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9-7-2017

## “It helps if you are a loud person”: Listening to the Voice of a School Student with a Vision Impairment

Jill Opie

Monash University, Australia., [jill.opie@monash.edu](mailto:jill.opie@monash.edu)

Jane Southcott

Monash University, Australia, [jane.southcott@monash.edu](mailto:jane.southcott@monash.edu)

Joanne Deppeler

Monash University, Australia, [joanne.deppeler@monash.edu](mailto:joanne.deppeler@monash.edu)

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### Recommended APA Citation

Opie, J., Southcott, J., & Deppeler, J. (2017). “It helps if you are a loud person”: Listening to the Voice of a School Student with a Vision Impairment. *The Qualitative Report*, 22(9), 2369-2384. <https://doi.org/10.46743/2160-3715/2017.2963>

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### **Abstract**

Students with vision impairment who attend mainstream secondary schools in Australia may not experience education as an inclusive and positive experience. This study of one senior secondary student with vision impairment provides a rare opportunity to give voice and provide understandings of the experience from the perspective of the student. The research question that drove this study was: What is the experience of mainstream schooling for a student with a vision impairment? The participant in this Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis study was Edward (pseudonym), a student in his final year of secondary schooling. Edward encountered significant barriers to inclusion, specifically teaching, technology, administrative inflexibility, and restricted social engagement. The participant has become resilient with a strong sense of self and has developed a range of personal strategies to address his challenges. It is evident that Edward was rarely asked about his needs and perceptions, rather decisions were made for and about him by those without a vision impairment. Educators require a clearer understanding of vision impairment and the impact that their often unintentionally exclusionary teaching practices may have on the educational experiences of their students.

### **Keywords**

Disability, Vision Impairment, Inclusive Education, Barriers, Secondary Schooling, Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis, Student Voice

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## **“It helps if you are a loud person”: Listening to the Voice of a School Student with a Vision Impairment**

Jill Opie, Jane Southcott, and Joanne Deppeler  
Monash University, Melbourne, Victoria, Australia

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*Students with vision impairment who attend mainstream secondary schools in Australia may not experience education as an inclusive and positive experience. This study of one senior secondary student with vision impairment provides a rare opportunity to give voice and provide understandings of the experience from the perspective of the student. The research question that drove this study was: What is the experience of mainstream schooling for a student with a vision impairment? The participant in this Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis study was Edward (pseudonym), a student in his final year of secondary schooling. Edward encountered significant barriers to inclusion, specifically teaching, technology, administrative inflexibility, and restricted social engagement. The participant has become resilient with a strong sense of self and has developed a range of personal strategies to address his challenges. It is evident that Edward was rarely asked about his needs and perceptions, rather decisions were made for and about him by those without a vision impairment. Educators require a clearer understanding of vision impairment and the impact that their often unintentionally exclusionary teaching practices may have on the educational experiences of their students. Keywords: Disability, Vision Impairment, Inclusive Education, Barriers, Secondary Schooling, Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis, Student Voice*

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### **Introduction**

At the time of writing there are approximately 357,000 Australians who are blind or have vision impairment and it is estimated that by 2030 this number will have risen to 564,000 (Butler, Holloway, Marriott, & Goncu, 2016). Australia espouses an inclusive education approach that promotes the “equal and active participation of all people with disability” (Forlin, Chambers, Loreman, Deppeler, & Sharma, 2013, p. 6) but hurdles to achieving inclusive education remain (Slee, 2013). UNESCO (2005) defines inclusion as “a dynamic approach of responding positively to pupil diversity and of seeing individual differences not as problems, but as opportunities for enriching learning” (p. 12). Inclusive education programs facilitate and accommodate the curricular, social, and physical needs of all students including those with disabilities (Brown, Packer, & Passmore, 2013). It is a tenet of educational equity that equal treatment is not the same as equal opportunity to learn (Artiles & Kozleski, 2016) and the unique learning needs of all students should be recognized (Nieto & Bode, 2012).

Few studies have explored how students with disabilities view the equity and quality of their education (Byrnes & Rickards, 2011; Redgrove, Jewell, & Ellison, 2016) and research reporting the views of those with vision impairment is limited (Jessup, Bundy, Broom, & Hancock, 2017; Opie & Southcott, 2015, 2016; Thurston, 2014; Whitburn & O’Connor, 2011). Although there is no official statistic for the number of school age children with vision impairment in Australia, it is estimated to be around 4000, with a vast majority attending mainstream schools (Media Access Australia, 2013). Decisions about the provision of programs and facilities for students with vision impairment are often made by those who have not experienced vision impairment and it is argued that educational research should seek the

voices of young people with disabilities (Ainscow, 2012; Jones, 2014; Moss, 2013). Doing so offers students a sense of empowerment and the opportunity to be included in the decisions that affect their education (Adderley, Hope, Hughes, Jones, Messiou, & Shaw, 2015; Messiou, 2012).

Most information received by the brain occurs through the visual (Hyerle, 2009) and often students with vision impairments must learn via alternate media and their other senses (American Foundation for the Blind, 2016). It is recognised that a long-standing difficulty encountered by students with vision impairment has been in accessing educational materials, including class materials and textbooks. In recent years, the situation should have improved “as materials are increasingly available in electronic format, enabling vision-impaired students to access textual content with adaptive technologies, such as screen or braille readers” (Butler, Holloway, Marriott, & Goncu, 2016, p. 1). To participate fully in classes students need to be able to access print materials but for those with vision impairment this remains difficult, often requiring alternative and often awkward and time consuming methods (Shinohara & Tenenberg, 2009). Students with a vision impairment may incorrectly appear to have a lower academic ability than their sighted peers because they need (and may not receive) additional time to complete work (Opie & Southcott, 2016). As students progress through their schooling, visual learning demands and overall workload increase significantly (Khadka, Ryan, Margrain, Woodhouse, & Davies, 2012). Students with vision impairments may experience isolation from their classmates, which limits their potential to consult with their peers regarding work requirements, resources, and a sense of how much effort others are putting into particular tasks (Opie & Southcott, 2015). In developed countries like Australia, schools frequently provide students with vision impairments specialist equipment and assistive technologies but this is often under-used by teachers who may lack expertise with both equipment and programs (Brown, Packer, & Passmore, 2013; Griffin-Shirley, Parker, Smith, & Zhou, 2011). Students with vision impairment may also reject assistive technologies in the belief that it makes them stand out when they would rather fit in with their peers (Thurston, 2014). Alternatively, some students may view the use of technologies as symbolising competence and independence (Söderström & Ytterhus, 2010).

Students with vision impairment encounter specific challenges in subjects where educational material is presented in visual formats (Bardin & Lewis, 2008; Supalo, Isaacson, & Lombardi, 2013), and in the more visual subjects including science and physical education (Haegele, Zhu, & Davis, 2016; Lieberman, Houston-Wilson, & Kozub, 2002). Alternative access strategies are needed but not always available, particularly if teachers have stereotypical understandings about students’ abilities (Kumar, Ramasamy, & Stefanich, 2001; Rule, Stefanich, Boody, & Peiffer, 2011). The experience of being a student with a vision impairment attending a mainstream secondary school in Australia may not be an inclusive and positive one. This study provides a rare opportunity to give voice and provide understandings of the experience from the perspective of one senior secondary student with vision impairment. The research question that drove this study was: What is the experience of mainstream schooling for a student with a vision impairment?

## **Methods**

This interpretative phenomenological single participant study explores the retrospective insider understandings of a student with vision impairment about his schooling. It has long been recognised that “one good case can illuminate the working of a social system” (Gluckman, 1961, p. 9) and this research explores the case of one senior secondary student with vision impairment. Rigorous single-subject research may reveal the unexpected and offer evidence and advice for educational practice (Horner, Carr, Halle, McGee, Odom, & Wolery, 2005;

Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009). Foundational to this study is a phenomenological understanding that reality for our participant is subjective, perceptual and constructed (Oleson, 1990). We selected interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) because it is concerned with how an individual understands his or her life-world within a specific context (Larkin, Watts, & Clifton, 2006; Smith, 2011) through “telling their own stories in their own words” (Reid, Flowers, & Larkin, 2005, p. 18). IPA researchers offer “an interpretative account of what it means for the participant to have such concerns within their particular context” (Larkin et al., 2006, p. 113) and in relation to wider social, cultural, and theoretical contexts. This approach develops “rich descriptions of how individuals think and feel about the challenges they face” (Smith, Brewer, Eatough, Stanley, Glendinning, & Quarrell, 2006, p. 487).

Ethical approval was gained from our university to undertake this research. We sought potential participants from Guide Dogs Victoria via their newsletter seeking any student attending a mainstream secondary school who was interested in opting into our study. Guide Dogs provide mobility instruction to students with vision impairment and advise their schools about access issues. Our participant, given the pseudonym Edward, responded to this information and author Opie arranged to meet with him at a mutually convenient time and place. The first two interviews were completed at his school and the third interview was at a café as Edward had completed his schooling. At the time of the first interview Edward was 18 years old but by the time of the third interview, he was 19. Data were gathered via semi-structured interviews that allowed Edward to discuss his experiences and understandings in detail (Larkin et al., 2006). The first interview established rapport with the participant and asked about his experience of schooling. The second asked him to delve deeper into his experiences and the third encouraged him to reflect on the meaning the experiences held (Kvale, 2009; Seidman, 1998). The interviews were audio recorded and then transcribed by author Opie. The participant was offered the opportunity to confirm the audio recordings but declined.

The interview data were initially coded independently by researchers Opie and Southcott. Independent analysis of the same transcripts has the potential to increase trustworthiness and reach thematic consensus (Rodham, Fox, & Doran, 2015). We each read and re-read the transcripts and then made marginal coding notes that recorded initial impressions. From this coding, emergent themes were identified (Southcott & Joseph, 2015). At this point we met together to negotiate shared understanding of the data. Next, the authors jointly discussed the emergent themes and then grouped them into broader categories that were hierarchically prioritised; unrelated matters were discarded and overarching themes generated. Throughout the research we bracketed prior understandings and assumptions, and adopted an open, curious and simultaneously critically self-aware position (Finlay, 2013; Tufford & Newman, 2010). In this process reflexivity is intertwined with bracketing and “something of a dance occurs [in which] researchers must wage a continuous, iterative struggle to become aware of, and then manage, pre-understandings and habitualities that inevitably linger” (Finlay, 2008, p. 1). An outcome of this “dance” can be heightened understanding and unanticipated revelation.

Jill Opie is a mainstream secondary school teacher who has worked with students with vision impairment throughout her career, often finding herself in a position of mediating between student and school. She is currently completing her doctorate that includes a number of phenomenological studies concerning students with vision impairments. Jane Southcott has undertaken many phenomenological studies that focus on issues of inclusion in learning across the lifespan. Joanne Deppeler is a qualified educational psychologist and teacher. She has extensive experience researching students experiencing learning challenges that result from personal or social circumstances and other areas of disadvantage. Joanne and Jane are the supervisors of Jill.

After reaching consensus, the writing began. Direct quotations are included to present the participant's voice (Pringle, Drummond, McLafferty, & Hendrey, 2011).

## Results

### The Participant

Edward was selected for this study because he volunteered to be involved and talk to us about his experience of living with vision impairment. He was born with bilateral coloboma (a hole in one of the structures of the eye). He has no vision in his right eye, his left is poor and he has nystagmus (involuntary eye movement). Visual fatigue increases his nystagmus, reduces his visual acuity and increases the likelihood of headaches. Edward explained that his mother chose his school because he would only need to attend one campus for his thirteen years of schooling. Our understanding of Edward was informed by documents shared with us by his school's Head of the Education Support Unit (HoES). These included school reports, ophthalmologist reports, Guide Dog Victoria and Visiting Teacher (VT) reports, and examination entitlements. Edward reads books/worksheets with his body bent over and head tilted closely to the page. Edward was happy for us to have this information and to talk briefly with his HoES. We did this to gather background information, recording and transcribing the discussion.

The HoES explained that the VT provided Edward access to special resources including large print and electronic texts/materials, and assisted him with organizing work. The VT spoke to Edward's teachers at the beginning of the school year and provided some notes regarding his access requirements for print and graphics, lighting needs, social skills, adaptive technology and test and exam provisions. Edward was proactive regarding his requirements. He explained that each year he addressed the teachers to explain what he could and could not do, for example he preferred all written work enlarged to Arial 18. The HoES felt that because Edward presents so well "for the most part ... you forget that Edward is even there with a disability." Edward used the Mimio (a portable tool which is mounted to a whiteboard and allows notes and drawings to be saved directly onto a computer) throughout his schooling even though it was old technology.

Guide Dogs Victoria advised the school about safety measures and assisted Edward so that he could negotiate his way around the school with confidence, and travel safely and independently in familiar or unfamiliar environments. Concerning mobility, the HoES recalled that,

When I first met him ... he comes flying down, without falling. I'm talking running down the stairs, quicker than a lot of the other kids, in this tiny dark little staircase area then running off in another direction and I thought ok, you're going to be ok.

Edward commented that, "I learnt very early how to move quite quickly, I can run around. Worst case scenario you run into the wall and laugh at yourself. A sense of humour always helps." Edward's statement reveals he has no restricting fear of hurting himself, and it was clear to researcher Opie during the interview that he moves with sureness and confidence.

The HoES said that socially "Edward always put himself out there. Kids respected his humour and respected the fact that he could always come up with an answer, even if it was something quite out of left field." She described his social interaction with the other students and teachers, stating "he was not alone at lunchtimes. He was never one we had to worry about. He was a full participant in every imaginable aspect of the school, except for sport." From Year

9, whenever sport was timetabled, Edward attended Education Support. The HoES thought that “he could not participate much as they mostly do ball games and he cannot play ball games of course.” Edward summed up the situation,

I wasn't too prepared to put much effort or interest into the PE department and strangely enough they weren't prepared to put too much interest and effort into me and we seemed to get along just fine under that understanding.

His involvement in physical education remained at an impasse except when he did rowing in summer.

### **Edward's Experience**

Edward's experiences and understandings are presented under four headings: Edward's view of himself, Support received, Engaging with technology, and Forming and maintaining social relationships. Each of these explores different facets of Edward's understanding of his experience of mainstream schooling.

#### *Edward's view of himself*

To the interviewer (Jill Opie) Edward presented as a confident and articulate young man. Opie was impressed by his self-assurance and strong sense of self. He was chatty, amusing and talked easily throughout. He was knowledgeable about his condition. The first question asked was about his preference about how he wanted to be described:

Interviewer: Do you consider yourself to be a person with a vision impairment or a vision impaired person?

Edward: It doesn't super bother me. I guess probably I prefer the vision impaired thing be more as an afterthought or a footnote.

Edward wanted to be accepted as if he were “just one of the boys”. His aim was to appear as “one of the normal crowd”, and he believes that he “projects” being sighted. He stated that, “If I really want to I can reasonably fake full-sightedness.” He continued, “To a very unobservant person, I would say I have enough vision to pass as a sighted person most of the time. The second they ask me to read something, though ...” He laughed, fully aware of how his limitations would become quite obvious.

Edward thinks that he has strength of character, and explained that “it helps if you are a loud person. You make sure you have bit more of a persona.” He reflected that it may have made him “a bit more of an abrasive person” who is “not afraid to stand up to anybody really” and laughingly added “there are very few people left around that don't have a very solid idea of what my opinion of them is. Perhaps that's a problem.” He asserted that he is not intimidated by others, nor afraid of openly giving his opinion but it is possible that by not noticing visual cues, he misses the effect he has on others.

Edward projected a confidence in doing things that may not be supported by his actions. He stated that public transport “has not really been a big thing ... I will use it if I really have to” but he was driven to and from school every day, relying on his mother to drive him about. Public transport is available but he hoped her driving will continue when he is at university until he can find another student to drive him. His understated reliance on his parents was

apparent, but it seems that Edward saw it as his choice rather than a reflection of lack of confidence or ability.

When asked what he found to be the biggest negative of having a vision impairment, Edward emphatically replied,

I won't be able to drive a car – if I had to pick out one thing that really stands out that would be it. That being said though, driverless cars are going to happen very quickly, and to paraphrase the Prime Minister, there has never been a more exciting time to be a vision impaired person [Laughs].

His desire for a driverless car may reflect his wish for greater independence and self-sufficiency. He reflected on his disability that, “for me it is just not really an issue ... you get dealt the cards you get dealt and you can either sit there and whinge about it and not do anything or just work with it.”

Edward's confidence in his ability to achieve was also evident. Regarding subject choices for year 12, he asserted that, “I chose the subjects pretty much on what my passions were, not on what best suited because of my vision impairment.” He was in no doubt about his ability to succeed academically, completing a Victorian Certificate of Education unit most successfully a year early in Year 11. His aspirations were high, aiming for a commerce-arts degree at a prestigious university which would require a high entry score. He concluded, “I have been able to stand on my own two feet. From a very young age my vision has not really been seen as a key thing but just going about life as normal.”

### *Support received*

Edward spoke about the support he has received from external agencies and from his school. He considered support from some agencies less than desirable after attending a state run facility that provides resources and events for students with vision impairment:

I only went once and didn't ever go again because, and this is probably going to be quite a controversial statement, but I thought a lot of people running it had a lot of trouble distinguishing between the idea of a vision impairment and a mental impairment to be perfectly blunt. I can't see properly but I can think perfectly well thank you!

Having made a decision, he never attended again.

Edward thought that the support he received from VTs was “very hit and miss ... some have very set ideas of how you are going to cope with vision impairment, what technologies you're going to use, even down to what type of pen you are going to write with!” Edward believed that the VTs felt that they knew what was best for him, even though they were not themselves vision impaired. He felt that to justify their role VTs needed him to not cope in some way.

I guess the fact that I was coping, to be brutally honest, was the issue, 'cos they have trouble – I don't really know why. I don't really know what the justification in their head is – they just don't see the possibility that you are really coping, and that is so annoying.

He did not recall being asked what he wanted very often, rather he was told what he should do or use. He recalled an instance when the VT commented that he did “an awful lot of

extracurricular stuff ... and really, seriously need to cut back on everything I do, extra.” He continued, “Out of sheer determinedness I have pretty much done everything, just sort of making a point. Yeah well, guess what! I can!” Edward presented as defiant and determined to do as he wants, and exuded the confidence that he knows what is best. Edward recognised that VTs could have helped him with touch typing but this did not happen. He also pointed out that they failed to keep him updated with the latest technology.

Edward made positive statements about the school’s support, but it appears that it could have been more effective as some issues were avoided rather than addressed. Although teachers were made aware of Edward’s need for worksheets and printed material to be in Arial 18, teachers routinely forgot. He explained that,

Generally, everyone was obsessed with blowing things up to A3 which is not a very workable option. You end up with unmanageable A3 sheets and to find stuff is just impossible. By the time you get to the end of the year you just have a pile of paper and I swear I have thrown out a good forest’s worth. It is just ridiculous. I am sure one day I will make a chiropractor very, very wealthy.

Again, Edward revealed his sense of humour. He was not happy with the situation but did not dwell on it nor apportion blame. He stated that some teachers were “chronic” in forgetting even to enlarge notes to A3 which “was annoying if you had to go down to the photocopying room to get things blown up, which was probably done in excess of 5000 times!” This meant missing class time. When asked why he thought teachers did not prepare better, he replied, “I guess it seemed to be a massive imposition.” When asked about the use of enlarged texts he expounded,

I have had giant text books. Bigger than A4 with enlarged text. Entire texts are huge. You need a second locker to store them. A maths text may come in ten volumes! Apart from the weight issue, they are hard to work with on a desk so I generally sit alone.

The texts and technologies that he used restricted his ability to socialize in class.

Edward’s favourite teachers were into technology, often presenting their material using different formats such as PowerPoint or Publisher, which he could easily access. He described the teacher who best catered to his vision impairment, “a really clever woman and on top of all that she was always really organized. She always had everything ready for class blown up.” He added, “Another teacher was also good, not as reliable but ... everything she presented was in these immaculate PowerPoint presentations which I could access.” Edward was well aware that he could have done more to make his work easier. He explained that,

I am a slow touch typist, not as fast as I probably should be because I am lazy. But I enjoy hand writing, a dying art, and I enjoy it. [Laughing] I do take notes. Everything on the board is just reiterating what is said so you are able to catch most of it just by ear. Some of my shorthand is quite appalling, but I can get it down and I can read my own hand writing. I think my good memory maybe has helped. Generally, I have been able to bluff my way through most things.

Reading and vision fatigue could also be problematic. Edward recalled that,

Recently I was in the drama so I was up late and I also had a 3000-word SAC [School Assessed Coursework requirement] to do. The next week everything

came crushing down. I do have nystagmus which becomes quite pronounced when I have done too much. This happened. I get headaches etc. I have to deal with it by sleeping really, it's the only way, just sleep.

### *Engaging with technology*

Edward has benefitted from the school's willingness to try various options for accessing work in the classroom but there was no one overseeing the introduction of new technologies. In Grade 1 he was introduced to a "device called the Mimio, which attaches to the board, and using infra-red pens captures what is on the board so you can see it on your computer screen." He has persevered with the Mimio but acknowledges its limitations as it takes time to set up, the device often slides down the board, and both the pens and the batteries run out. Edward was encouraged to file the images captured from Mimio in topics, to transcribe or type up notes from the images, and maintain a workbook of notes for each subject. Edward admitted that he does not do this because it took too much time and "was like doing a class over again." Edward thought that mathematics had been the most difficult subject to access because it was "very much based on watching the board and watching the examples being solved in the 'there and then'." Edward has used the Mimio throughout his schooling although other technologies might have been available. He feels that he is managing but could be more organized.

Edward only started using an iPad in his final school year. This was his own initiative. He explained that

We got it for mum to use then we realized that it had lots of really good applications for school and was really, really helpful. I have bought the eBooks for literature rather than the actual books, and there is an application that allows me to highlight and add a sticky note so you can just write all your notes. I can make technology work for me and use it quite easily.

By using the iPad Edward gained greater independence in accessing information. He only needed to carry his iPad and notebook instead of a heavy bag of equipment. Edward could have been introduced to this technology much earlier by the school or VT. When asked who was his go-to person for technology he replied, "to be perfectly honest I keep my eye on what goes on myself and decide what works for me." Because of his relatively poor typing skills, Edward prefers to write in examinations, and was granted generous extra time allowances but this was problematic, as trying to read and write for six hours puts strain on his eyes. For him to compete more equitably his word processing skills should have been a priority. He was not introduced to voice activation software.

### *Forming and maintaining social relationships*

Edward justified sitting alone at the front of the class because the equipment and enlarged texts take up space. He explained that, "I am one of those people that chronically sit up at the front of the room which is for some reason not the most popular place in the world." Although unable to read from the board he sits at the front, knowing that this is an isolating position. He acknowledged that the proximity of the teacher may be a contributing factor. He admitted that he did at times feel isolated.

Edward named two boys he considered friends, Luke and John, who went through Junior school with him. Luke and Edward "really enjoy talking about politics, like literature and we are both in the debating team." Edward only sees Luke socially "during the holidays maybe as we see each other at school during the term." If Edward has academic concerns, he

is “pretty organized for that sort of stuff but generally if I needed to talk to someone, then with John.” Concerning friends outside of school, Edward explained that “I generally chat with people on Facebook.” He added “I realize now that my friendship group is really small.” When asked about parties, Edward responded that, “I definitely have not been to as many as a lot of people in my year group but that is probably more for the fact that the people I am friendly with were bit more of a quiet bunch.” In fact, he could not recall being invited to any party.

Edward did not mention feeling lonely at school as he kept himself busy with numerous extra-curricular activities such as the choir, drama and debating at lunchtimes, thus ensuring that he was not alone at these times. He has also been a member of the school cadets, attended school camps and went with the school on an overseas trip to NASA. There was another student with a vision impairment and a slight cerebral palsy at Edward’s school but he did not want to socialise with him. He explained,

I didn’t feel the need to get to know him, but he did seem to have the need to know me. It is an interesting idea why I didn’t but I think it was a personality thing. I didn’t feel I needed his company.

Edward recounted once attending a support skills program for students with vision impairment at an external agency. He said that, “It was a good day and you got to meet a whole heap of other vision impaired people from across the state ... you got to play swish [modified table tennis], which is fun. He “really enjoyed having contact with other vision impaired people” but refused to attend similar functions after the unsatisfactory event described earlier.

When asked to reflect on whether he felt the school had been fair and inclusive, Edward was measured in his response:

The school has, to the best of the ability that can be done, made it fair for me. Has the school be able to make it totally equal? I don’t really know. I couldn’t really say. Because at the end of the day you can never really say what my life would have been like if I were fully sighted you know and all the flow-ons from that. I am able to hold my own against the rest of my cohort so I figure that you know, it must be doing something right. I guess I am very privileged to go to a very well-resourced school. I did everything there.

### **Discussion and Conclusion**

Edward had a clear understanding of his vision impairment. He could explain the effects of his condition and the accommodations required in the classroom and at school. Through his narratives and our interpretation, we have generated a fine-grained, interpretative account. To further this, we have selected theories of self-esteem to offer a theoretical perspective. Doing so is within the tenets of IPA (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2012). We did not begin this study from a theoretical stance, rather meaning is generated inductively from the data and in discussion, theory can be useful. As with our participant, a student’s ability to define and articulate his or her condition combined, academic situation and visual acuity impacts self-esteem and self-acceptance (Griffin-Shirley & Nes, 2005; Guerette, Lewis, & Mattingly, 2011). Childhood experiences that contribute to healthy self-esteem include being listened to, being spoken to respectfully, receiving appropriate attention and affection and having accomplishments recognized and mistakes or failures acknowledged and accepted (Tuttle & Tuttle, 2004). During school-aged years, academic achievement is a significant contributor to self-esteem development (Baumeister, Campbell, Krueger, & Vohs, 2003). The ability to compare oneself with peers is important in shaping students’ self-esteem and influences the positive or negative

feelings students have about themselves. Through adolescence, peer influence becomes increasingly important, with successful relationships among friends significant in the development of high self-esteem for children (Cambra & Silvestre, 2003; Tuttle & Tuttle, 2004). Without the ability to read the visual clues and share learning with peers, students with vision impairment are disadvantaged in their schooling.

Edward has caring supportive parents who have clear expectations for their son. They sent him to an expensive academic private school to ensure he had educational stability and the best opportunity to achieve. Students in elementary school who have high self-esteem tend to have caring, supportive parents (Isberg et al., 1989; Raboteg-Saric & Sakic, 2014). Edward was well aware of the expectations of both his parents and of the school to do his best. He availed himself of many extra-curricular activities, satisfying not only a desire to interact with peers but also to challenge himself. His willingness to try new things showed in his participation in many extra-curricular activities. Edward has a good voice which gave him kudos in the choir and would have added to his self-esteem. The school encouraged his self-agency with their expectation that he speaks to his teachers at the beginning of each school year. Edward's school reports show that he was achieving well academically. He appears to have satisfied both criteria for self-esteem in Maslow's *Hierarchy of Human Needs* (Maslow, 1987). Edward perceived both respect from others in the form of recognition, success, and admiration, and self-respect in the form of self-love, self-confidence, skill, or aptitude.

Edward described having a fairly limited social group, with rather more acquaintances than friends, but he does not appear to have had undue issues with social rejection or bullying. This may be because many of the boys at school have known Edward since Preparatory class. Edward has developed a persona of a loud, opinionated, able young man. He is not afraid to voice his opinions, even if at the expense of offending others. He justifies being loud and bold as being a way to be seen as more than "the kid who is vision impaired." Students integrate social identity into their own self-concept in school by assessing their position among peers, interpreting their own feelings and abilities from feedback received from parents, teachers, and peers (Gest, Rulison, Davidson, & Welsh, 2008; Leflot, Onghena, & Colpin, 2010). The development of a sense of self influences academic achievement, social and emotional competence, well-being and personality development (Elksnin & Elksnin, 2006; Hadley, Hair, & Moore, 2008; Trautwein, Ludtke, Marsh, & Nagy, 2009), with the possession of a positive self-concept seen as a key variable in students' school success (Datta & Talukdar, 2015; Swanson, 2003). Edward appeared to take his vision impairment in his stride but this may have an element of refuting his disability. He may believe that if he adheres to the "norm" he will be more accepted.

Edward did not want to be friends with the other boy with vision impairment attending his school. It could be argued that his desire to be perceived as "normal" results in him distancing himself from another who is "different" (Crocker et al., 1987; Garcia, Tor, & Gonzalez, 2006). A person's self-concept is essentially influenced by the ways in which he or she perceives significant others in the environment (Corcoran, Crusius, & Mussweiler, 2011; Festinger, 1954). Edward's strong sense of identity contradicts research that argues that students with vision impairment typically have low self-concepts based on how they compared themselves with sighted peers (Datta & Talukdar, 2015). When Edward compared himself with his sighted peers, he assessed himself favourably and did not see himself to be so different.

It appears that Edward felt a strong sense of belonging at the school and participates in as many activities as possible. He believed he is accepted by his peers in these pursuits. For example, his confidence to be on stage reflected his sense of belonging and of safety that others would help if needed. Edward felt part of the group. He was not a reluctant participant, and regarded other members of the groups as friends, although they do not appear to be close. He felt privileged to attend the school and aimed to make the most of the opportunities given.

Edward was supported by his mother who always made herself available to collect him from the school at whatever time required. This sense of safety, support and belonging may have helped give him the confidence he exudes, and the sense of his right to be as one with his peers. It is not that he wishes not to be vision impaired – this he knows he has no alternative but to live with – but he strongly believed he can be perceived as sighted and thus sees himself as an equal in a sighted community. He accepted some accommodations may be required for equity. He may have few close friends but we sensed that this is partly by choice. He is bold and unafraid of saying what he thinks to people for fear they may withhold friendship, seeming to support research that indicates a certain level of confrontation and betrayal is essential for a healthy friendship, with a fear of confrontation reflecting a fear of losing friends (Hartup, 1993; Lifshitz et al., 2007). Edward seemed comfortable with who he is, and had a strong sense of where he is heading in life.

Acceptance and belonging are central tenets of effective inclusion (Jones, 2005, 2014). Inclusion is about community, meaningful participation and belonging (McLeskley et al., 2010). When students' feel that they belong to a class, they become more engaged and enjoy greater school success (Shields, 2004). While the teacher/student relationship is clearly a crucial one, peer relationships have been shown to have a significant impact on the emotional well-being of students. While Edward seems to have managed with just a few friendships consolidated from his early years, he did regard the number of people he could call friends as less than he would have liked.

Sapp and Hatlen (2010) argue that students with vision impairment are less successful at school and under-represented in the workforce. Unlike much previous research concerning students with vision impairment, Edward's schooling has been successful. We ascribe Edward's success to several causes. His few friends are long-term friends from childhood. The school had high academic expectations that Edward was able to meet. The school also provided challenging extra-curricular activities that provided opportunities for interaction with peers. Edward has a strong concept of self as abled. He is fully aware that he has a disability but does not allow this to hinder his positivity and engagement. He has developed self-reliance. Edward knows how he learns and what technologies work for him. The implications for schools and agencies working with students with vision impairment are that expectations for success should be maintained and supported, challenge is necessary for student growth and engagement and that it is vital to listen to the voice of the student.

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### Author Note

Jill Opie is an experienced secondary school teacher of Mathematics/Science undertaking doctoral research studies. Her interest in students with disabilities stemmed from a desire for all students in her classroom to reach their potential. After further studies in Education (Special) she has held several positions of responsibility in mainstream schools in this area. Correspondence regarding this article can be addressed directly to: [jill.opie@monash.edu](mailto:jill.opie@monash.edu).

Dr Jane Southcott is an Associate Professor, Faculty of Education, at Monash University. Jane researches community engagement with the arts, inclusive practices and cultural identity focusing on positive ageing. Jane supervises many postgraduate research students. She is President of the Australian and New Zealand Association for Research in Music Education and on the editorial boards of international refereed journals. Correspondence regarding this article can also be addressed directly to: [jane.southcott@monash.edu](mailto:jane.southcott@monash.edu).

Professor Joanne Deppeler is Associate Dean of Research Degrees in the Faculty of Education at Monash University. As a qualified educational psychologist and teacher, she has spent most of her career in educational contexts, with a particular focus on students experiencing learning challenges. Joanne is committed to advancing theory, research and

practice in the field of inclusive education. Correspondence regarding this article can also be addressed directly to: [joanne.deppeler@monash.edu](mailto:joanne.deppeler@monash.edu).

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#### **Article Citation**

Opie, J., Southcott, J., & Deppeler, J. (2017). "It helps if you are a loud person": Listening to the voice of a school student with a vision impairment. *The Qualitative Report*, 22(9), 2369-2384. Retrieved from <http://nsuworks.nova.edu/tqr/vol22/iss9/7>

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