‘I’ve got people here’: Place, space and relationships in the lives of young disabled people in regional Australia

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The other partners in this work:

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- Assoc Prof Karen Fisher, Dr Kylie Valentine (Social Policy Research Centre, University of NSW)
- Prof Malcolm Hill (Strathclyde University)
- Children with Disability Australia
- NSW Council for Intellectual Disability
Aim of project

• Explore the lived experience of belonging and connection with and for young people with cognitive disability living in regional communities.

• Support these young people to explore the enablers and barriers to belonging and connection, including any perceived impact of living in a regional community.
Conceptual framing

• Drawing from both childhood studies and social relational approaches to disability.

• Shared constructs:
  – Social constructions of both childhood and of disability
  – Contesting normative narratives of child development
  – Allowing for the interrogation of social policy and structural discourses on disability, inclusion, exclusion, and uses of place and space
Methodology

• Participatory qualitative research
  – Centrality of participants
  – Voice
  – Accessible methods

• Social geography (Imrie & Edwards, 2007; Hall & Kearns, 2001; Hall, 2010).
  – Place
  – Space
  – Relationships
Research Methods

- Interviews
- Photographic projects – based on photovoice
- Surveys
Doing the project

- 3 communities – regional towns in NSW, Victoria and Queensland
- 30 young people – 12 – 24
- 6 months in each community
- 2 interviews + informal meeting and conversation + photo uploading
- Survey across Australia
Interviews

- Mapping
- Conversational
- Experiential
- Adaptable
- Person-as-expert
- Not about disability
- Established B&C
- Set frame for project
Establishing what it means to belong
Photography project

• Workshops – start and mid point
• Support resources for young people
• Uploading to Flickr
• Support for disability orgs to facilitate
• Analysis interviews
• Exhibitions
Photographing
Being a good friend is being understanding. Very important to me.

I am proud of my culture.

Music is my way of expressing myself.
Exhibiting

Being a good friend is very important to me

I am proud of my cultures

Music is my way of expressing myself

BELONGING
A Photographic Exhibition Which Speaks

December 3rd, 2013
Young people’s connections to place and people

Places:
• Home
• Virtual worlds
• Disability services and schools

People:
• Family
• Friends
• Support workers

At soccer, best buddies and mates. By Martin
How these connections affected identity

- Capability
- Creativity
- Gender
- Culture
- Transitions
- Disability and impairment
- Regionality and rurality

*Drum snare. By John*
Being regional

- Sense of place – in or out of town
- Limited access to activities, goods and services
- Expanded sense of distance
- Being known – supportive AND intrusive
- Harder for some to reach ‘adult’ milestones (jobs, leaving home)

Dad picks me up each fortnight and takes me to his house. By Katie
What helped young people feel a sense of belonging and connection?

• Mutuality and reciprocity in relationships
  – Family as a foundation
  – Depth in friendship
  – Feeling a sense of alliance with others

• Recognition of capability
  – Being respected
  – Being understood and valued
  – Having a sense of agency

• Sense of place
  – Feeling and being safe
  – Feeling comfortable, relaxed and secure
  – Physical and virtual connections
What hindered belonging and connection?

- Discord in families
- Loneliness
- Unacknowledged loss & grief
- Violence & abuse

- Struggle in accepting unwanted care
- Feeling like you don’t fit in
- Lack of access

- Lack of authority over decisions
- Not having enough to do
- Distance/lack of transport

Unwanted support. By Jums
Implications for young people, policy and practice, and research

For young people:

- It was important to young people that their capability and agency is recognised.
- The multiple identities of young people need to be recognised.
- Relationships are critical for establishing and sustaining young people’s sense of belonging and connection.
- Being known and valued is a core requirement for a secure sense of belonging and personal identity.
Implications (contd)

For policy:

- Support needs to focus on relationship development as a priority
- A dual focus on developing the capacity of individual young people as well as groups and communities is needed
- Virtual connections matter to young people, and should be explored further for connecting young people and for information dissemination
- Violence and interpersonal harm damage belonging and connection. Action is needed in prevention, minimisation, response and recovery.
- Sensitive support to acknowledge and address unacknowledged grief and loss is needed for young people
Implications (contd)

For communities
- Place is a foundational site for relationships, and young people avoid going where they don’t feel welcome.
- Living in regional towns can make it harder to meet transitional milestones.

For further research
- Accessible methods such as these enable young people to share their experiences and generate rich and deep understanding of their lives.
- Emerging knowledge about belonging and connection needs further empirical testing using stronger conceptual framing.
- The high rates of negative experiences in young people’s lives warrant further exploration as a matter of priority.
- More research is needed to see how this study might extend or modify theories about recognition, identity, social inclusion and disability.
For further information, and contact

www.belonging.net.au – for some of the young people’s photography and the report: full, summary and easy-read versions

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Some reflections arising from recent work...your thoughts, experiences?

- the ethics and practice of research with young people with high(er) support needs
- recognising the significance of negative experiences (individually and collectively), without allowing them to ontologically dominate
- distinctions between policy-focused and theoretically-oriented research
- tensions and opportunities in involving those who support young people in formal and informal ways