

Thresholds for School Response to Adolescent Social Isolation: Teachers' Accounts from Lithuania and Latvia

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Abstract. This qualitative cross-national study examined how lower-secondary schools in Lithuania and Latvia recognise adolescent social isolation and decide when it warrants intervention. In the article, social isolation refers to teacher-visible peer disconnection and marginal participation in classroom and peer life. The study focused on the interpretive processes within schools through which such disconnection becomes actionable in everyday practice. Participants were 104 teachers (52 in each country) who provided written responses to an online questionnaire that included five multi-part narrative items. Data were analysed using reflexive thematic analysis. Four themes were developed: (1) social isolation as an interpretive threshold for intervention, (2) helpful support as relational and ecological rather than referral-based, (3) parents as gatekeepers and co-shapers of support, and (4) support as selective rather than universal in everyday school practice. Across both contexts, teachers did not describe support as an automatic response to aloneness. Coordinated help was more likely when peer disconnection was interpreted as persistent, involuntary, and restrictive of school participation. Teachers described helpful support as involving trusted adult relationships, work with the peer and classroom context, gradual opportunities for participation, and specialist involvement when needed. The findings suggest that school responses are shaped by practical judgement, parental cooperation, and existing support pathways, leaving quiet, non-disruptive disconnection potentially below the threshold for coordinated support.

Keywords: social isolation; early adolescence; school-based support; school psychology; peer disconnection.

Introduction

Early adolescence is a developmental period in which peer relationships, classroom participation, and school belonging become especially important for psychological and educational adjustment (Jefferson et al., 2023; Ferguson et al., 2022). During these years, friendship instability and weak peer networks are associated with poorer social adjustment and greater internalising difficulties, whereas stronger school connectedness and regular friend contact are associated with lower loneliness and better health-related outcomes (Ferguson et al., 2022; Walsh et al., 2023; Zheng et al., 2024a). Persistent peer disconnection is therefore an important educational concern, particularly when adolescents remain marginal in everyday school life over time.

However, peer disconnection is not conceptually identical to loneliness, nor does being alone always indicate a problem requiring intervention. Loneliness refers to a subjective and often distressing experience, whereas some forms of solitude may be voluntary and not experienced negatively. In this article, adolescent social isolation is used more narrowly to refer

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to teacher-visible peer disconnection and marginal participation in classroom and peer life. This school-visible side of relational vulnerability is educationally significant because it may restrict participation, belonging, and adjustment while remaining quiet, non-disruptive, and easily interpreted as temperament, preference, or a temporary phase.

Schools are relevant not only because peer disconnection occurs within them, but also because they are the main institutional settings in which it may be noticed, interpreted, and acted upon. Meta-analytic evidence links stronger teacher–student relationships to lower loneliness, and teachers themselves report that they can recognise loneliness-related difficulties and value practical resources for addressing them, while also facing barriers related to time, confidence, recognition, and available support structures (Zheng et al., 2024b; Adam et al., 2024; Zheng et al., 2026). Interventions oriented towards connectedness, belonging, and engagement can also improve relevant outcomes in secondary school settings (Davies et al., 2025). Yet identification is not straightforward: teacher and peer nominations only partly overlap with adolescents' self-reported loneliness, which means that solitary behaviour alone cannot be treated as a sufficient indicator of need (Geukens et al., 2021). Taken together, this literature suggests that movement from noticing peer disconnection to treating it as a matter for intervention depends on professional judgement rather than on a fixed behavioural rule. The issue is therefore relational and organisational as well as individual.

What remains less well understood is how such judgements unfold in everyday school practice. Existing literature has paid more attention to the consequences of loneliness and peer disconnection, and to intervention effects, than to the practical judgements through which schools decide when social isolation warrants action, what forms of support are seen as helpful in routine practice, and how parental cooperation, specialist availability, and school priorities shape access to help. This gap matters because quiet or non-disruptive disconnection may remain below the threshold of coordinated response even when it is developmentally significant.

The present qualitative cross-national study addresses this gap by examining teachers' accounts as practice-based perspectives on how schools respond to adolescent social isolation in lower-secondary schools in Lithuania and Latvia. Examining two neighbouring national contexts makes it possible to identify shared response logics while remaining attentive to differences in emphasis across settings. Using teachers' written accounts collected through a confidential online questionnaire and analysed through reflexive thematic analysis, the study asks: (a) when does social isolation cross the threshold for school intervention, (b) what forms of school-based support are described as helpful in routine practice, and (c) how do parental cooperation, specialist availability, and school priorities shape who receives coordinated help and who remains beyond it? In doing so, the article clarifies how support for adolescent social isolation becomes selective rather than universal in everyday school practice.

Theoretical Framework: A Social-Ecological Perspective on School Response to Adolescent Social Isolation

Adolescent social isolation is often discussed alongside loneliness, but the two are not identical. Loneliness refers to a subjective experience, whereas schools usually respond to observable patterns of peer disconnection, marginal participation, and weak school belonging. In the present article, social isolation is therefore used more narrowly to refer to teacher-visible peer disconnection in classroom and peer life. This distinction matters because being alone at school is not, in itself, sufficient evidence of distress or intervention need. Teacher and peer nominations only partly overlap with adolescents' self-reported loneliness (Geukens et al., 2021), and teachers' judgements of students' subjective well-being are only low to moderate in accuracy (Zurbriggen et al., 2023). Recent work on school connectedness further suggests that

this construct is best understood as multidimensional, encompassing attachment or belonging to school as well as ties to teachers and peers (Peng & Patterson, 2025). Accordingly, the present study focuses not on subjective loneliness as such, but on school-visible relational vulnerability and on how that vulnerability becomes interpreted within school practice.

A social-ecological perspective provides the most coherent framework for integrating this literature. In Bronfenbrenner's ecological theory, development is shaped by nested and interacting systems, from immediate relational settings such as family, peers, and school to broader institutional and cultural contexts (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). The later bioecological model further emphasises reciprocal processes unfolding over time between the developing person and the people, objects, and symbols in their environment (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006). Neal and Neal (2013) refine this perspective by arguing that ecological systems are better understood not as static containers but as networks of social interactions. This refinement is especially useful here because adolescents do not experience school as a single bounded unit: they move across overlapping peer groups, classrooms, teacher relationships, home-school interactions, and support pathways. A social-ecological perspective therefore shifts attention away from isolated adolescents as an individual category and toward the relational and organisational conditions under which isolation becomes visible and actionable.

At the microsystem level, the literature consistently shows that peer ties, participation, and school connectedness matter for adolescent adjustment. Friendship instability and weak peer networks are associated with poorer social adjustment and greater internalising difficulties, whereas stronger school connectedness, regular friend contact, and positive teacher–student relationships are associated with lower loneliness and better school-related and health-related outcomes (Ferguson et al., 2022; Jefferson et al., 2023; Walsh et al., 2023; Zheng et al., 2024a; Zheng et al., 2024b). Multilevel evidence further indicates that loneliness is partly structured by school context, as school-level climate and relational conditions explain meaningful variation in adolescent loneliness across European schools (Schnepf et al., 2023). Recent reviews likewise suggest that school connectedness is protective for depression and anxiety over time and that interventions targeting connectedness, belonging, and engagement can be effective, especially when they operate across more than one level of school life (Raniti et al., 2022; Davies et al., 2025; Attri et al., 2025). From a social-ecological perspective, then, adolescent disconnection is not reducible to individual disposition; it is shaped in everyday interactions with peers, teachers, and classroom environments.

At the same time, micro-level signs of social isolation are often ambiguous and must be interpreted. Some solitude is voluntary, some withdrawal is temporary, and some socially peripheral students do not describe themselves as lonely. This makes recognition inherently uncertain. The literature already suggests that professional observation is necessary but partial: visible social position cannot be treated as a direct proxy for subjective distress, and teacher judgement necessarily involves inference rather than direct access to students' inner experience (Geukens et al., 2021; Zurbriggen et al., 2023). Research with teachers similarly shows that staff recognise loneliness-related difficulties but face barriers related to time, workload, confidence, recognition, and available support structures (Adam et al., 2024; Zheng et al., 2026). Recent school-staff research analysed through an ecological lens also highlights that caring adult relationships are central, but staff capacity to respond is shaped by systemic pressures such as staffing shortages, academic demands, and competing institutional priorities (Strindberg, 2025). This body of work suggests that the key analytic question is not simply whether adolescents are disconnected, but how teachers interpret the meaning, persistence, and educational relevance of that disconnection in routine school practice.

This interpretive process extends beyond the microsystem. At the mesosystem level, school responses depend on the quality of links among teachers, parents, and student-support professionals. Parental involvement may facilitate recognition and help-seeking, but it can also

complicate access to support when consent, trust, privacy concerns, family conflict, or divergent interpretations of the student's situation become barriers (Mushonga et al., 2025; Patte et al., 2025; Roulston et al., 2025). At the exosystem level, recognition and intervention are shaped by school arrangements that adolescents do not control directly, including specialist availability, consultation routines, referral pathways, timetabling, workload, and organisational prioritisation (Richter et al., 2022; Schäfer et al., 2025). The macrosystem provides a broader interpretive horizon, including assumptions about normal adolescent sociability, family responsibility, student autonomy, and the role of schools in well-being. The chronosystem is equally important, because social isolation rarely becomes actionable at a single moment; rather, it becomes more salient when it persists over time, accumulates consequences, or resists routine pedagogical response. Taken together, these levels suggest that school response is best understood as a social-ecological process rather than a simple reaction to a student's individual state.

For the present study, this perspective is used as a sensitising framework rather than a deductive coding template. It does not assume that each ecological level will appear neatly in teachers' accounts, nor does it treat the framework as a model to be tested. Instead, it directs analytic attention to how teacher-visible peer disconnection becomes legible across interacting levels: the student's position in peer life, the availability of trusted adult relationships, the role of parents and family-school cooperation, and the organisational pathways through which concern can be escalated or contained. From this perspective, support may become selective rather than universal not simply because some students are more isolated than others, but because their disconnection becomes recognisable, interpretable, and actionable within a particular ecology of relationships, judgements, and institutional possibilities. This framing is especially appropriate for a study based on teachers' accounts from Lithuania and Latvia, where the aim is not to explain social isolation as an individual trait, but to understand how schools come to recognise it and respond to it in everyday practice.

Methodology

Research Design. This article reports a qualitative cross-national study of school responses to adolescent social isolation in lower-secondary schools in Lithuania and Latvia. The study draws on teachers' written responses to a confidential online questionnaire that included demographic items and open-ended prompts about adolescents' social adaptation difficulties in school. For the purposes of this article, the analysis focused on the part of the material directly relevant to how social isolation is recognised, interpreted, and responded to in everyday school practice. The study was informed by an interpretive-constructivist orientation (Schwandt, 2015), and teachers' responses were treated as situated accounts of practice rather than as objective records of events or as evidence of intervention effectiveness.

A qualitative cross-national design was appropriate because the study addressed interpretive and practice-oriented questions: when social isolation comes to be understood as warranting school action, what forms of support teachers describe as helpful in routine practice, and how responses are shaped by parental involvement, specialist availability, and school priorities. The questionnaire was used as a qualitative elicitation tool rather than a psychometric instrument, and the study did not aim to estimate prevalence or to compare the two national contexts statistically. Rather, it sought to generate analytically informative accounts and to identify shared patterns and differences in emphasis across the Lithuanian and Latvian teacher samples. Because the data consisted of written survey responses rather than interviews or case material, the design was suited to examining teachers' interpretations and described response logics, but not to reconstructing the depth or temporal dynamics of individual cases. Its contribution is therefore conceptual and interpretive rather than empirically generalisable.

Participants and Sampling. Participants were 104 teachers working with lower-secondary students aged approximately 10–14 years, including 52 teachers from Lithuania and 52 from Latvia. Eligibility criteria required participants to be currently teaching students in this age range. The study focused specifically on teachers because the aim was to examine how social isolation becomes noticed, interpreted, and acted upon in everyday school practice. Teachers were therefore approached as practice-based informants with routine access to classroom peer dynamics, student participation, and the early signs of social adaptation difficulties. School leaders and student support specialists were not included because the analytic focus was on teachers' day-to-day interpretations and responses in ordinary school practice.

A purposive snowball sampling strategy was used (Palinkas et al., 2015). Recruitment began through the authors' professional and personal networks and was then extended through snowball sharing. This strategy was chosen not to achieve statistical representativeness, but to reach information-rich participants with relevant experience of teaching lower-secondary students and observing peer relations in school settings. Given the study's focus on practice-based accounts of how support is recognised and mobilised, this approach was appropriate for accessing teachers likely to have encountered students experiencing social adaptation difficulties, including social isolation.

Participant characteristics are presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Participant characteristics

Characteristic	Lithuania (<i>n</i> = 52)	Latvia (<i>n</i> = 52)	Total (<i>n</i> = 104)
Age, M (SD)	49.08 (10.85)	50.69 (9.74)	49.88 (10.29)
Teaching years, M (SD)	22.60 (12.32)	25.48 (11.38)	24.04 (11.89)
Women, <i>n</i> (%)	48 (92.3)	48 (92.3)	96 (92.3)
Men, <i>n</i> (%)	4 (7.7)	4 (7.7)	8 (7.7)
Homeroom/class teachers, <i>n</i> (%)	29 (55.8)	30 (57.7)	59 (56.7)
Urban schools, <i>n</i> (%)	39 (75.0)	37 (71.2)	76 (73.1)
Town schools, <i>n</i> (%)	7 (13.5)	11 (21.2)	18 (17.3)
Rural schools, <i>n</i> (%)	6 (11.5)	4 (7.7)	10 (9.6)

Note: *M* = mean; *SD* = standard deviation; *n* = number of teachers

The sample was intended to generate analytically informative accounts from teachers with relevant practice experience rather than to provide a statistically representative picture of national teacher populations. At the same time, because recruitment relied partly on the authors' networks and snowball sharing, the sample may have been more likely to include teachers who were accessible to the researchers and willing to reflect on student well-being and support practices.

Procedure and Data Source. Data were collected through Google Forms questionnaires administered separately in Lithuania and Latvia. The Lithuanian responses were submitted between 29 October and 14 November 2025, and the Latvian responses between 6 November and 12 December 2025. The questionnaire introduction explained that the study concerned teachers' experiences of adolescents' social adaptation difficulties in school settings. Participation was voluntary, respondents could discontinue at any point, and responses were reported only in aggregated form. Completing the questionnaire took approximately 15–20 minutes.

The questionnaire was originally drafted in English and then translated into Lithuanian and Latvian for administration in each national setting. The first author prepared the Lithuanian version and the second author prepared the Latvian version. The two versions were then jointly reviewed to ensure conceptual equivalence before administration. The broader questionnaire

included demographic items, narrative questions, and structured multiple-response items. The present article draws on the narrative material. In questionnaire form, this material appeared as five multi-part narrative items; analytically, these yielded seven focal prompts relevant to the present study: (a) observable patterns of being alone at school, (b) perceived reasons for peer disconnection or low acceptance, (c) recalled cases of exclusion and teachers' immediate responses, (d) indicators that additional help was needed, (e) support available at school and forms described as helpful in practice, (f) parental involvement and challenges in cooperation, and (g) the role of family climate and the point at which loneliness or social isolation was seen as risky.

For this article, the analytic corpus consisted of the narrative responses provided by 104 teachers (52 in Lithuania and 52 in Latvia). These written responses were treated as situated accounts of routine school practice rather than as objective records of events or as evidence of intervention effectiveness. Response length varied considerably, ranging from brief statements to more elaborated case descriptions. This format made it possible to collect a comparatively broad cross-national set of practice-based accounts, but it did not allow follow-up questioning, clarification of ambiguous responses, or in-depth reconstruction of the temporal dynamics of individual cases. The contribution of the dataset is therefore conceptual and interpretive rather than case-process or statistically generalisable.

Data Analysis. Data were analysed using reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2021). The analysis was guided by the research questions while remaining open to patterns emerging from teachers' written accounts. It proceeded iteratively through repeated reading of the responses, initial coding, development of candidate themes, and return to the full dataset to refine theme boundaries and interpretations. Because the material consisted of written questionnaire responses, the analysis focused on teachers' interpretations and described response logics rather than on reconstructing the full sequence of individual cases or evaluating intervention effectiveness.

Analysis was conducted in two linked stages. First, the Lithuanian and Latvian datasets were analysed separately in their original languages in order to preserve linguistic and contextual specificity. The first author led analysis of the Lithuanian responses, and the second author led analysis of the Latvian responses. In each dataset, the responses to the focal narrative prompts were read repeatedly and coded for recurring meanings related to recognition of social isolation, thresholds for additional help, forms of support, parental involvement, and the conditions that shaped access to coordinated support. Candidate within-country themes were then developed by reviewing patterns across codes and across the different prompts, rather than treating each prompt as a stand-alone analytic unit.

Second, the authors undertook a cross-national thematic comparison. The provisional Lithuanian and Latvian themes were compared in order to identify shared patterns and differences in emphasis across the two datasets. Through this process, a common thematic structure was refined across the full corpus. The final themes were developed across the dataset rather than mapped directly onto individual questionnaire questions: the prompts functioned as elicitation points, but a theme was retained only when it organised material across multiple prompts and both national datasets. This process led to four final themes: social isolation as an interpretive threshold for action; helpful support as relational and ecological rather than referral-based; parents as gatekeepers and co-shapers of support; and from monitoring to referral: how support becomes selective.

Consistent with reflexive thematic analysis, coding was not approached as a reliability exercise requiring agreement statistics. Given the single-source qualitative design, analytic robustness was sought not through data triangulation across different data types, but through separate within-country analysis, cross-national comparison, and ongoing analytic dialogue during theme development; differences in emphasis or interpretation were used to clarify theme

boundaries and levels of abstraction. The written-response format made it possible to identify recurring patterns across a broader cross-national teacher sample, but it did not allow follow-up questioning or in-depth reconstruction of the temporal dynamics of individual cases. Accordingly, references in the findings to helpful or effective support refer to practices described by participants as helpful or effective in routine school practice, not to independently evaluated intervention outcomes.

Reflexivity, Positionality, and Trustworthiness. Reflexivity was treated as part of the analytic process rather than as a step added after coding. The first author, affiliated with a Lithuanian institution, analysed the Lithuanian dataset, and the second author, affiliated with a Latvian institution, analysed the Latvian dataset. This provided linguistic and contextual familiarity with the two school contexts under study and supported sensitivity to the everyday meanings embedded in teachers' written accounts. At the same time, such proximity may also have shaped what was initially treated as ordinary, salient, or analytically important. The authors therefore approached their contextual familiarity as both a resource and a potential source of taken-for-granted interpretation.

Given the single-source qualitative design, trustworthiness was not sought through data triangulation across different participant groups or methods. Instead, it was supported through iterative reading of the data, reflexive memo writing, documentation of coding and theme development, separate within-country analysis in the original languages, and subsequent cross-national analytic dialogue. Differences in interpretation were treated as prompts for further analytic questioning rather than as problems to be resolved through consensus alone. This process helped retain contextual specificity while also refining themes at a shared level of abstraction across the Lithuanian and Latvian datasets.

The study is also delimited in several ways. It focuses on teachers' written accounts of school-visible social isolation among lower-secondary students in Lithuania and Latvia. It does not examine adolescents' own subjective loneliness, parents' perspectives, or the effectiveness of specific interventions, nor does it aim to provide a formal comparison of national education or support systems. More specific limitations related to the written questionnaire format and the restricted depth of individual case reconstruction are addressed in the limitations section.

In qualitative work of this kind, transferability depends on the provision of sufficient contextual and analytic detail rather than on statistical representativeness. For this reason, the article reports the sample characteristics, school-location profile, national composition, data source, and analytic focus so that readers can judge the relevance of the findings to comparable lower-secondary school contexts. Because recruitment partly relied on the authors' professional and personal networks and snowball sharing, the accounts should be read as analytically informative rather than representative of national teacher populations. Reporting was further informed by qualitative reporting standards in psychology (Levitt et al., 2018). As the data were generated in Lithuanian and Latvian but reported in English, illustrative quotations were translated by the authors and checked against the original wording during analysis in order to preserve conceptual meaning and contextual nuance.

Ethical Considerations. The study involved adult teacher participants only and used a voluntary confidential online questionnaire about professional practice in school settings. No students were recruited as participants, and the questionnaire did not request participants' names, school names, or direct contact details. Under Lithuanian law, approval by the Lithuanian Bioethics Committee or a regional biomedical research ethics committee is required only for studies falling within the scope of the Law on the Ethics of Biomedical Research of the Republic of Lithuania (Republic of Lithuania, 2000). According to official guidance by the Ministry of Health of the Republic of Lithuania and the Lithuanian Bioethics Committee, a study falls within that law only if it meets all statutory criteria for biomedical research (Lithuanian Bioethics Committee, n.d.; Ministry of Health of the Republic of Lithuania, 2026).

The present study did not fall within that scope because it was an educational/social-science study of adult teachers' professional accounts of school practice rather than a biomedical study designed to generate knowledge about human health, disease, diagnosis, treatment, or prevention. Accordingly, approval under the Lithuanian Law on the Ethics of Biomedical Research was not required. The study procedures were also designed in line with general principles of educational research ethics and research integrity, including informed participation, voluntariness, confidentiality, minimisation of harm, and responsible data handling (British Educational Research Association, 2024; All European Academies, 2023). Participants were informed about the purpose of the study, the voluntary nature of participation, their right to discontinue before submission, and the intended use of their responses; consent was indicated by questionnaire submission. Because raw exports included submission metadata and contextually specific free-text material, the data are described as confidential rather than fully anonymous, and quotations were selected conservatively to reduce the risk of indirect identification. No separate institutional ethics clearance is claimed in this manuscript.

Data Availability Statement. Public sharing of the full dataset is not possible because the material consists of confidential teacher questionnaire responses from Lithuania and Latvia that include contextually specific free-text accounts. Even after removal of direct identifiers, public release could increase the risk of indirect identification in relatively small professional and national settings. The original online-form exports also contained submission metadata. The questionnaire prompts analysed in this article and further details about the analytic procedure may be requested from the corresponding author, subject to confidentiality and ethical considerations.

Results

The analysis generated four interrelated themes that describe how teacher-visible peer disconnection became recognised and acted upon in routine school practice: (1) social isolation as an interpretive threshold for action, (2) helpful support as relational, gradual, and ecological rather than referral-based, (3) parents as gatekeepers and co-shapers of support, and (4) how monitoring, escalation, and referral make support selective. Across both datasets, social isolation did not function as a self-evident category that automatically triggered intervention. Rather, it became actionable through teachers' interpretations of persistence, involuntariness, emotional cost, and restriction of participation in school life. Quotations are identified by country code (LT or LV) and respondent number.

Social Isolation as an Interpretive Threshold for Action

Across both datasets, social isolation was described not as a fixed behavioural condition but as an interpretive threshold. Teachers did not portray aloneness in itself as a sufficient reason for coordinated support. Rather, social isolation became a matter for action when it was no longer understood as temperament, temporary withdrawal, or a preference for limited contact, but as a pattern of peer disconnection beginning to constrain well-being, participation, or engagement in school life.

In the Lithuanian accounts, this threshold was most often described through visibility and escalation. Teachers became more concerned when distress became outwardly legible, for example through "apathy lasting about two weeks, sleeping during lessons, adolescent withdrawal, and significantly worsened academic achievement" (LT_10). Yet intervention was rarely tied to crisis alone. Several respondents described a gradual process of observing, talking, and only later seeking broader support, as in the case of one teacher who explained that "if I see that exclusion has been going on for some time and my conversations with the class or the student have no effect, then I turn to specialists" (LT_30). In these accounts, coordinated

support was typically mobilised once isolation appeared to exceed what could be addressed through ordinary classroom-level response.

The Latvian accounts reflected the same broad boundary, but more often framed it in terms of chronicity and functional disruption. Teachers described additional support as warranted in cases of “prolonged withdrawal, regular avoidance of peers, frequent anxiety or sadness, sharp changes in learning motivation, and repeated conflicts with classmates or teachers” (LV_38). Another respondent noted that the decision to seek help depended on “the duration and intensity of behavioural change, the student’s own signals, parents’ concern, and the teacher’s professional intuition” (LV_44). At the same time, Latvian teachers explicitly distinguished between problematic isolation and non-problematic solitude: “if the child is alone, it does not always mean they are lonely” (LV_35). Lithuanian accounts conveyed a similar caution, suggesting that quiet or solitary students were not automatically treated as needing coordinated intervention.

Across both contexts, then, socially isolated adolescents became candidates for support not simply because they were alone, but because their disconnection was interpreted as persistent, increasingly involuntary, and restrictive of school participation. In this sense, social isolation functioned as an interpretive threshold for action rather than as a self-evident condition automatically leading to support.

Helpful Support as Relational, Gradual, and Ecological

Across both countries, once social isolation had become a matter of concern, teachers rarely described helpful support as a single referral or one-off intervention. Instead, they portrayed it as a gradual process of rebuilding the relational conditions for safe participation in school life. Specialist involvement formed part of this process, but was seldom presented as sufficient on its own. Rather, teachers described support in terms of trusted adult contact, peer and classroom work, and opportunities for participation that did not overwhelm the student.

In the Lithuanian accounts, helpful support was most often described through the creation of at least one safe relational bridge. Teachers stressed the importance of helping the student find “a friend in the class/school” (LT_4) or ensuring that the student “has a person they trust and know that they will be safe” (LT_8). Support was also described as extending beyond the individual student to the peer context through class discussions, shared activities, and low-pressure opportunities to join in. As one teacher noted, socially struggling students could “light up” when they discovered that classmates were not necessarily judging them negatively (LT_3). In these accounts, what mattered was not forcing rapid social integration, but making it more possible for the student to experience acceptance and to re-enter peer life gradually.

The Latvian accounts reflected the same relational orientation but more often emphasised coordinated multi-actor support. Teachers described helpful support through the combined work of the class teacher, psychologist, social pedagogue, and parents, alongside structured opportunities for gradual participation. One respondent referred to “combined forms of support” involving individual consultations, class work on inclusion, and close cooperation with parents (LV_38), while another highlighted low-pressure participation by giving the student small responsibilities and pair-based tasks (LV_8). In these accounts, helpful support was described not only as relational, but also as pedagogical and organisational.

A further cross-national pattern was caution about forcing inclusion. Teachers in both countries recognised that belonging cannot simply be imposed, particularly when students are wary, withdrawn, or resigned to marginality. A Lithuanian teacher noted that adults may at times only help the student “endure that period” (LT_29), while Latvian respondents argued that it may be better “not to force [the student] to be a participant” (LV_30). Across both datasets, then, helpful support was described as layered and gradual: most useful when it

enabled socially isolated adolescents to participate without being overwhelmed, coerced, or left alone to manage their disconnection.

Parents as Gatekeepers and Co-Shapers of Support

Across both datasets, parents were described not simply as background influences on adolescents' social functioning, but as actors who could enable, slow, redirect, or stabilise school response. Teachers' accounts suggested that student need alone did not reliably lead to coordinated help. Rather, support was often shaped by whether parents recognised the difficulty, accepted the school's interpretation of it, and were willing to cooperate in deciding what should happen next.

In the Lithuanian accounts, this gatekeeping role was especially visible. Teachers frequently described contacting parents as an early step, and further work with the student often appeared to depend on whether parents acknowledged the concern and endorsed additional support. Some respondents noted that parents treated the adolescent as "just a quieter child" (LT_3), assumed that the difficulty would be outgrown (LT_51), or hesitated to support individual work or referral (LT_10). At the same time, Lithuanian teachers did not portray parents only as barriers. Some accounts suggested that initial defensiveness could give way to cooperation once concerns were discussed more carefully, indicating that recognition and trust sometimes had to be built before joint action became possible (LT_2; LT_11).

The Latvian accounts reflected the same overall pattern, but more often framed parental involvement as variable engagement within an ongoing support process rather than as a clear permission threshold. Some teachers described parents who were willing to listen, collaborate with the school, and search for solutions together (LV_38; LV_50). Others, however, reported denial, defensiveness, or withdrawal from cooperation, including claims that the child was fine, that the problem would "pass on its own" (LV_24), or that parents simply "do not want to cooperate" (LV_45). In these accounts, parental involvement could strengthen support, delay it, or redirect it, depending on how the situation was interpreted at home as well as at school.

Across both countries, teachers also linked peer disconnection to family emotional climate and relationship models. Lithuanian respondents noted that "children bring their communication model from the family" (LT_11), while Latvian teachers similarly suggested that relationship patterns are first learned at home (LV_34). Some Latvian accounts further implied that parents themselves may need guidance or support if they are to respond constructively to the adolescent's difficulties (LV_15). Parents were therefore represented not only as facilitators or obstacles, but also as participants in the ecology of the problem itself.

Overall, these accounts suggest that parents shaped not only access to support, but also how the student's difficulty was interpreted, legitimised, and acted upon, making school response a school-family process rather than a school-only decision.

How Monitoring, Escalation, and Referral Make Support Selective

Across both datasets, support for socially isolated adolescents was described as selective rather than automatic. Even after peer disconnection had become noticeable, teachers did not portray a single pathway that moved directly from recognition to coordinated help. Instead, support usually emerged through a staged process of monitoring, sounding out the situation, trying limited classroom-level responses, and only then, in some cases, escalating the case to specialists or broader school procedures. In this sense, what students received depended not only on need itself, but on how that need was judged in relation to seriousness, visibility, manageability, and available support pathways.

In the Lithuanian accounts, this selectivity was most often produced through waiting, observation, and escalation. Teachers described beginning with monitoring, conversations with the student or class, and informal pedagogical efforts within ordinary school life. Only when

exclusion persisted, repeated itself, or seemed resistant to these first-line responses did they seek broader help: “if I see that exclusion has been going on for some time and my conversations with the class or the student have no effect, then I turn to specialists” (LT_30). Another respondent noted that “if the situation repeats for a second time, that prompts me to seek help” (LT_31). At the same time, some Lithuanian accounts implied that more visible or disruptive cases were more likely to mobilise coordinated response, whereas quieter students who remained on the margins could continue to be monitored rather than actively supported.

The Latvian accounts reflected the same staged logic, but framed selectivity more explicitly through differentiated thresholds and conditional pathways. Teachers distinguished between cases that could still be monitored, cases in which being alone might reflect preference or temperament, and cases in which stronger intervention became necessary because isolation was beginning to affect participation, motivation, or emotional stability. Support intensified when difficulties became functionally disruptive, for example when a student “regularly skips lessons, asks to leave the lesson, does not talk with others” (LV_8), or when the case exceeded what could be managed by the classroom teacher alone and required referral within or beyond the school (LV_20). At the same time, Latvian teachers also emphasised that not every solitary student should be drawn into coordinated intervention: some, as one respondent put it, “feel good being alone,” and the response in such cases was to respect their “needs and boundaries” (LV_50).

Across both countries, then, selectivity did not simply mean a lack of support. Rather, it described a practical sorting process through which some forms of teacher-visible disconnection were treated as manageable within ordinary classroom life, while others crossed a threshold into coordinated action. Overall, support became most available when isolation was persistent, difficult to address informally, more visible to adults, or increasingly restrictive of school participation. This means that quieter, non-disruptive adolescents could remain monitored but not yet fully taken up by formal support pathways.

Discussion

Main Findings and Interpretation

The main contribution of this study is not simply to confirm that peer disconnection matters in adolescence, as this is already well established in the literature on loneliness, school connectedness, and adolescent adjustment. Rather, the study clarifies how teacher-visible peer disconnection becomes actionable within everyday school practice. Across teachers' accounts from Lithuania and Latvia, social isolation did not automatically trigger coordinated support. Instead, it became a matter for action when it was interpreted as persistent, increasingly involuntary, emotionally costly, or restrictive of participation in school life. In this sense, the findings shift attention from the consequences of peer disconnection alone to the interpretive school processes through which need becomes institutionally visible.

This finding is important because the identification of relational vulnerability in school is inherently uncertain. Research has already shown that teacher and peer nominations do not map neatly onto adolescents' own reports of loneliness, meaning that solitary behaviour alone cannot be treated as a sufficient indicator of distress or intervention need (Geukens et al., 2021). Recent qualitative work likewise suggests that loneliness-related difficulties are especially difficult to recognise when they remain quiet, non-disruptive, or easily read as temperament, while staff capacity to respond is shaped by time, workload, and competing school demands (Adam et al., 2024; Strindberg, 2025; Zheng et al., 2026). The present findings extend this literature by showing how teachers actively differentiated between manageable solitude and concerning social isolation. In both national contexts, students became candidates for coordinated support not merely because they were alone, but because their aloneness was interpreted as persistent, harmful, or increasingly incompatible with ordinary participation in school life.

At this point, the findings can be read productively through the lens of teachers' reflective professional judgement. The threshold for intervention did not operate as a fixed behavioural rule; rather, it depended on how teachers reflected on what they were seeing, what meanings they attached to it, and whether classroom-level pedagogical response still seemed sufficient. In this sense, the present study aligns with the reviewer's suggestion that the significance of teachers' professional reflection deserves stronger emphasis. Work on feedback and reflection is useful here as a complementary interpretive resource. Jurs and Špehte (2021) emphasise that meaningful feedback helps sustain engagement and preserve the relational link between teacher and student, while Jurs et al. (2023) frame reflection as supporting students' thinking, self-improvement, and engagement. Although these studies were not conducted on adolescent social isolation specifically, they help illuminate an important mechanism in the present findings: quiet social disconnection becomes more visible when teachers do not merely observe withdrawal, but reflect on participation, maintain relational contact, and treat subtle disengagement as something to be interpreted rather than ignored.

A second contribution concerns how helpful support was understood. Across both countries, teachers rarely described support as referral alone. Instead, they portrayed it as relational, gradual, and ecological: involving one trusted adult, work with the peer and classroom context, low-pressure opportunities for participation, and specialist input where needed. This is consistent with evidence showing that stronger teacher–student relationships, classmate support, and school connectedness are associated with lower loneliness and better school-related outcomes (Jefferson et al., 2023; Zheng et al., 2024a; Zheng et al., 2024b). It also supports recent review evidence suggesting that school-based responses are more promising when they operate across multiple social-ecological levels rather than focusing narrowly on the individual student alone (Attri et al., 2025; Davies et al., 2025). The present study adds to this literature by showing that teachers themselves conceptualised helpful support not primarily as “sending the student somewhere,” but as rebuilding the conditions for participation and belonging within everyday school life.

A social-ecological reading is particularly useful here. At the microsystem level, social isolation was described through peer exclusion, low participation, and fragile teacher–student connection. At the mesosystem level, support depended on how teachers, parents, and support specialists worked together. At the exosystem level, recognition and support were shaped by available pathways for consultation, escalation, and referral, as well as by school priorities and resource constraints. The findings therefore support moving away from an individualised reading of “isolated adolescents” toward an understanding of school response as distributed across interacting relational and organisational levels. In this sense, the study does not simply show that support is important; it shows why support becomes more available to some students than to others.

A third contribution concerns the role of parents. Across both datasets, parents were described not merely as background influences on young people's social development, but as actors who could enable, delay, redirect, or stabilise school response. This is in line with broader literature showing that parental involvement can strengthen school-based support while also complicating it when recognition, consent, trust, or family conflict become barriers (Mushonga et al., 2025; Patte et al., 2025; Roulston et al., 2025). In the present study, parental cooperation shaped whether teacher concern could move toward coordinated action, but parents were also represented as part of the ecology of the problem itself, particularly when teachers linked students' peer functioning to family emotional climate and relationship models. This is an important clarification, because it suggests that school response to social isolation is not only a school process, but a school-family process in which recognition itself is negotiated.

A fourth contribution concerns the selectivity of support. Across both countries, support did not emerge as universal once concern had been noticed. Rather, it was filtered through

monitoring, informal classroom-level attempts, repeated observation, and only then, in some cases, escalation to broader school support. This resonates with implementation literature showing that school-based support depends not only on need, but also on coordination, leadership, available expertise, and practical prioritisation within busy school settings (Richter et al., 2022; Schäfer et al., 2025). The present findings extend this literature by showing how selectivity is experienced at the level of everyday school judgement. Support became more likely when disconnection was persistent, difficult to manage informally, more visible to adults, or increasingly restrictive of school participation. As a result, quieter and less disruptive adolescents could remain monitored without yet becoming the object of coordinated intervention.

The cross-national comparison suggests a shared response logic with somewhat different emphases rather than two fundamentally different systems. In both contexts, teachers distinguished between solitude that could be respected and social isolation that signalled risk or restricted participation. Within this sample, Lithuanian responses more often described action in terms of visibility and escalation, whereas Latvian responses more often emphasised chronicity, functional disruption, and the accumulation of corroborating signals. These differences should be interpreted cautiously, since the study was not designed as a formal comparison of national support systems. Even so, they suggest that similar thresholding processes may take somewhat different practical forms across school contexts.

Taken together, the findings suggest that support for adolescent social isolation is best understood as a selective and interpretive school-family process embedded in an ecology of relationships, judgements, and institutional conditions. Social isolation did not automatically lead to coordinated support; rather, support became more likely when disconnection was recognised as sufficiently serious, when ordinary pedagogical response seemed insufficient, and when the student's situation could be taken up within existing relational and organisational pathways. For school psychology, this is important because it means that quiet, compliant, or weakly recognised disconnection may remain below the threshold for coordinated support even when it is already developmentally costly.

Practical Implications for School Psychology Practice

The findings suggest that schools should not rely only on visible crisis, behavioural disruption, or academic decline when identifying students who may need support. Quiet, compliant, or academically functioning adolescents may remain below the threshold for action despite persistent disconnection from peers. In practice, this points to the value of more structured opportunities for teacher reflection, such as brief relational check-ins, consultation in student-support teams, and regular discussion of students who remain persistently peripheral in classroom or peer life. In light of the present findings, reflective pedagogical judgement should be understood not as an optional extra, but as one of the main mechanisms through which social isolation becomes institutionally visible.

The results also suggest that everyday feedback may matter not only academically but relationally. For socially isolated students, teacher feedback can function as a signal that the student is seen, that participation is possible, and that belonging does not have to begin with high-pressure social performance. This implication fits well with work emphasising meaningful feedback and reflection as conditions for engagement rather than as purely technical instructional tools. In the context of social isolation, low-pressure relational feedback, predictable adult availability, and gradual participation opportunities may be especially important for students who are reluctant to seek help directly.

A further implication is that support should not be organised as referral alone. Teachers in both countries described helpful support as involving trusted adult relationships, careful classroom work, peer-context intervention, and specialist support when needed. For school

psychology practice, this means that support planning should extend beyond individual consultation and include the broader social ecology of the student's everyday school life: the peer group, classroom routines, participation demands, and the availability of manageable entry points into shared activity. In other words, support for socially isolated adolescents is likely to be stronger when it is coordinated across relational levels rather than delegated entirely to a specialist.

Finally, parental engagement should be treated as part of the intervention pathway rather than as a secondary background factor. In the present study, support frequently depended on whether parents recognised the concern and were willing to cooperate with the school. This suggests a practical role for school psychologists and support staff not only in direct work with students, but also in parent consultation, psychoeducation, and early clarification of concerns. At the same time, schools need clear internal pathways for consultation and escalation, so that teacher concern can move into coordinated response before difficulties become entrenched. Without such pathways, support is likely to remain reactive and selective.

Limitations and Future Directions

Several limitations should be considered when interpreting the findings. First, the study is based on teachers' written accounts rather than on direct observation or on students' and parents' own perspectives. The findings therefore show how teachers interpret and describe school response, not how that response necessarily unfolds in every case. Relatedly, the study addresses teacher-visible social isolation rather than adolescents' subjective loneliness. Teachers may observe withdrawal, exclusion, or low participation, but they cannot directly access whether being alone is experienced as distressing.

Second, the written questionnaire format shaped the depth of the material. Although it made it possible to collect a broader cross-national set of practice-based accounts, it did not allow follow-up questioning, clarification of ambiguous responses, or close reconstruction of how individual cases developed over time. The study therefore supports conceptual and interpretive claims about school response logics, but not detailed process reconstruction of particular cases. This limitation is important and should be understood as part of the design rather than as a defect that can be fully overcome retrospectively.

Third, the purposive snowball sample from two neighbouring national settings does not permit statistical generalisation to all schools in Lithuania, Latvia, or elsewhere. Nor was the study designed as a formal comparison of national policy or service systems. Its cross-national value lies instead in identifying shared patterns and differences in emphasis across two teacher samples.

Finally, the study does not evaluate the actual effectiveness of the practices teachers described. The findings indicate what participants regarded as helpful or workable in routine school practice, not which forms of support produce better student outcomes over time. Future research would benefit from multi-informant and multi-method designs, including adolescents' and parents' perspectives, more process-oriented study of how support unfolds in practice, and longitudinal work examining whether relational and ecological responses improve participation, belonging, and adjustment among socially isolated adolescents.

Conclusions

This study examined how teachers in lower-secondary schools in Lithuania and Latvia described the recognition of adolescent social isolation and the school responses that followed from it. Across both national contexts, teacher-visible peer disconnection did not emerge as a self-evident category that automatically triggered coordinated support. Rather, social isolation became actionable when it was interpreted as persistent, increasingly involuntary, and restrictive of participation in school life. In this sense, the study shows that school response

depends not only on student need, but also on how that need becomes legible within everyday professional judgement and available support pathways.

The findings further suggest that helpful support is understood by teachers as relational, gradual, and ecological rather than referral-based alone. Teachers described the importance of trusted adult relationships, work with peer and classroom dynamics, parental cooperation, and specialist involvement when needed. At the same time, support did not appear to be universally available once concern had been noticed. Instead, it was filtered through monitoring, informal response, escalation, and referral, making support selective in practice. Parents were therefore not only part of the background context, but active co-shapers of whether and how school concern developed into coordinated action.

Overall, the study contributes to research on adolescent social isolation by shifting attention from the phenomenon itself to the interpretive and organisational processes through which it becomes a school matter. Read through a social-ecological perspective, these findings suggest that support is shaped across interacting relational levels rather than by individual student characteristics alone. For school psychology and school-based support practice, this means that quiet, compliant, or weakly recognised peer disconnection may remain below the threshold for coordinated help even when it is already constraining students' participation and belonging.

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