spoke of their aspirations. Damon wanted to attend university although he that his lack of literacy would hamper his ambition, "I know I have a few hurdles before I get there." Emily was also focused on further education. She explained her thoughts. "You have got to go to university or Technical and Further Education (TAFE) to get a job at all, so I really want to got to TAFE and I would love to go to university." Errol also had university aspirations after a school visit to a local university which indicated the level of support they were prepared to give him. He remarked:

> At the start I was thinking no way because it seemed a bit too hard. Actually I have to say, we did go on a learning difficulty tour at the …campus and they gave us a lot of options and asked a lot of questions, how we could be benefited there and it made it easier. It was really good that I went along and I learnt how I could get through university without any problems.

Denise was unsure what she wanted to do on leaving school. She was offered a traineeship where she worked but made it clear that she did this for herself, the school gave her no help on even discussed possibilities with her. Blair was enthusiastic about getting an apprenticeship when he left school and credited the school's vocational program as making that possible. Tyrone had ambitions to join the armed forces however his rationale was disturbing. He said: "I want to be in the army. I like army games,' Halo'. I like destroying things."

Parents aspirations for their children sometimes matched with student ambitions however, they were unanimous in wanting their children to be happy at school. Kathy said she primarily wanted Tyrone to be happy, "because if your child is struggling at school and is really unhappy, then their behaviour at home, their whole personality is going to be different." Mary was also concerned because her son was unhappy at school and found it hard. She suggested that it would be a real struggle to keep him there until Year 10. Shane took heart that Emily talked about finishing Year 12 but he reported that her mother, "has fears for her future." Both Doreen and Carmel expected their sons to attend university while Janet was hopeful that Errol, who watched his father complete his degree, would also want to continue on to university. All parents, except for Doreen and Carmel were unsure of the outcomes for their children after leaving school. Mary and Kathy also discussed difficulties in getting their sons to attend school. Mary indicated how proud she was of her son that, "he doesn't wag school" despite his unhappiness in being there.

Further issues

There were also a number of other issues which were spoken about by one or a number of participants which did not fit easily with other sections. Carmel, for example, introduced the idea of schools having a moral and ethical responsibility towards students. She asserted:

> It is unconscionable for a school to simply do nothing, and let the child's performance and self esteem first go down and down and then, when he finally fails an exam say, "Find another school."

Mark as the only male secondary teacher in the participants introduced two topics which were not considered by the other teachers. One was the feminisation of the workforce. He related, that in his position as pastoral care coordinator, he was constantly receiving complaints from women teachers about boys' behaviour. He indicated that he felt that these problems were mostly related to lack of knowledge of how to teach boys as well as a lack of basic classroom management skills. He also expressed concern about the threat of charges of pedophilia hanging, like Damocles sword, over the heads of male teachers. He gave examples of numerous innocent actions and activities at school that were being eliminated to stop their being

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misinterpreted. He also voiced his concern about that the ultimate negative impacts upon the relationships with students and on the quality of the experiences which students can have at school, because of this trend. He found this particularly burdensome for male teachers.

Shane also referred to another common practice undertaken by parents of students with learning difficulties, of employing a private tutor to assist students. Shane indicated that his tutor was accredited with SPELD, that is, had completed a SPELD approved training course in teaching students who have been diagnosed with dyslexia. He also indicated that this weekly contact with a tutor was the major reason for Emily's increasing academic success at school.

The other issue mentioned by a number of participants, Fiona, Lena and Errol was empathy. Errol empathised with his mother and her fight for his learning difficulties to be recognised and addressed by the school. Fiona indicated that a personal encounter with learning difficulties changed teachers. She said, "the best teachers I've seen have learning difficulties themselves or have had children with learning difficulties and have really empathised with the fact that these kids are struggling." Lena agreed that this personal connection was important to develop empathy but it was also necessary to provide challenges to students with learning difficulties.

In this chapter, the results from the analysis of data indicated that, in many ways, teachers and parents agreed about the issues affecting students with learning difficulties in the secondary school. However, there were topics on which the perceptions of parents and teachers differed considerably, with teachers tending to be convinced that the school operated better than it really did. Advocating parents revealed their disillusion with schools and their frustration with teachers and administrators who dismissed their children's needs for support and the ad hoc manner in which any interventions were made.

Students also offered interesting insights into how they viewed teachers and the policies of the school which directly impacted upon their lives. Although there were examples of positive encounters, challenges given and accepted, the overall picture for students was distressing with student unhappiness, disengagement and rejecting of opportunities being very common. Chapter Six, the final section of this thesis, considers the implications of the results from the teacher survey of Phase One and Phase Two interviews. It also advances conclusions and recommendations to improve outcomes for

students with learning difficulties and to enhance the lives of these students and their parents.

CHAPTER SIX

Finding a Common Voice

Man is the only animal that laughs and weeps;
For he is the only animal that is struck with the difference between what things are,
And what they ought to be.
William Hazlitt 'Lectures on English Comic Writers' (1818)

6.1 Introduction

What is the reality of experiencing learning difficulties at school for affected
mainstreamed students and their advocating parents? The data collected in this project
has begun to answer this question. Learning difficulties affects students who experience
"short or long term difficulties in literacy, numeracy or learning how to learn" (Education
Queensland, 1996, Introduction). This study used a two phase, multimethod design to
examine the research questions posed in each section (Morse, 2003). Phase One
explored possible relationships between demographic indicators and teachers' attitudes
and understanding about students with learning difficulties as well as the factors
affecting levels of support. Questionnaire distribution was effected through a web-based
survey of Queensland secondary teachers and promoted by a combination of
educational and commercial interests. Electronically collected data were then subjected
to Rasch analysis (Andrich, 1988; Bond & Fox, 2001) using the Quest program (Adams
& Khoo, 1993). Phase Two focused on questions related to the school experiences of
students with learning difficulties, advocating parents and secondary teachers.
Semistructured interviews were used to collect data from17 participants including five
teachers selected from the survey, six secondary students with learning difficulties and
six advocating parents. Data were analysed using NVivo (QSR International, 1999-2002)
and the categorisation (Lankshear & Knobel, 2004) of existing theory related to students

with learning difficulties (Avramidis et al., 2002; Elkins, 2001; Sanders & Jordan, 2000; Westwood, 2004; Westwood & Graham, 2003; Zigmond & Matta, 2004).

This research project was conducted within the transformative emancipatory paradigm of disability (Mertens, 2003; Oliver, 1997). A brief summary is provided here to position my findings within this conceptual model. The foundations of the paradigm were provided by Aristotle, Plato and Socrates as well as later social order critics such as Machiavelli, Hobbes and Marx (Ewert, 1991; Harvey, 1990). Critical theorists, particularly Habermas, the Frankfurt School and Foucault, contributed emphasis on increasing the power differentials among groups and silencing the powerless (Fendler, 1999; Gore, 1998; Johnston & Nicholls, 1995). Emphasis on the experiential knowledge of marginalised groups was provided by feminist theorists who demonstrated the use of advocacy as a political activity on behalf of those who were oppressed (Hesse-Biber et al., 2004; Sprague & Zimmerman, 1993a; Tuana, 1993). The paradigm also included the contribution of political theorists who questioned state sponsored educational policies that maintained social control and which alienated and marginalised disadvantaged groups. Freire (1968; , 2000a), as a major influence on my research, focused on those who were oppressed, dehumanised and made responsible for their own problems as are students with learning difficulties. He advocated radical change within schools and systemically to transform the individual, society and education. Other political theorists asserted that educational research should challenge, empower and change (Popkewitz & Brennan, 1998; Torres, 1995, 1999). These elements were fundamental to my own research. Bauman (1976) and Tandon (1988) introduced the concept of emacipatory action. Bauman claimed that institutions distort reality and that the voices of the marginalised needed to be included to redress this and to challenge and change dominant perceptions. Tandon rejected traditional research approaches of objectivity and distance and instead maintained that transformation could only occur for marginalised groups through their active participation.

The transformative emancipatory paradigm was eclectic and made use of all these elements already discussed (Mertens, 2003). Research undertaken within this paradigm should be empowering, relevant and attempt to improve lives by promoting changes in policy and practice (Humphries, Mertens, & Truman, 2000; Oliver, 1997). The transformative emancipatory paradigm has been expanded to include disability (Oliver, 1996). Shakespeare (1996) indicated that a researcher working in disability research was required to spend quality time with those who have disabilities and

research conducted in this paradigm was not regarded as valid unless the researcher had extensive life experiences and involvement with the individual or group under investigation.

My personal history of having an adolescent with learning difficulties in my family, fulfilled this criterion. When undertaking a research project that focused on secondary students with learning difficulties who were blamed for their own problems and who were generally marginalised from school (Brown et al., 2003; Fulcher, 1989a; Pearce, 1996), the transformative emacipatory paradigm of disability (Barton, 1998; Merton, 1968) was the appropriate operational conceptual model. It allowed the voices of those directly concerned with the outcomes of secondary education to be heard and allows me to advocate on their behalf to challenge and to hopefully initiate changes which will directly benefit them, their families and their teachers (Clough & Barton, 1998; Corbett, 1998). At the very least, it permitted me to re-tell their stories to draw attention to the injustice within their situations (Christensen, 1993; Connell, 1998; Howe, 1996; Lynch & Lodge, 2002; Mills & Gale, 2001; Purpel & Shapiro, 1998).

The remainder of this chapter focuses on the findings of each phase, their implications and their limitations. It then examines the reliability of the data by triangulating the results from each phase (Flick, 2004; Jick, 1979; Tashakkori & Teddlie, 2003b) and seeks to find a common voice while still foregrounding the views of students and advocating parents. Finally, recommendations are made to improve the secondary school experiences of students with learning diffculties as well as suggestions for areas of further research.

6.2 Discussion of Phase One: The Survey

Analysis of the qualitative data collected by the survey instrument, revealed a number of issues of concern to secondary teachers across the State. These were curriculum, pedagogy, inclusion, policy, support, school organisation, collaboration, training and professional development, funding, numbers of students with learning difficulties and the inability of teachers to cope with the increasing demands made upon them. The views presented by a self-selected, self-report survey were individual and could not be seen to represent all teachers in the State. However, where similar views

have been expressed and where they have been endorsed by different sources, some reliability should be accorded to them.

The pilot of the survey instrument showed that some participating teachers did not believe they taught students with learning difficulties particularly in classes such as physics and higher streamed English. Research has demonstrated (Christensen & Baker, 2002) the inability of teachers to recognise gifted and talented students with learning difficulties in their classes. This failure among teachers to attribute underachievement of some gifted and talented students to learning difficulties (Reis, 2002) might have contributed to lower participation rates of teachers, for example, of physics and higher level English, traditionally regarded as highly academic subjects. It could be assumed that some teachers in the State held similar views to those expressed in the pilot study and erroneously believed that they did not have contact with students with learning difficulties. A number of teachers involved in the pilot indicated that the delivery of the survey instrument via the internet posed significant problems to their participation as they lacked the necessary computer literacy skills. Nevertheless, web-based surveys with effective incentives have recorded two percent response rates (Marcussen, 2001). As this survey had holidays as incentives and participation rates that continued to rise throughout the collection period, it would appear that lack of teacher access and recognition of the target students might have been factors in responses being lower than anticipated rather than lack of interest in the topic or ineffective incentives.

Qualitative data collected revealed that teachers perceived that school organisation did not support mainstream students with learning difficulties. Collaboration was not facilitated by timetabling and/or noncontact time. A common practice cited was ad-hoc meetings at lunch breaks or after school. Commitment to collaboration appeared to be lacking as these meetings were often poorly attended. Policies related to students with learning difficulties varied across schools and within sectors. Even when a systemic policy existed, as in EQ (Education Queensland, 2001) or Catholic Education (Queensland Catholic Education Commission, 2003), data indicated that policy was often disregarded or undermined by school practices. Inclusion was given lip service but examples of discriminatory practice cited indicated that real inclusion did not often occur. Teachers also criticised curricula which they believed were inappropriate for the needs of mainstream students with learning difficulties.

Some teachers suggested that their peers used inappropriate pedagogy for students with learning difficulties. Concerns were also raised about the employment of untrained and unqualified teachers' aides to assist students who required teachers with high levels of skills and appropriate training. The present practice was regarded as counter-productive. Professional development in schools was reported as being either nonexistent or inadequate as was preservice education as neither addressed the needs of teachers to effectively teach these students.

Rasch analysis of teachers' attitudes revealed uniformly poor attitudes towards students with learning difficulties across the State and within all government and nongovernment schools. Although some teachers exhibited either very positive or very negative attitudes, no demographic indicator accounted for the differences. The implications of these results are of concern as there are no obvious demographic factors which are accounting for these results. However, uniformly poor attitudes towards this group of students has undoubtedly detrimental effects upon the happiness of students with learning difficulties at school and ultimately, their academic achievement.

Analysis of data related to teacher understanding showed that teachers in the sample were equally divided about the intellectual ability of students with learning difficulties, their inability to apply what was taught and their motivation to learn. Approximately 50 percent of teachers believed that the problems encountered by these students at school were caused by the student, and had no relationship with pedagogy, curriculum, assessment or the school community.

Early career teachers were the demographic group with the least positive attitudes and the least understanding about students with learning difficulties. They were also the group the least likely to agree that students with learning difficulties have acquired learnt helplessness, that they preferred practically based lessons or that they might be disadvantaged by some pedagogies used in the classroom. Although this result was predictable, it raises serious questions about the preservice education that these early career teachers have received. Considering that most preservice education degrees have at least one special education subject, it raises serious concerns about length of subjects, and the level of knowledge and skills that have been imparted to preservice teachers in relation to special needs students in general and students with learning difficulties in particular.

When the results of teachers' attitudes and understanding were correlated, no significant relationship was found to exist. Although teachers with masters' degrees

revealed more understanding about the characteristics of students with learning difficulties, this did not create more positive attitudes. More preservice education and professional development is, therefore, not the sole answer to creating more positive attitudes. This is a disheartening finding in one sense but also shows that new answers need to be sought and found to address the existing overwhelmingly negative attitudes by secondary teachers towards mainstream students with learning difficulties.

6.2.1 Implications from Phase One

Would the results for Phase One have been significantly different if there had been larger numbers of underrepresented groups in the sample as suggested in the literature (Crano & Brewer, 2002; Dillman, 2000)? For example, if fewer experienced teachers, more males, those employed in very small schools and more classroom teachers as opposed to those involved in learning support or special education, had participated, would that have changed results? This is not possible to answer definitively, but the indications from the data suggest that the overall result is unlikely to be different as the issues exist in the majority of the sample, within individual schools and systemically and needs to be addressed at these levels. These results indicated the need for radical change in secondary schools and teacher education including more emphasis on special education skills. Findings also revealed the need for mentoring in schools, for ongoing professional development and for teachers to become more reflective about their practice.

Phase One results confirmed earlier studies which called for substantive change in secondary schools (Hargreaves et al., 1996; Lingard et al., 2000; McLeskey & Waldron, 2000). These inquiries demonstrated that teachers required special education skills and ongoing professional development, and needed to engage in more reflective practice (Clough, 1998; Darling-Hammond, 1994; Hayes et al., 2006; Prochnow et al., 1999). On the practical level, this has implications for timetabling and for the provision of more noncontact time to allow for collaboration and mentoring as well as for planning and reflection.

Teachers with masters' degrees revealed more understanding about students with learning difficulties. This would suggest that in assisting teachers to undertake higher degrees and be involved in active research, this could help to increase their levels of awareness particularly in relation to students with learning difficulties. The results also

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raise the question of how teachers' aides might be used in classes and their current training. Using unqualified teachers' aides to teach these students who pose significant challenges within the classroom, is at best problematic and at worst, untenable, unprofessional and unethical. This view has also been supported by literature in the field (Rohl et al., 2000).

As stated previously, demographic indicators did not explain why some teachers had very positive attitudes and high understanding about students with learning difficulties. Anecdotal evidence suggested that personal connections to these students would be the key to more positive attitudes and greater teacher understanding, however, the data indicated that this was not the case. This confirmed results from a recent study of teachers' attitudes towards students with special educational needs where personal knowledge of students did not alter teacher profiles (Levins et al., 2005). Although there was some difference in the logit range between demographic indicators for teachers' attitude and understanding, these were all statistically insignificant apart from the relationship between masters' degrees and teacher understanding. These results illustrated that positive attitudes were individual and did not belong to a specific group. Something else had made the difference. Perhaps this difference was empathy. No specific questions were included to explore this idea. Research which is more sophisticated than a survey would be required to tease out what exactly is the connection between personal involvement with a student with learning difficulties, positive teacher attitudes and understanding and empathy.

Phase One also exposed the role played by gatekeepers in either facilitating or hindering access to the survey document by potential participants. It is an aspect which needs to be carefully considered in any future research using this methodology. For a sponsored web-based survey to attract more participants, ways of lessening gatekeepers' impact, perhaps with more wide-ranging formal research approvals and the support of principals' organisations would warrant investigation.

6.2.2 Limitations of Phase One

The findings of Phase One provided substantive information from 280 Queensland secondary teachers about their attitudes and understanding of students with learning difficulties. This data provided a depth of information that did not previously exist and allowed insights into the viewpoints of practicing teachers. However, there were a number of limitations associated with this phase of the study. A web-based

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survey required reliance on third parties to promote it while it called for teachers to have access to hardware and to be computer literate to participate. There were also coverage errors: as participants were self-selected, teachers interested in the topic tended to contribute. Coverage by the sponsors was incomplete and some informants did not correctly identify the target group. Some participating teachers taught only one to one or in small groups. No allowance was made for that occurrence in the forced choices of the number of classes taught. Further research using this survey instrument would have to address this particular issue. Wording for the two items that were reversed coded should also be reworded to make the statements read positively to overcome this limitation. This change should address the issue of lack of 'fit' for these specific items on the survey instrument.

6.3 Discussion of Phase Two: The Interviews

Phase Two was concerned with extending awareness of perceptions by exploring the personal stories of students with learning difficulties, parents who advocate and a number of secondary teachers who had participated in Phase One. To establish trust and rapport with students and advocating parents I always identified my personal connection with a student with learning difficulties. With teachers, however, I revealed my classroom teaching background, although for those with a personal connection, I also identified my personal interest. This personal involvement and identification with the affected community was regarded as integral to the transformative emancipatory paradigm of disability which informed this research (Oliver, 1997; Shakespeare, 1996).

Interviews and discussions, particularly with parents, were reciprocal. Kathy, Mary and Janet not only sought advice about issues with their children, but also asked about my story. When interviewing parents the rapport was such that I almost felt I was interviewing myself. The circumstances were different but the obstacles encountered were similar. I felt very much part of this group. All of the parents interviewed exhibited similar qualities. They were dedicated to improving the outcomes for their child and would do whatever it took to achieve that. They were also frustrated about issues associated with the education of their children. All wanted to make a difference to their own child but some were concerned about improving outcomes for other students with learning difficulties. Carmel and Janet were two such parents. Carmel was actively

establishing support and advocacy groups for gifted and talented students with learning difficulties and regularly addressed existing groups. Janet wanted to change outcomes not only for her second son with learning difficulties but also for other students who were not receiving appropriate support. Another parent, Shane, spoke of renewing his membership with SPELD Queensland Incorporated as the organisation relied on monetary support to continue its advocacy role. Mary, as a parent, felt that the interview process had exposed issues that she was not aware of or had not thought about. Although the interview situation was artificial, it had stimulated ideas for further action. All students, except Tyrone, expressed interest in the school experiences of my own child while Sally, a teacher, shared postschool experiences of her son. There was a need by participants to share their experiences and to have their voices listened to, heard and validated.

Fiona, for example, reflected on her experiences as a mother of a student with learning difficulties and how it had impacted upon her teaching practice:

I wouldn't be the teacher I am now if my children hadn't had the problems that they do and I've never thought of myself as being anyone particularly special in terms of teaching but I keep finding I've got all these skills that other people haven't got that have been teaching the same amount of time. I am absolutely bowled over really because I think, "How could you not know that?" I think that I assume that people should know and they don't …I think my own issues have made me read more wisely, [widely?] have made me search for a way to do it. And it is like driving to Brisbane, there are lots of ways to drive to Brisbane, the quickest way would be to go on the highway but you can navigate your way just as successfully going country roads.

Transformation was apparent for all parents involved in this research as well as for myself. There appeared to be increased understanding and awareness in the parents and the liberating experience of the telling of stories to someone who listened and reacted with empathy. The parents expressed hope: hope for their own children and for others who struggle with a school environment which is mostly ill-suited to their needs. For me, it was also a transforming experience. I became aware of the commonality of our problems, the diversity of the solutions advanced and my admiration grew for each of the parents who were seeking a better way, often in the face of sustained opposition and indifference. It would appear that this research touched and

changed the lives of the parent participants and myself in some indefinable way and gave us all the strength to go on. Even nearly one year later, some of my parent participants send me unsolicited emails to cheer my day. They also volunteered to participate as guest speakers at a university course for preservice teachers where they represented the voices of parents.

The issue of empathy remains a continuing theme of this research. Empathy was raised as an issue in a number of ways. Errol, a student, revealed empathy for his mother's position in saying, "She has had to fight tooth and nail to get me where I am at the moment." All of the teachers interviewed showed empathy. Fiona specifically referred to empathy as being the link which determined positive attitudes towards students with learning difficulties and provided the willingness to acquire understanding about their difficulties and how to address them. She said, 'I think the best teachers I've seen have learning difficulties themselves or have had children with learning difficulties and have really empathised with the fact that their kids are struggling'. Lena's determination to challenge her students arose from empathy with her sister. Megan, who empathised with her friend's struggles on behalf of her son, with learning difficulties, used this to inform her pedagogical and assessment practices. Sally used her empathy to provide enabling, innovative solutions to retaining students at school and to drive her active mentoring program for teachers. Mark empathised with students who were alienated by school. He was concerned that this project should not just be used to gain a qualification but that the work should be used for some practical good: students should benefit. His voice resonated clearly, 'Students are our core business'.

As the only male teacher interviewed, Mark spoke of gender related concerns. He felt that many female teachers at his school were unprepared for boys in their classes and lacked appropriate classroom management skills. He believed that boys were disadvantaged through the feminisation of the work force. Some research literature has echoed his concerns (Drudy, Martin, Woods, & O'Flynn, 2005). Mark also expressed disquiet that teachers' actions could be easily misinterpreted and charges of pedophilia wrongly laid. He felt that this change in society and teachers' fears of being falsely accused was detrimental to the trust and companionship needed for effective student/teacher relationships. The effects of positive teacher/ student relationships both on academic outcomes and the emotional wellbeing of students has been clearly established by literature in the field (Brophy & Good, 1974; Murray, 2002; Sanders & Jordan, 2000).

There was limited reference made to student resilience by some parents. Mary spoke about her son's ability to cope with academic problems and bullying at school. Doreen praised Damon's resilience when promoted midyear and noted how he had thrived despite negative reactions from peers. Teachers did not refer to this aspect and its effects on students with learning difficulties although it was discussed in some literature relating to these students (Morrison & Cosden, 1997; Werner & Smith, 1982; Withers & Russell, 2001). Two students, Emily and Damon, illustrated the effects of resilience in their positive attitudes to school, despite previously having had less than satisfactory experiences in their classes.

6.3.1 Implications from Phase Two

Generally it was parents, rather than teachers, who were aware of the impact of a learning difficulty on the student and family. Although parents initiated action, often this did not achieve the desired results for their children. They were generally powerless. Psychologists, for example, persuaded some schools to implement findings of parent commissioned reports. Previous research in the field by Davies (1996) Delpit (1988) and Lynch and Lodge (2002) suggested that power in schools was concentrated in specific discourses, organisation and structures but did not reside with parents or students. There were apparent inconsistencies in practices in accommodations and policy between and within schools. There was no systemic support provided to students with learning difficulties. If support was forthcoming it was largely the result of individual commitment by teachers. The experiences reported demonstrated that parents needed financial resources to initiate private assessments or to change schools to others that might be more prepared to accommodate their child. Financial resources were also required to employ private tutors on a regular basis. All parents involved in this study had dedicated substantial time and resources, including financial, in advocating for their children.

The concept of community was important for both parents and students but teachers were uncritically accepting that their community was cohesive and inclusive. Parents and students, however, were aware of exclusions. Parents wanted to be part of a collaborative community whereas teachers used the term 'collaboration' to mean 'facilitation'. The data revealed that there was little genuine commitment by schools to create communities where the needs of students with learning difficulties could be accommodated and achieved and where their parents were seen as partners in the

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process. There was not adequate awareness or discussion on the contributions made by parents and students. Previous research in this area confirmed the importance of community to both parents and students and the necessity of making it a priority for schools to become truly inclusive (Sanders & Epstein, 2000; Sergiovanni, 1994; Teese & Polesel, 2003). This has implications for the future of secondary schools and the sense of community and commitment which they create. This lack of collaboration by teachers with parents and the nonulilisation of parent expert knowledge about their child has also been reported by the Vinson inquiry into New South Wales schools, indicating that this situation was not confined to Queensland (Esson et al., 2002).

Student attitudes towards school varied. Of all the students interviewed only Emily and Damon liked school and Tyrone disliked it intensely. His comments reflected both his alienation and bitterness:

> I would like no such thing as school. If I had a magic wand. School wastes lots of your life. School is good for making friends, that the only thing it's good for. If I wasn't at school I'd watch TV, play computer games or ride around on my bike.

Errol, Denise and Blair were ambivalent about school. The comments made by the student participants about teachers and schools supported the findings of previous research (Kortering & Braziel, 2002; McWhirter et al., 1998). Students' circumstances demonstrated the necessity for a school based advocate to advance legitimate concerns of students with leaning difficulties and their parents and to agitate for appropriate action to be undertaken. Pastoral care teachers such as Mark have neither the specialised knowledge nor the focused interest to be the changemakers as advocated by Fullan (1993). Students with learning difficulties often have socioemotional problems and often have problems being accepted by their peers or the school community generally. A body of literature has discussed the problems associated with their alienation and their socioemotional problems (Brown et al., 2003; Jahnukainen, 2001; Knight, 1985). Lyons (2000) reported the benefits to marginalised students of advocates and advocacy groups such as SPELD Queensland Incorporated. These mechanisms assisted these students and their families in their efforts to obtain appropriate help for their children and in doing so, created social capital. Advocates, exemplified by the parents in this study, assist in promoting understanding, empathy and help students with learning difficulties overcome the barriers to learning and acceptance in their school communities.

Parents (Shane, Janet and Doreen) and students (Emily, Errol and Damon) discussed the importance of tutors/teachers' aides for academic achievement. The quality of teachers' aides assistance was questioned and those with teaching qualifications were suggested as being more appropriate. Regular help on a one to one basis from suitably qualified tutors had been important for successful outcomes for these students and this has implications for the way in which help is offered to students with learning difficulties in schools and the qualifications of those who are being employed as tutors and aides. This position has also been supported by research focused on appropriate pedagogy and support for students with learning difficulties (Crawford, 1996; McLaren, 2003; Melican, 2001; Rubin, 2003; Westwood, 2004).

There were implications from the data that suggested that there were large numbers of parents who were marginalised and who remained uninvolved with their children's school. Data has indicated possible reasons for noninvolvement, including negative experiences of parents at school and low levels of literacy. However, it has also indicated that social events, particularly sporting events, have achieved some success in involving alienated parents. To overcome this problem of lack of parent contact with the school, teachers need to be committed beyond the classroom and become actively involved in the school's local community. Parents' fear of appearing 'simpletons' combined with their powerlessness, patronising attitudes by teachers and the use of educational jargon were all considered contributing factors to parent alienation and need to be addressed if parents are to re-establish links with schools.

Kathy's view illustrated one parent's perspective:

I feel like I'm a bit out of my depth sometimes with the intellectual level. It is very difficult when you specialise in one particular facet of the education system and you are used to talking to teachers who use the same lingo and when you have got to actually talk to parents.

Previous research has also reported that parents were generally uncomfortable with teachers, and the relationships rarely exhibited reciprocity (McKibbin & Cooper, 1994; Sanders & Epstein, 2000; Wood, 1988).

Interview data confirmed that resistance was a common reaction for each group. Parents resisted what they were told by schools about their children, students resisted fully participating in school and teachers resisted taking appropriate actions to meet the

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needs of students with learning difficulties. Some aspects of student and teacher resistance and its contribution to declining rates of student achievement and retention have been discussed in previous research (Trent & Slade, 2001). Factors, suggested by participants, as influencing teacher resistance were the lack of understanding about students with learning difficulties, busyness, the absence of noncontact time for preparation, collaboration and mentoring as well as the lack of regular, comprehensive and appropriate professional development. This aversion to change has been documented in research which concluded that teachers themselves seemed alienated by students who appeared to be unresponsive, apathetic or aggressively attention seeking (Hargreaves, 2000). Schools have not been structured to support the needs of the classroom teacher. These findings were confirmed by recent research undertaken in Queensland schools (Hayes et al., 2006; Lingard et al., 2000). If resistance by parents and students is to be overcome, schools and teachers need to become more skilled and willing to accommodate the requirements of students with learning difficulties and their parents. This has ramifications for policy, leadership, school organisation, preservice education and professional development.

Parents were primarily concerned for their children's happiness at school. In this study, their lack of happiness had implications for family life and, as Janet stated," has the power to affect the person that they become". Generally students interviewed wanted to be with friends and to have friends. Teachers were not specifically concerned about student happiness. If students with learning difficulties are seen in a holistic way then their happiness or unhappiness at school must be of utmost importance to the school and teachers. It affects the quality of all relationships within the school community and within the family. This has implications on all levels within schools and particularly on an organisational structure which delineates teachers by the subjects they teach and students by their results in a particular subject without reference to any other information. Research has previously recorded that this has been the usual situation in secondary schools (Weller & McLeskey, 2000). Unhappiness at school has implications for truancy and refusing to attend school. Parents, Mary and Kathy have experienced these problems. Mary reported her experiences with her son, "he doesn't wag school" despite his unhappiness in being there. Lena, as a teacher, also noted that upheavals at home affect school attendance. These issues have implications for school based counseling services to be available to assist parents, students and teachers.

Parents, students and teachers all referred to issues of homework, especially its inappropriateness, as so eloquently expressed by Lena:

I had eleven boys in this classroom and I was setting homework and suddenly I looked around the room and I had one boy's dad had just got out of jail, another one's was in jail, a mother died of cancer last week and I'm going round the room and I'm thinking "What the hell am I setting homework for, this is ridiculous?" and it hit me like a brick wall, I don't know these kids. I'm thinking "Oh these kids are going home to mum and dad and mum and dad are offering them afternoon tea and the they are going off to a swimming lesson." And I'm sitting there going "These children don't even know if they are having dinner."

Homework appeared throughout the transcripts as a burden for parents and students. Mary clearly explained the parent's concern as well as her frustration with teachers:

Being a parent at home you can't give them all the support they really need. As it is about 11 or 12 o'clock at night, at times when you sit down finishing off assignments. He stayed up to 3 o'clock in the morning one morning, finishing. We also need more explanations, more details from teachers regarding assignments and less homework

The ongoing negative social and economic outcomes for students with learning difficulties have been well documented in the literature reviewed on juvenile crime in New South Wales (Juvenile Crime in New South Wales Report, 2000) and unemployment (Rojewski, 1999). Moreover, Larson, (1992) reflected that school based decisions about courses, subjects, exclusions from subjects and courses had economic and social implications for students. These issues need to be fully discussed with all parties concerned and arbitrary mandated decisions should not be made. Generally, mainstream students with learning difficulties could study challenging courses if appropriate pedagogy and assessment were implemented to allow them to achieve academic success. Research undertaken in the USA (Wallace et al., 2003; Wallace et al., 2002) which incorporated observation, surveys and case studies confirmed that appropriate pedagogy and collaborative practices for students with learning difficulties

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achieved high achievement levels by all students in mainstream classes including those students with learning difficulties.

6.3.2 Limitations of Phase Two

The structured nature of the interview questions placed limits on the scope of discussion particularly for teachers and parents. However, students seemed to find that the structure assisted them. For example, students used the questions to focus their replies and answer the question asked, whereas, parents and teachers were more likely to digress. Field notes revealed other issues that may have been discussed in more depth in an open interview, for example Mark, as a teacher in a Catholic school, was interested in discussing political correctness and how he would be expected to answer questions. Another teacher, Sally, spoke at length about her son's attempts to obtain both a driver's licence and an apprenticeship and how his learning difficulties and his socioemotional issues made these tasks difficult for him and caused worry in the family. Shane, as a parent, was also prepared to discuss his fears and Emily's mother's fear for their daughter's future. Mary, another parent, revealed the difficulties of dealing with her son's problems when she also had other children with special educational needs and she felt that she was not receiving adequate help from professionals for any of her children. Time limitations existed with all participants, but especially with teachers and students. Some parents were willing to travel long distances and all parents allocated substantial time for their interview. They also added further substantive information when they verified their transcripts. Teachers only allocated noncontact time in the school day for interviews and accepted the transcripts with only minimal changes. The time allocated to students and the formal nature of the interview process limited input from them although the verification interview gathered more information from all student participants when trust and rapport had been established.

Data gathered was also limited by the small number of participants and access to them. I needed to use third parties to recruit potential parent and student interview contributors. I made a subjective judgment, after talking to parents and teachers, whether the student under consideration fitted with the definition of learning difficulties which guided this project. Only one teacher participant was male, as was one parent, and only one teacher was employed by an independent school. Students did not come from all grade levels and only two of the student participants were female. Parents

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interviewed were all involved in advocacy and were prepared to be involved with their child's school. Their views do not necessarily reflect those of all parents of students with learning difficulties. Coding and themes were undertaken by myself as the sole researcher. Although that assisted reliability it also limited the input of other interpretations of the data.

Phase Two, despite its limitations, allows the voices of practicing teachers, students with learning difficulties and advocating parents to be heard. The data reflects the reality of school for these participants who come from across the State and are involved in different schools in different sectors. Their contribution provides unique and valuable information which enhances the body of knowledge about this particular group of students who are failing and underachieving in secondary schools.

6.4 Triangulating Results

This methodology which used two separate phases, one mixed within mode and one qualitative study, allowed the views of all participats to be compared and contrasted. It also offers the opportunity to triangulate data (Jick, 1979) by comparing and contrasting data from each phase which assisted in establishing the robustness of the findings and ultimately the recommendations being made. On initial examination of the data, one aspect is apparent. Data from Phase One and Phase Two essentially supported the theory related to students with learning difficulties. This has been demonstrated throughout the discussion in this chapter and enhances the reliability of findings of this study. Although the concerns and focus of parents and students often differed, parents and teachers also overlapped in their awareness of the issues as they affected students with learning difficulties. The preceding discussions have established that the teachers who participated in the interviews in Phase Two held very positive attitudes towards students with learning difficulties and revealed high levels of understanding about their characteristics and needs for support. This reflects the fact that they understood the issues as they affected these students and had implemented strategies to assist their learning. The ensuing discussion, examines the finer details of the data especially in relation to specific recurrent themes.

Phase One established and Phase Two confirmed that many Queensland secondary teachers had a limited understanding about students with learning difficulties and had difficulty in recognising them in class or in accommodating their needs. Phase

One teachers with very positive attitudes towards students with learning difficulties had concerns over the systemic use of teachers' aides for use only with ascertained students. This policy excludes the majority of students with learning difficulties in Queensland classrooms who have not been ascertained. Teachers and parents interviewed in Phase Two were aware that this policy advantaged and disadvantaged particular individuals and left the majority of students with learning difficulties without help. The two ascertained students who were interviewed also were aware that they had an advantage over other students with learning difficulties. Teachers in both Phases One and Two and parents in Phase Two realised that without appropriate assistance, students with learning difficulties were destined to fail. There were no calls, however, by teachers, parents or students in Phase Two, for appraisement, which some teachers in Phase One had suggested. Appraisement is the system of addressing the needs of students with learning difficulties in government primary schools (Education Queensland, 2001). Parents wanted students diagnosed, as did some teachers in Phase Two, although whether this was the same thing as appraisement was impossible to establish from the data. However, all parents and teachers in Phase Two wanted students with learning difficulties to receive extra attention and recognition of their difficulties.

Approximately 50 percent of teachers in Phase One and all teachers and parents in Phase Two agreed that the issues surrounding students with learning difficulties at school were not related to their intelligence but to policies and approaches intrinsic to the school and education system. However, in both phases, the medicalised discourse predominated. This is not surprising as historically students with learning difficulties have been perceived in this way and the discourse has become the accepted one in education (Cadman, 1976; Elkins, 2001). It is reinforced by the funding system, ascertainment (Education Queensland, 2002) which uses the individual deficit model to allocate additional help to selected students (Education for All, 2001; Slee, 1996).

Students with learning difficulties present in class as either having behavioural difficulties or as being quiet and apathetic (Ashman & Elkins, 2002; McWhirter et al., 1998; Westwood, 2004). Teachers with a very high understanding and those with masters' degrees were the only teachers in Phase One who were aware of this. All of the teachers in Phase Two recognised this while parents related any challenging behaviours in their own children to their difficulties at school. Parents reported, however, that when the school adequately addressed academic issues, behavioural problems disappeared or were considerably lessened. The results of both phases confirmed that

generally teachers across the State lacked understanding about the relationship between student behaviours and learning difficulties. Teachers with masters' degrees believed that appropriate pedagogy was essential for students with learning difficulties to reach their potential. Parents and teachers in Phase Two agreed but also included appropriate assessment and curricula as being integral to positive student outcomes.

Participants in both phases were concerned about the lack of funding, professional development, inadequate preservice training, insufficient training for learning support teachers and teachers' aides as well as the large number of students with learning difficulties in classes. They also affirmed that teachers were overburdened to the detriment of their students. Some teachers in Phase One wanted time for collaboration but generally little was said about this issue and it was not mentioned by the teachers interviewed in Phase Two. However, parents wanted collaboration between teachers, departments within schools and for themselves to be involved in decision making.

An additional survey administered to some participants in Phase One to gain contact information, indicated that many teachers stated that they sought help with students with learning difficulties from parents. Parents in Phase Two generally did not support this assertion. They believed that their advice was ignored and that nonascertained students received little assistance.

Parents and students interviewed in Phase Two generally had a sense of community. This concept of community was not present in the responses in Phase One or in the majority of teachers in Phase Two. Parents and students appeared to have different expectations and a different world view from the majority of teachers. Parents wanted schools to have a sense of community and for their children to belong. This confirmed findings from previous a case study (Avramidis et al., 2002) which also recorded parents concern for community.

The existence of limited understanding and poor attitudes towards students with learning difficulties in Phase One were confirmed by all participants in Phase Two. Although all interviewees could give examples of excellent teaching for students with learning difficulties, these were the exception. The experiences of students with learning difficulties and their parents reflect a State where the majority of teachers do not understand the specific needs of these students and they do not believe that they have a particular responsibility for the student's academic outcomes.

Although samples in both phases were small, findings from each phase have been confirmed through the triangulation of results. These findings corroborate previous research findings related to students with learning difficulties and those with special needs. This indicates that the results of this exploratory research can be considered reliable.

Recommendations that follow are a reflection on the pervasiveness of the issues that confront students with learning difficulties across the State on a daily basis and which have ramifications for the student's future economic and social well-being. The recommendations apply to both government and nongovernment sectors as there was no discernable difference between them.

6.5 Recommendations

The results of this study are robust and provide authentic information in a research area where the voices of secondary students with learning difficulties, their parents and their teachers have previously not been heard. The data provide substantive knowledge about the reality of these students' school experiences.

In order that the needs of these students in Queensland be identified and addressed it is imperative that a national definition for students with learning difficulties be developed and authorised to help to overcome problems in prevalence estimates and to have more specifically funded programs available to cater for their learning needs. Until a definition is endorsed, the prevalence of students with learning difficulties in Queensland schools can not be established nor can the real issues facing these students be imaginatively addressed.

The recommendations which follow are made to improve the lives and outcomes for secondary students with learning difficulties in Queensland schools. Recommendations are divided into those that which could be implemented in the short term and those which will require change over a period of time either in policy or in the way in which teachers and school communities interact with students with learning difficulties.

6.5.1 Changes recommended in the short term

Secondary teachers should be strongly encouraged, particularly with financial incentives, to undertake higher degrees. Furthermore, at the minimum a minor (for example, three subjects) in special education needs to be undertaken by all preservice generalist secondary teachers to be eligible for teacher registration. This has implications for preservice course structures and those courses of shorter duration (one year) provided to expedite a secondary teaching qualification. For those seeking to practise as learning support teachers, a higher degree which focuses on special education skills should be mandatory and further linked with teacher registration. Only those teachers with those qualifications, or currently studying for them, should be able to be employed in those roles. This linking of special education skills to registration has implications for more extensive and appropriate professional development for practising teachers. All preservice and professional development opportunities should include more attention to skills in classroom management as well as instruction in how to teach literacy and numeracy for those students with learning difficulties who enter secondary school without these skills.

Individual case managers, who can advocate for students with learning difficulties and their parents, need to be placed within schools, or as a minimum, within a District. This senior management position should allow them to liaise with specialists including educational psychologists, speech pathologists and occupational therapists to organise interventions. They should make counseling recommendations in consultation with guidance officers/psychologists and recommend appropriate professional development to be undertaken in the school. Case managers should be actively involved in the mentoring program and collaborative meetings. School based counseling services to assist parents, students and teachers similar to the community based counseling services offered by the higher education sector, should also be established.

School organisation, including flexible timetabling, needs to accommodate students with learning difficulties. Timetabled periods for collaboration for teachers, case managers and others involved with students with learning difficulties should also be implemented. This initiative should have the input of teachers, students and parents as to the effectiveness of organisational changes. Secondary schools are obliged to be aware of the limiting of outcomes for students with learning difficulties by being realistic about course prerequisites. Whether a student has the competencies to undertake a course is more salient, rather than an ability to pass or fail. This is particularly important for the practically based courses in the junior and senior secondary school,

6.5.2 Changes recommended in the long term

There should also be a strong emphasis placed on collaborative practices both in preservice and professional development courses, including modeling by the training institution. Collaboration in preservice and professional development should include regular contact between special educators and generalist teachers to encourage recognition of special education skills which will enhance the practice of the generalist teacher.

Collaboration with parents in particular should also be implemented in all training courses with appropriate skills being taught and modeled. Attention should also be given to the issue of homework within preservice and professional development courses. Emphasis should be placed on the existing research knowledge and teachers should also be encouraged to undertake action research to enhance the knowledge base in this field.

Changes within school organisation, structure and policy are recommended to establish collaborative practices and mentoring to assist teachers and to provide them with access to parental input and to relevant community services. It would help to break down the insular nature of secondary classroom teaching and in subject departments. Best teaching practices which specifically address the needs of diverse groups within classes should be encouraged though the interchange of ideas presented in research papers. Presently, educational research is undervalued by practicing teachers and by bureaucracies who provide disincentives so that no financial remuneration for upgrading qualifications is given in Queensland until teachers have gained a doctorate. Practicing teachers need to be given incentives, particularly financial, to participate in research and to be involved in disseminating their results to the research community and in public forums.

The dislike and ambivalence towards school of many students with learning difficulties has implications for school communities where there needs to be much more attention to social capital and to building community within a school so that it is truly inclusive. Trust and rapport need to be built if negative feelings towards schools and teachers, especially by many parents of students with learning difficulties, are to be overcome. Community building should focus on the positive values of achievements, beyond sport, and foster public recognition. Although there is resistance to cooperation at all levels, the greatest culpability lies at the feet of schools and teachers where

inappropriate curriculum, pedagogies, school and class organisation exacerbate preexisting problems for students with learning difficulties when they enter secondary schools. Their failing and underachieving in literacy and numeracy and the lack of metacognitive strategies have already created, for many of these students, a low self-esteem, a history of academic failure and exclusion within the school community.

The considerable expertise in teachers and in community advocacy groups must be harnessed both in mentoring and in professional development aspects. There is also great value in teachers being exposed to the "stories" of those who are far different from themselves to assist them in developing empathy for those students who struggle with many aspects of school, not only academically, but with its values and expectations.

It is essential to provide funding for all students with a learning difficulty. The distinction of ascertained students and nonascertained students with learning difficulties does not allow students or their families to receive natural justice and consistently disadvantages mainstream students with learning difficulties. Generalist teachers with special education qualifications would also assist in providing additional help to these students and others with special educational needs. It is further recommended that unqualified teachers' aides be used for nonteaching duties and only those with teaching qualifications be used to assist students.

The individual deficit discourse must be publicly discredited by educational institutions and replaced by a discourse focused on appropriate pedagogy, assessment and service provision to assist students with learning difficulties to achieve acceptable academic outcomes. Funding models require change from the proof of an individual deficit model to a needs based model.

Finally it must be clarified for all secondary teachers, schools and education systems that they are accountable and responsible for the academic outcomes of the students with learning difficulties. It is responsibility of those within education and the wider community, who believe in natural and social recognitive justice, to advocate on behalf of students with learning difficulties. These students require concerned and committed advocates, including teachers, to become changemakers on their behalf.

6.6 Implications for Further Research

There are several areas resulting from this study which warrant further investigation. Empathy and its links with teacher attitude to students with learning difficulties require further clarification. Does empathy coupled with understanding about student needs improve attitudes to students with learning difficulties and lead to better outcomes? What are the most effective ways to build empathy? Does more collaboration, flexible timetabling and school organisation coupled with appropriate pedagogy and assessment and building closer ties with the community, improve outcomes for this particular group of students? These are some of the issues need further research.

Another area of importance is that of advocacy. What is the effect of advocacy upon schools and teachers? How might it be enhanced to achieve positive outcomes for students with learning difficulties and remove the school stress factor from parents' lives? How can the role of advocacy groups and individual advocates be more effectively employed in schools for the benefit of students with learning difficulties and their families?

6.7 Concluding Comments

This research project has only provided a start by looking at some to the issues that confront students with learning difficulties in the secondary school setting. It has moved beyond anecdotal evidence of secondary teachers' attitudes and understanding of students with learning difficulties and has provided data about the subject. The findings challenge the assumption of some teachers and parents in the study that only teachers with a personal connection to these students are effective teachers of students with learning difficulties. The frustrated voices of parents of students with learning difficulties, their teachers and the students themselves have also been heard.

It reveals the deep seated unhappiness and injustice that surrounds the education of these students within our secondary schools. It also makes clear that it is not only an educational problem but very much a political one which requires political will

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to address the issues that have been exposed here and the political courage to make the changes. All stakeholders, including parents and students must be involved in the discussions and be part of the solutions. Perhaps some of the recommendations presented for implementation in the longer term could be interpreted as idealistic, however I consider them as options for a better way forward.

Throughout this project I have shared with the parents the anger, humiliation, frustration, the sense of injustice and that there must be a better way. This way would not only benefit students with learning difficulties but also the whole student body. The entire class, the school community and the larger community would be richer from students with learning difficulties being happy at school and achieving their potential. A common voice must be raised to change, 'what things are' to 'what they ought to be'.

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APPENDIX 4.1

Survey Instrument

Students with learning difficulties are those who have short or long term difficulties in literacy, numeracy and learning how to learn (Education Queensland, 1996).

Section 1: School Demographic Information

1. Post Code of school	⇒ _____
2. Number of students in the secondary school	⇒ Under 150 150 - 350 350 – 500 500 – 800 800 – 1000 1000 – 1500 Over 1500
3. Indicate grades in whole school	
4 Type of school	⇒ P 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 11 12
5. School enrols	⇒ State Catholic Independent
6. Special education teacher employed in school	⇒ Both boys and girls Boys only Girls only
7. Learning Support teacher employed in school	⇒ Yes No ⇒ Yes No

Section 2: Personal Background Information

9. I am	⇒ Male Female
10. I have been teaching full-time or full time equivalent for	⇒ under 1 year 1 - 5 years 5 – 10 years 10 -20 years over 20 years
11. I have been teaching at my current school for 12. My present employment status is	⇒ Under 1 year 1 – 5 years 5 – 10 years 10 -20 years over 20 years ⇒ Full time Part time Contract Job share Other
13. My highest level of education qualification is	⇒ Bachelor Degree Post Graduate Diploma Masters Degree Doctorate Other _____ (Please state qualification)

Section 3: Personal experiences of students with Learning Difficulties

14. My knowledge about students with learning difficulties is	⇒ None Minimal Adequate High
15. How many classes do you teach in the school?	⇒ 5 or under 6 – 10 over 10
16. Please estimate the total number of students with learning difficulties across all your classes. (If you teach a student in more than one class, please count that student only once)	⇒ 5 or under 6 – 10 11 – 20 21 – 30 over 30
17. Please indicate the balance of these students with learning difficulties in your classes.	⇒ equal numbers of boys and girls more boys than girls more girls than boys have only single sex classes
18. Please estimate the proportion of Aboriginal Australian students in your classes who have learning difficulties	⇒ All of them Some of them None of them I don't have any of these students in my classes
19. Please estimate the proportion of Torres Strait Islander students in your classes who have learning difficulties	⇒ All of them Some of them None of them I don't teach any of these students
20. Please estimate the proportion of English as a second language in your classes who have learning difficulties	⇒ All of them Some of them None of them I don't have any of these students in my classes

21. Please indicate the total number of students in your classes on Individual Education Plans (IEP's). (If you teach a student in more than one class, please count that student only once).	⇒ 5 or under 6 -10 11 – 20 21- 30 over 30 don't know not used in my school
22. Please tick the characteristics that you think apply generally to the students with learning difficulties in your classes. (Tick as few/ many as you think)	⇒ Have been diagnosed as ADHD ⇒ Have poor achievement levels in key curriculum areas ⇒ Have behavioural difficulties ⇒ Are intellectually able ⇒ Have social and emotional problems ⇒ Work well when lessons are practically based ⇒ Are easily distracted ⇒ Are unmotivated to learn ⇒ Have poor study skills ⇒ Have poor organisational skills ⇒ Have little ability to apply what they have taught ⇒ Do not learn from their mistakes ⇒ Try to get others, including the teacher, to do their work for them. ⇒ Have poor short term memory ⇒ Have a low self-esteem ⇒ Exhibit negative attitudes towards school and teachers ⇒ Are disadvantaged by many teaching and assessments methods ➢ Work well in co-operative groups
23. Please indicate the type/s of help,	⇒ from teacher aides

including advice, that you currently receive in teaching students with learning difficulties in your classes from within your school.	from other teachers in the school from peers of students have received no help other (please specify)---------------------- --
24. Please indicate any source/s of help or advice you have received about teaching students with learning difficulties from outside your school. 25. Do you have personal experience with (an) individual(s) with learning difficulties outside the school setting i.e. family member, friend etc?	⇒ From other teachers Professional development Parent SPELD (Advocacy group for specific learning disabilities) Educational psychologist Have received no help Other (please specify)-------------------- ⇒ Yes No ⇒ If YES, please indicate the relationship to you. Self Immediate family member Extended family member Friend Neighbour Other: _____

Section 4: Personal Teaching Beliefs and Practices

Please mark the answer which BEST describes your feelings about each statement about students with learning difficulties in your classes.

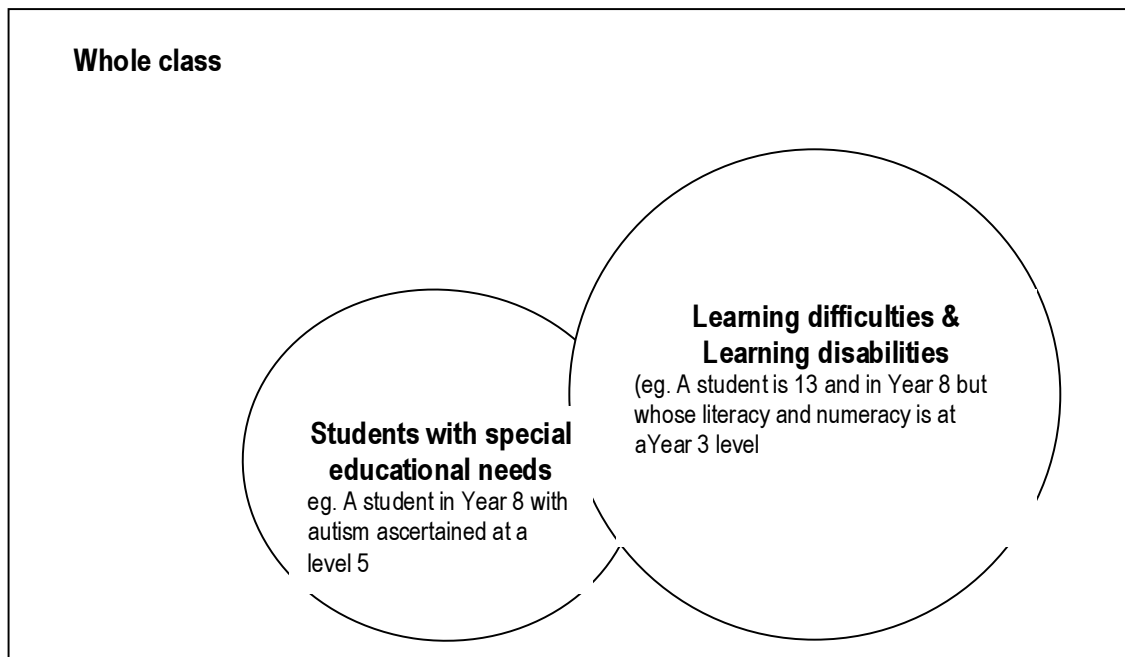|	Strongly disagree	Disagree	50/50	Agree	Strongly agree
26. I can effectively teach students with learning difficulties.					
27. I have adequate preparation time to accommodate students with learning difficulties.					
28. Students with learning difficulties are socially well adjusted.					
29. Students with learning difficulties have a negative impact in my classes.					
30. Students with learning difficulties have disruptive behaviour in my classes					
31. Generally, students with learning difficulties in my classes have ADHD					
32 My lack of special education training hinders my ability to teach students with learning difficulties.					
33. Having students with learning difficulties in my classes has reduced the amount of curriculum content I can cover in a school year					
34. Whole school policies are essential for students with learning difficulties.					

35. Subjects on students with learning difficulties should be mandatory in undergraduate and postgraduate education degrees.					
36. Externally based professional development about students with learning difficulties should be mandatory for all secondary teachers.					
37. Incentives should be provided for teachers to undertake professional development about students with learning difficulties.					
38. I set different assessment tasks for the students with learning difficulties in my classes.					
39. I set different outcomes for the students with learning difficulties in my classes.					
40. I collaborate with other teachers and school personnel to discuss teaching and assessment for students with learning difficulties in my classes.					
41. I would welcome qualified special education/learning support teachers to team-teach my classes.					
42 Parents/guardians of students with learning difficulties should be consulted about appropriate teaching and assessment practices for their child.					

Section 5: School Policy and Organisation

43. What specific policies exist in your school that relate to students with learning difficulties?

44. What support do students with learning difficulties receive in your school?

45. What factors do you think impact on the support that students with learning difficulties receive?

46. Please describe briefly how the organisational practices (eg. Block timetabling, collaborative meetings) in your school support students with learning difficulties.

47. If there are any further issues which have not been raised that affect your professional practice, please outline them here.

Appendix 4.2

Diagrammatic representation and definition on survey instrument

Whole class

Students with special educational needs
eg. A student in Year 8 with autism ascertained at a level 5

Learning difficulties & Learning disabilities
(eg. A student is 13 and in Year 8 but whose literacy and numeracy is at aYear 3 level

Students with learning difficulties are those with 'short or long term difficulties in literacy, numeracy and learning how to learn'

Appendix 4.3

Participant survey

1. Name:

2. School address:

3. Contact details:

Please tick as many of the following categories that apply in the following questions.

       Learning support teacher

       Special education teacher

Source of survey notification:

       Union

       AISQ

       Staff College

       SPELD

       Principal

       Email

       Noticeboard

       Media

       Friends

       Others (Please list)

4. Reason for participating in the teacher survey

Appendix 5.1

Theoretical base	Teachers
Background	1. What year levels do you teach? How long have you been teaching? How long have you been teaching in this school?
	2. What is your educational and teaching background?
	3. Do you have any involvement with Speld Qld? If so in what way?
School organisation	4. Do you think the way the school is organised affects the ability of teachers of students with learning difficulties to meet their needs in class? Please explain your answer.
Policy	5. How do you think staff should be made aware of specific school policies about students with learning difficulties? Are there any obstacles that could prevent this happening?
Collaboration	6. How does the school facilitate collaboration between parents/classroom teachers and the school? Does this fit your needs?
Knowledge & attitude	7. What do you think is the relationship between school achievement, behaviour and learning difficulties?
	8. What do you think are the greatest difficulties faced by teachers when teaching students with learning difficulties?
	9. What do you think are the greatest difficulties faced by students with learning difficulties in your classes?
Curriculum & pedagogy	10. How do you see the present teaching methods, assessment and curriculum as meeting the needs of students with learning difficulties? Please explain your answer.
	11. Can IT play a role and improve outcomes for students with learning difficulties? How can computer and IT skills be made easier and more accessible to students with learning difficulties?
	12. Does mentoring for either teachers or students occur in your school? How effective has any mentoring been? What are the obstacles to mentoring in your school?
	13. Do you think that children with learning difficulties have a

	preferred way of learning? Please explain your answer.
	14. What do you believe makes a good teacher for students with learning difficulties?
	15. How do you feel that the school has equipped students with learning difficulties for their future study and/or employment? Please explain your answer.
Teacher training & professional development	16. What roles do you see for initial teacher training and professional development in improving outcomes for students with learning difficulties? Please explain.
Inclusion	17. How do you see student with learning difficulties fitting into the wider school community?
	18. Do any of these students fulfill leadership roles in your class or school? Please explain your answer.

Appendix 5.2

Theoretical base	Parents
Background	1. What grade is your child in and how long have they been in this school?
	2. What is your educational and teaching background?
	3. Are you a member of Speld Qld? Why or why not?
School organisation	4. Do you think the way the school is organised affects the ability of your child's teachers to meet their needs in class? Please explain your answer.
Policy	5. How do you think staff should be made aware of specific school policies about students with learning difficulties? Are there any obstacles that could prevent this happening?
Collaboration	6. How does the school facilitate collaboration between parents/classroom teachers and the school? Does this fit your needs?
Knowledge & attitude	7. What do you think is the relationship between school achievement, behaviour and learning difficulties?
	8. What do you think are the greatest difficulties faced by teachers when teaching students with learning difficulties?
	9. What do you think are the greatest difficulties that your child faces in class and school?
Curriculum & pedagogy	10. How do you see the present teaching methods, assessment and curriculum as meeting the needs of your child? Please explain your answer.
	11. Can IT play a role and improve outcomes for students with learning difficulties? How can computer and IT skills be made easier and more accessible to your child?
	12. Does mentoring for either teachers or students occur in your school? How effective has any mentoring been? What are the obstacles to mentoring in your child's school?
	13. Do you think that your child has a preferred way of learning? Please explain your answer.

	14. What do you believe makes a good teacher for your child.?
	15. How do you feel that the school has equipped students with learning difficulties for their future study and/or employment? Please explain your answer.
Teacher training & professional development	16. How appropriate are teachers' knowledge and training to meet the needs of your child in class? Please explain.
Inclusion	17. How do see your child fitting into the wider school community? How comfortable are you about being involved with the school community? Please explain.
	18. Do you feel that your child is given leadership and mentoring opportunities in your school? Please explain.

Appendix 5.3

Theoretical base	Student questions
Background	1. What grade are you in? How long have you been at this school? 2. What subjects do you take? Which ones do you like? Why?
Collaboration	3. Do your parents approach the school or your teachers on your behalf about your work or your behaviour? How does this make you feel? 4. What are the ways in which you can see teachers about your work in and out of class? Do these ways help you?
Knowledge & attitude	5. Have teachers or the administration done anything to help you with problems at school? 6. What do you find that you and your teachers have the most difficulty with in school? 7. How do you think that your classes could be improved for you?
Curriculum & pedagogy	8. Do you feel that computers are of any help to you in improving your results at school? How do you think computer and IT skills could be made easier and more available to you? 9. How do you feel if you receive extra help in class, are withdrawn from class or have changes made to your assessment? Could you explain why you feel that way? 10. Think of a teacher you have or have had that you believe is a good teacher. What kind of things make them a good teacher? How have they helped you? 11. Who was the person who helped you in school the most? How have they helped you? 12. How do you feel about the idea of further study after school and/or finding employment? What has the school done to help you? 13. What ways don't you like to learn in class? What ways do you like to learn? Do they happen?
Inclusion	14. How do you and your friends fit into the school? Are there any

particular groups of kids that you avoid? Which kids? What kind of school organised things do you like to be involved with outside of class time?

15. Have you any particular class or school responsibilities that you have been selected for or volunteered to do? What are they?