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## 4

# A self rejected: Childhood loneliness and the experience of alienation

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## Introduction: 'I would feel the guilt of loneliness'

Human life is characterized by the ebb and flow of togetherness. Birth itself is a separation, and throughout infancy, togetherness and separation dominate the emotional, cultural and identity formation of the person. There are – for children and adults alike – both 'good' and 'bad' versions of separation and of togetherness. 'Bad' separation may be experienced as loneliness, as bereavement, as rejection, as exile; 'good' separation may be experienced as exciting independence, freedom, or as growing up. Likewise, togetherness may be experienced as love or as troubling co-dependency, as a comfort or as a trap, as friendship or as abuse. Schools have arrival and departure ceremonies, formal and informal, as do workplaces and religious communities. Through the giving and taking away of citizenship, countries too recognize coming together and departing.

In this chapter, two quite distinct forms of separation are brought together: alienation and loneliness. These are both presented as central to the development of children's identity in the modern world with relevance for schools, families and virtual and 'irl' (in real life) communities. Loneliness is linked to alienation as the 'alienation-emotion', more often seen and described in literature than in academic research. The key characteristic that links them, and that is underplayed in many of the accounts of loneliness in particular, is self-rejection. My own research over recent decades (on ways in which schools can be communities, with 'community' defined in a specific way, Stern, 2001, 2009, 2018a) has led to research on how separation, in its positive and negative senses, can be hosted in such communities (Stern, 2013, 2014, 2018b; Stern and Walejko, 2020). The research – in the UK, Hong Kong in China, and across North America, Europe and Australia – has drawn on previous research in psychology (e.g. Margalit, 2010), literature (e.g. Lewis, 2009), philosophy (e.g. Koch, 1994) and theology (e.g. Williams, 2003), among other disciplines. However, on childhood loneliness, some of the best insights have been provided by children's literature rather than academic research. And it is the voices of children themselves that, along with children's literature, speak of a self rejected. Dominic, aged seven, for example, responded to a question asking how he would know he was lonely and said, 'I would feel the guilt of loneliness' (Stern, 2014: 24).

This chapter describes some of the key academic research, and children's literature, on childhood loneliness and how this relates to alienation. It is important that an account is given of how schools and homes can enable healthy solitude as part of their communal character and

how they can best host loneliness. The conclusion addresses the value of both togetherness and separation, and the value of research itself in a world prone to loneliness and alienation.

## Together and apart: Emerging personhood

A ‘self-judging’ person, in the sense described by Taylor (1989) as characteristic of ‘modern identity’, is in a peculiar position, one that leads to alienation. If I am being negatively judged by others, then I may accept or reject their judgement. But if I judge *myself* negatively, it is harder to escape that judgement. The modern world has become far more self-judging with young people in particular drawn into constant self-critique through social media. There is a great deal of competition between people (of all ages) and this competition is accompanied by competition with oneself: as self-judges, people are judging themselves more harshly than others might have judged them. As this modern ‘self’ has emerged, so has loneliness developed, in parallel to many approaches to alienation. To be lonely, latterly, includes a sense of self-rejection as well as a sense of separateness, and this is not – as in the early

Romantic accounts – mostly about physical isolation in ‘Nature’, but interpersonal isolation precisely while in company with others. Emotions such as loneliness have their own histories. A possible definition of the emotion of loneliness, up to the middle of the nineteenth century, might be something like ‘loneliness is pain accompanied by the idea of love that is now absent’ (Stern, 2014: 37–8). That initial definition is similar to that of the affect-plus-interpretation description of loneliness by Parkhurst and Hopmeyer (in Rotenberg and Hymel, 1999: 58). However, those forms of loneliness that also involve *self-rejection* need an extended definition and are potentially described as ‘pain accompanied by the idea of love that is now absent, when that pain is accompanied by self-rejection, for example because the absence is thought to be “deserved”’ (Stern, 2014: 182). The history of loneliness as an emotion is covered in considerable detail by Bound Alberti (2019). In this chapter, enough of its history is provided to argue that it is tied to modernity in general and to the capitalist industrialization of the nineteenth century in particular – Marx’s ‘ensemble of ... social relations’ (Marx, in Marx and Engels, 1970: 122) and the false consciousness (Lukács, 1920) that leads people to reject themselves.

The following section of this chapter will further explore loneliness as the alienation-emotion, especially as it is experienced in contemporary childhood. It is the communities experienced by children, notably households, friendship groups, communities (virtual and irl), and schools, in which identity is developed – and in which identities (‘selves’) may also be rejected. Loneliness, alienation and self-rejection are therefore intertwined with communities through the last 200 years and can best be understood alongside each other.

## Childhood loneliness and alienation

Literature on childhood alienation and loneliness is not as extensive as the literatures related to adulthood. Some researchers have denied that children suffer from loneliness: Rotenberg notes how some deny any loneliness exists prior to adolescence (in Rotenberg and Hymel, 1999: 5),

and he notes that there is little research literature on the topic prior to the 1980s (in Rotenberg and Hymel, 1999: 3). However, the foundations were laid in the psychotherapeutic literature of Winnicott (1964) and Bowlby (2005) in the 1960s and 1970s. Children's literature has been more forthcoming, for much longer. Classic tales for children such as *Marianne Dreams* (Storr, 1958) for older children, and *Where the Wild Things Are* (Sendak, 1963) and *Not Now, Bernard* (McKee, 1980) for younger children, are accounts of alienation and loneliness familiar to – and therefore popular with – children from a very young age. How children understand these books is a whole study in itself, as is the 'reader response' of all readers (Rosenblatt, 1994). For an author like Sendak, though, there is a sense – described by Lurie – in which the author 'is' a child: 'It is the particular gift of some writers to remain in a sense children all their lives: to continue to see the world as boys and girls see it and to take their side instinctively' (Lurie, 1990: 14). In Sendak's book, the narrative begins with the hero, Max, being rejected by his family (he is sent to his room), followed by his imaginative and violent 'wild rumpus' with the wild things. Although made their king, the wild rumpus soon palls, and loneliness emerges – cured by his reintegration into his family's meal.

And Max the king of all wild things was lonely and wanted to be where someone loved him best of all. Then all around from far away across the world he smelled good things to eat so he gave up being king of where the wild things are.

(Sendak, 1963)

As Lurie says, Sendak is able to suggest, directly to children (and usually without adults noticing), 'that children sometimes have violent, aggressive impulses toward their parents' (Lurie, 1990: 14). The book also describes, delicately, the loneliness that follows the violent feelings and the possibility of an escape from loneliness back into the family. The loneliness of Bernard (in McKee, 1980) is also stimulated by adult rejection (everyone is too busy to respond to his warnings of a monster), and this has a somewhat less happy ending, as Bernard is eaten by the monster he has tried to warn everyone about. Or perhaps he has *become* the monster in an act of self-monstering rather like the self-wilding in Sendak's story. And in *Marianne Dreams* (Storr, 1958), ten-year-old Marianne's isolation is the result of being ill and bed-ridden, leading to missing her school friends and creating a dreamworld with a magic pencil – a disturbing dreamworld itself populated by lonely places and people.

Yates (2009) writes for adults, although some of his stories may be read by adolescents or younger. He provides accounts of American loneliness that are eloquent and troubling and treats childhood and adult loneliness as equivalent. For example, Vincent Sabella, aged nine or ten, is the fictional anti-hero of Yates's masterly *Doctor Jack-o'-lantern*, the first of *Eleven Kinds of Loneliness* (Yates, 2009). Vincent is new to the school and finds himself lonely. Vincent's teacher makes the 'mistake' of befriending him ('I hope you'll consider *me* your friend,' she says, Yates, 2009: 486), and Vincent gets his revenge, to everyone's disadvantage. 'Perhaps', the teacher concludes, 'she should never have undertaken the responsibility of Vincent Sabella's loneliness' (Yates, 2009: 490). It is the self-destructive character of Vincent's revenge that captures the internal damage – what I will refer to as the self-rejection – of much modern loneliness and alienation. That is, indeed, what links all four stories cited here. The child (anti-)heroes are not only rejected by others: each has an element of self-rejection. Whether becoming wild or monstrous, or creating and trying to resolve a lonely dreamworld to escape the reality of a lonely

world of illness, or rejecting the help of a kindly teacher and thereby exacerbating the loneliness, all the children have an element of endangering themselves.

From the 1980s onwards, academic writers start to catch up. Bronfenbrenner (1986) writes of childhood and adolescent alienation. His account is of the danger of alienation from family, friends, school and work (referring to Saturday jobs, and also hobbies), caused most of all by the inability of US social policy to support single-parent families or families where two parents are both employed. Bronfenbrenner's description of alienation is not as complex as the descriptions from the nineteenth-century philosophers, but he does have an 'internal' dimension. 'What threatens the well-being of children and young people the most', he says, 'is that the external havoc can become internal, first for parents and then for their children' (Bronfenbrenner, 1986: 432). A similar account is given by the personal construct psychologist Salmon, who describes the problems of both the togetherness and the separation characterizing schools. For a few 'the gang represents a context of personal recognition', but many more 'feel alone and vulnerable in the heaving numbers in the playground or the lunch hall' creating a 'lonely crowd' which 'bestows no sense of collective belonging, but only anonymity and alienation' (Salmon, 1998: 32). Margalit describes the distress of childhood loneliness in terms of self-perception and describes 'not ... a dichotomy model (lonely/not lonely) but ... a dynamic multidimensional understanding of movement along continuums between loneliness, connectedness, and solitude within developmental paradigms' (Margalit, 2010: vii). There are at least four distinct kinds of loneliness. 'Emotional loneliness' is the 'distress' reflecting the 'lack ... or loss ... of intimately close persons'; 'social loneliness' is the result of 'the lack (or the loss) of satisfactory connections'; '[e]xistential loneliness' is 'a self-perception of personal isolation, ... related to feelings of personal meaninglessness, helplessness, isolation, aloneness, and loss of freedom'; '[r]epresentational loneliness' occurs with 'the awareness that the self can never be understood by others in its totality' (Margalit, 2010: 7–8). As with Parkhurst and Hopmeyer (in Rotenberg and Hymel, 1999: 58), the approaches of Bronfenbrenner and Margalit do not put self-rejection at the heart of alienation or loneliness but still have a sense of negative self-perception.

Galanaki provides a valuable account of togetherness and separation, drawing on Bowlby and Winnicott, saying that the teacher should be a 'reliable' and 'neutral' figure for children, rather than the 'friend' as described by Yates (above). 'The whole school environment performs a "holding" function, in which children feel free to "abandon" or "forget" themselves in the solitary state', with the teacher 'able to maintain his or her neutrality, to distance himself or herself from the students to the extent that he or she does not get over-involved in their relationships or interfere in each child's own personal or private space' (Galanaki, 2005: 131). It should be noted that schools are recommended to provide for separation and solitude, as well as togetherness. Without solitude opportunities, children are – oddly – more likely to suffer from loneliness. 'According to Winnicott', Galanaki says, 'the capacity to be alone ... enables the child to simply exist without having to react to external stimuli or act with a purpose; only in this way can the child discover his or her own personal life – that is, his or her true self' (Galanaki, 2005: 129). Galanaki implies that the alternative would be for the child to have a 'false' sense of self, one that can or should be rejected.

In my own research (Stern, 2014, see also Stern, 2013, 2018b, Stern et al., 2015), UK-based children described what it 'feels like' when they have been lonely, and how they knew the feeling

was of loneliness and not something else. One of the most vivid descriptions of loneliness was from Annie, aged seven: 'I felt like I didn't exist and I kept messing things up and I felt lost deep, deep deep down inside me and that hurt my feelings a lot.' (All quotations here are taken from Stern, 2014, and all original spelling is retained.) Many described being rejected, but some extended this to a sense of self-rejection. 'It feels like ... you're a pile of rubbish that people just sweep into the corner and forget about you,' says Linda (aged 12–13), and Eliza (aged 12–13) continues, '[I]t feels like a million people are telling you that you have no friends.' Much more explicit self-rejection is described by Sara, who says, 'Most of the time I feel regret, because I know I could have done something about it.' Becky (aged 12–13) says loneliness 'made me doubt myself and doubt my action'. Even clearer self-rejection is described by Dominic (aged 7) who, remarkably, would know when he feels lonely because 'I would feel the guilt of loneliness'. Amy (aged 50+), an adult in the same research, said that loneliness 'is accompanied by a profound sadness and self-rejection', while Rachel (aged 30–49) knows she is lonely 'when I begin to feel shame that I cannot share this feeling with anyone'. The seven-year-old Dominic's 'guilt' and the adult Rachel's 'shame' are not unique to loneliness: we can all feel guilt and shame for all kinds of reasons, and these are emotions that certainly pre-date modernity. What makes them most interesting, here, is that they are experienced as an element of loneliness because they involve self-rejection.

As the emerging self, in Taylor's (1989) account of modernity, is a 'doubled' self, setting itself up as its own judge, it becomes more possible to feel not only rejected by others, but rejected by oneself. Alienation in the nineteenth century was described as involving separation from other people and also from oneself. At the same time, a form of loneliness arose that included self-rejection. There therefore appear to be three dimensions of modern loneliness that are relevant to children and young people.

- Separation from others, which might be physical separation but is increasingly likely to be a sense of separation experienced precisely while with other people. This 'one-dimensional' loneliness would not really be 'loneliness' but more likely a form of solitude (Koch, 1994) or perhaps lonesomeness (Lewis, 2009).
- Separation plus a sense of rejection by others or a breakdown of a previous positive relationship. This 'two-dimensional' loneliness is more like the sense of rejection described by the early Romantic poets and coined earlier by Shakespeare – who said of the banished Coriolanus 'I go alone, / Like to a lonely Dragon, that his fen / Makes fear'd and talk'd of more than seen' (*Coriolanus*, Act IV, Scene 1). Coriolanus does not blame himself: he blames everyone else for his banishment. Such two-dimensional loneliness is the most common description of the emotion in empirical research on the topic.
- Separation, plus rejection by others, plus a sense of self-rejection. This 'three-dimensional' loneliness, as expressed by several young and adult respondents in the more recent research described above, involves the guilt or shame of self-rejection. That three-dimensional loneliness is, it is suggested, precisely the 'alienation-emotion', the emotion associated with the form of self-rejection described in mid-nineteenth-century accounts of alienation – alienation not simply from one's 'species being' (in Feuerbach, 1855) but from oneself as experienced in the social and economic situation of industrial capitalism (in Marx) and maintained by a 'false consciousness' (Lukács, 1920) of the situation.

It is worth considering distinctive current concerns as they affect alienation and loneliness. For O'Sullivan, the contemporary experience of young people online 'reproduces us as images back to us, blurring the lines between the metaphors of reproductive and therapeutic cloning and threatening all notions of "differentiation and identification" in the process, what once enabled us to discover the reasons for our own likes and dislikes' (O'Sullivan, 2019: 2). He describes this 'taking away' and 'giving back' of a person's image as a form of 'cloning', as it 'copies' a self in order to create a virtual self that appears as more real (and interacts more) than the original self. This 'mental cloning' (attributed to Baudrillard, in O'Sullivan, 2019: 2) involves the withering away of the original self, so that 'social media users are, in a sense, being cloned as "interconnected loners"' (O'Sullivan, 2019: 2). O'Sullivan is well aware of the historical development of loneliness, and his theory of 'cloneliness' resulting from social media use is very attractive – and can be connected to theories of alienation as our 'image', our very self, is taken from us in an online 'community'. To what extent, though, is this an additional dimension of loneliness, or a contemporary version of forms already well established?

O'Sullivan's empirical research with young people is focused on university students, and he writes well about student stress and how a generation of 'interconnected loners' is being created (O'Sullivan, 2019: 173). However, it is too easy to see young people as universally experiencing social media as alienating in this way: it 'is unhelpful ... to lament the rise of social media as an inevitable cause or repository of social ills ... [as] each new form of communication from the telegraph to the Internet has brought uncertainty and panic about its uses and abuses, as well as a presumption that "old ways" of sociability would be threatened ... [so] it's not what social media is, but how it is used that creates impact, for good or ill' (Bound Alberti, 2019: 128). There is some evidence that online discussions 'tend to be more frank and egalitarian than face-to-face meetings' and that 'computer-mediated communication is less hierarchical, more participatory, more candid, and less biased by status differences' so that '[w]omen, for example, are less likely to be interrupted in cyberspace discussions' (Putnam, 2000: 173). Of course, as Putnam recognizes, '[s]ome of the allegedly greater democracy in cyberspace is based more on hope and hype than on careful research' and '[t]he political culture of the Internet, at least in its early stages, is astringently libertarian, and in some respects cyberspace represents a Hobbesian state of nature, not a Lockean one' (Putnam, 2000: 173). But he goes on to note that '[b]oth the history of the telephone and the early evidence on Internet usage strongly suggest that computer-mediated communication will turn out to *complement*, not *replace*, face-to-face communities' (179). 'The most important question is not what the Internet will do to us, but what we will do with it' or, 'in short, how can we make the Internet a part of the solution?' (180). Indeed, before the telephone was invented, never mind the Internet, adults were worried about how the use of books might break up communities. Chaucer, in the fourteenth century, is so bookish that he describes himself being complained about: 'In stede of reste and newe thynges, / Thou goost hoom to thy hous anoon; / And also domb as any stoon, / Thou sittest at another book, / Tyl fully daswed is thy loke, / And lyvest thus as an heremyte' (Chaucer, from *The House of Fame*, quoted in Webb, 2007: 135). How many contemporary parents complain of their children to come home and look at their smartphones 'as dumb as a stone' until they look 'completely dazed' – stuck in their bedrooms 'like a hermit'?

So the relationship to social media was prefigured by relationships to books, more than 600 years ago. Some research with contemporary children and young people does not look as

dangerous as some of the more fearful writing on social media. An example can be given from the work with seventy children and young people (aged seven to sixteen) in my own research carried out in 2013–14, in which none mentioned computers or social media – either as causes of loneliness or as ‘cures’. The research was carried out within schools in conventional lesson time, and so perhaps the absence of the use of social media in such situations led the respondents to under-report online influences on loneliness or solitude. However, the complete absence of reference to media may yet indicate it has a ‘thinner’ influence than some other researchers and commentators fear.

When considering online communication, it is perhaps worth considering the ‘dimensions’ of dialogue, as well as the dimensions of loneliness. A person can be in dialogue ‘with the self’ and with people in the immediate vicinity. But thanks to various forms of communication technology (including books, as well as Internet-based technologies), it is possible to be in dialogue with people at a great distance in space and at a great distance in time. We can easily be in dialogue with people around the world (by phone as well as social media), and we can easily be in a dialogic relationship with ancient peoples, through their writings, along with their artwork and architecture. We can also attempt a dialogue with future generations: hence, the pleasure children get in creating ‘time-capsules’ for future generations to open. The issue for the use of social media then becomes whether it is used only to communicate among current people (of roughly the same age) and people of similar views and living in similar circumstances, or whether it is used to communicate across boundaries with ‘different’ people and with people from different times. There is indeed a risk, and some evidence of a very high risk, that online dialogue is mostly ‘horizontal’ in its reach only to similar people living similarly. In these circumstances, the task for adults and for anyone wishing to avoid the ‘cloneliness’ of social media is to look for opportunities to cross boundaries of space, time and viewpoints online.

It is in the light of three-dimensional loneliness, and its association with alienation, that communities – especially homes, schools and online communities – should consider how to host and mitigate and, it is hoped, reduce the incidence of loneliness. That is the topic of the following section of this chapter.

## Enabling community and healthy solitude

There are many implications of this account of alienation and loneliness for the development of culture and identity in homes, schools and communities. The focus here is on schools, in part because this has been the focus of my own research, but more importantly because schools are sites of professional responsibility for the personal and social development of children and young people. It is schools that families and communities may reasonably look to for carefully planned ‘education’ in its broadest sense: the intentional development of ‘better people’ (Noddings, in Stern, 2016: 28) by teachers who are society’s ‘professional adults’ (Waller, in Lawrence-Lightfoot, 2003: 30).

One of the first tasks is to distinguish between different forms of ‘aloneness’: some (such as loneliness) are necessarily problematic, others (what can be called ‘healthy solitude’) may be not only positive experiences but also necessary for avoiding loneliness. Loneliness and alienation are



personal (to the individual experiencing them) *and* social (related to others and to social structures beyond the immediate environment of home and school). Neither loneliness nor alienation can be dealt with ‘on their own’: a lonely child is not necessarily ‘cured’ by being put with other people, and loneliness is not an entirely independent emotion that can be tackled without reference to other issues of culture and identity, and ethical, social and economic structures. Given these implications, this section of the chapter will explore three distinct ways in which loneliness and alienation may best be hosted, mitigated and perhaps reduced, firstly through the promotion of ‘community’ of a particular kind, secondly, through reclaiming and teaching healthy solitude, and thirdly through teaching and hosting loneliness itself. These – especially the latter two – are educative processes that may involve overcoming a ‘false consciousness’ of guilt or shame and are therefore especially suited to being dealt with by schools. In summary, it may be possible to promote self-realization in homes, schools and communities, together and apart – recognizing the importance, that is, of both togetherness and separation in the development of culture and identity.

Although society and the economy have continued changing since the middle of the nineteenth century, some elements of the society that led to descriptions of alienation are still important today. The current socio-economic formation usually used to describe the wealthiest nations, and many other nations, is ‘neoliberalism’. As Burke describes it, ‘[n]eoliberalism directs policy attention to individual aspirations and foregrounds individual responsibility, self-determination and employability in the context of uncertain, unstable and fluctuating market forces’ (in Cole and Gunter, 2010: 23). In other words, in – and beyond – education, neoliberalism individualizes and makes people compete against each other, while making people feel individually responsible for their own problems. Neoliberalism makes all the more explicit the ways in which all are expected to see others as competitors (and therefore alienating them from each other) and to see oneself (rather than others or society more broadly) as to blame if things go wrong: Foucault’s ‘responsibilization’ (Foucault, 2003). In schools, this means that pupils are set against each other and are pushed to see success in exams as primarily a route to employment. Responsibilization is created, for example, through ‘effort’ grades: no matter how successful or unsuccessful a child is in academic achievements, their effort must also be monitored – to ensure all are told the extent to which they are responsible for their own grades, however high or low.

There are other ways to view schools, though. The economist Unger writes of how ‘[w]e can understand ourselves and our history without imagining ourselves to be the objects of a law-giving fate’ (Unger, 2004: xvii), and that there are ways in which people can act more democratically, even in circumstances constrained by economic and social structures that appear immovable. The neoliberal form of capitalism is structured precisely to make people think that there is no alternative and that people are themselves ‘to blame’ for what happens. But, Unger says, this is a ‘false necessity’ (Unger, 2004, title). Within schools there are personal relationships characterized by care, curiosity and a sense of working together in community. These may not dominate all schools at all times, but accounts of alienation in school are not universal, and it is worth encouraging the many examples of more caring work. As I wrote in a recent article, teachers can – and often do – overcome the dominance of test scores through the promotion of curiosity (hence ‘curiosity killed the SAT’, Stern, 2018c), and schools can – and generally do – organize themselves as communities that are somewhat like households in combining the public and the personal (Stern, 2012). To mitigate or overcome the different kinds of alienation

and loneliness, then, schools need to be concentrating on learning for its own sake (i.e. curiosity-driven learning, in contrast to exclusively instrumental learning), on relationships where people treat each other as ends in themselves (rather than merely as means to other ends such as exam results or league tables), on collaboration (rather than just competition) and on learning to be ‘better people’ (Noddings, in Stern, 2016). It should be noted that these suggestions refer to all elements of the school, its curriculum, its relationships and its very purpose. Mitigating loneliness is not the job of a single person or a small group of people specializing in, say, personal and social education or providing counselling or tutoring. Alienation and loneliness are – to a significant extent – consequences of how all in the school behave with each other, and what they do, throughout the school day.

The same can be said of homes, although the ‘pure’ forms of neoliberalism are less prevalent in homes than they are in schools and workplaces. It is when households break up – for example as the result of a member of the household leaving to join another household or someone dying – that remaining members of the household most commonly experience loneliness. ‘I have felt lonely when my dad died and I felt lonely for a while,’ said Keira (aged 12–13) (Stern, 2014: 22). However, the stories of Sendak and McKee, described above, should still warn of the dangers of family-generated loneliness and the possibilities of avoiding this. A child ‘told off’ for being naughty is often isolated: told to stand on a ‘naughty step’ or told ‘go to your bedroom’. This might be described as generating the first dimension of loneliness: separation or exile. However, the adult telling the child off may also more explicitly express rejection (‘I don’t want to see you!’) creating the second dimension of loneliness. And a further comment (such as ‘you are a worthless child!’) may help generate the third dimension of loneliness: self-rejection. Adults who restrict themselves (as appropriate) to ‘mere’ exile may help reduce the fuller versions of loneliness, and a focus on the (naughty) action, rather than the naughty *child*, can help further.

One of the other ways in which both schools and homes can help reduce or mitigate loneliness is – somewhat counter-intuitively – by providing for and encouraging healthy solitude. (It is worth repeating that providing good opportunities for healthy relationships is also important.) Children can enjoy solitude in the company of others: in silence (e.g. while reading) or while concentrating (e.g. when drawing) or being left alone in company (e.g. at lunch). In homes, it is often (unshared) bedrooms that are used by children for solitude, but solitude can also be achieved by reading (Webb, 2007: 67). Solitude can be actively taught within school subjects, as every subject has its solitude tradition. Reading is an excellent example (which can take place in almost any subject), and there is a solitudinous focus required for practising a musical instrument, developing a craft skill, preparing for taking free kicks in football, close observation work in science, coding a computer app, exploring a religious artefact and much more. In homes (as in schools), children often complain of being bored. However, being bored and daydreaming are themselves of value: as Kessler says, ‘[o]ccasionally giving our students time and permission to daydream in their silence can satisfy [their] need for rest and respite from constant pressure and for flexing and strengthening an imagination weakened by modern life’ (Kessler, 2000: 41). Galanaki notes children’s views of the value of solitude:

[P]eace, quietude, and relaxation (even sleep), especially after a tiring shared activity; decrease of anxiety, tension, and anger; opportunities for reflection, which can help the child to work through his or her problems, understand his or

her faults, and find solutions; planning ahead; gaining a sense of self-reliance, self-control, and mastery; independence; the opportunity for privacy and secrecy and time to daydream and write in a diary (all the above are reported almost exclusively by 4th- and 6th-graders); being pleasantly occupied with something (e.g. solitary play, doing homework, reading, drawing, listening to music); concentration in a task and high achievement; freedom to do things (even “bad” ones)’. (Galanaki, 2005: 130)

Nuzzo is concerned that ‘[w]eb technology has exponentially multiplied its weapons of distraction increasingly promising to reduce creative solitude to a myth of the past’ (Nuzzo, in Jones, 2019: 54), yet this is a matter for action rather than a given. Online communities can themselves be developed to support more multi-dimensional dialogue (dialogue across generations, across geographical and historical boundaries, across different belief systems and culture) and such developments can be encouraged in homes and schools, as well as within the online systems themselves.

Loneliness and alienation can also be tackled head-on in schools and homes. Stories and poems that explore loneliness, as described above, are welcomed by children precisely because children recognize the feeling of loneliness better when they see others suffering in similar ways. There are books that bridge home and school, which can help teach about loneliness, such as *Can I Tell You About Loneliness?* (Stern, 2017). The twelfth-century Cistercian monk William of St-Thierry writes of living in a cell, for a monk and for a prisoner. Why do they both live in cells, but it is only a punishment for a prisoner? ‘He who lives with himself’, William say, ‘has only himself, such as he is, with him’, and so ‘[a] bad man can never safely live with himself, because he lives with a bad man and no one is more harmful to him that he is to himself’ (quoted in Webb, 2007: 72). A child alone, in school or home, may feel like the monk in William’s account (i.e. in good company) or like a prisoner (i.e. in bad company). Schools and homes should try to tell the difference – and should be just as worried about the child who never wants to be alone (perhaps because they sense they are ‘bad’) as they are about the child who is something of a loner (who may simply be comfortable in their own company).

Avoiding the ‘false necessity’ of alienation and loneliness in today’s schools, homes and communities, even in a broadly capitalist economy with a neoliberal culture, must be possible and is certainly needed to mitigate or reduce alienation and loneliness. As Fielding and Moss say, we may need to ‘overthrow’ and not just ‘avoid’ the ‘dictatorship of no alternatives’ (Fielding and Moss, 2011: 1), and in doing so – in some of the ways described above – a school and a home can become less alienated, less lonely, places, overcoming the ‘false consciousness’ leading to self-rejection.

## Conclusion

Togetherness and separation have been explored in this chapter in order to understand the links between alienation and loneliness, in and beyond childhood, and how best they can be dealt with in schools, homes and communities. As scholarly writing on alienation developed through the nineteenth century, so did fictional (and scholarly) writing on loneliness. Appreciating the

different forms of aloneness is central to appreciating the development of culture and identity in children as in adults. The alienation literature and the loneliness literature are deeply troubling, but there is – I suggest – a value in both togetherness *and* separation.

The lessons learned from nineteenth-century social developments can be applied in similar ways to twenty-first-century social developments, especially the growth of social media. It is when opportunities for healthy solitude, as well as healthy communal togetherness, are provided (online and irl) that children and young people can best develop their individual identities. And it is the process of research, making use of children's own voices, and using literary as well as historical and psychological accounts, exploiting all the subjects of the school curriculum and all aspects of home and community life, that can bring us to the best understanding of children's developing culture and identity, and the risk – in alienation, and with the alienation-emotion of loneliness – of self-rejection can best be mitigated. Self-rejection can, at least to an extent, be replaced by self-realization, a self, that is, recovered.

