# Spaces of belonging - High Level Messages

**Introduction**

This project is a collaboration between Disabled Persons’ Assembly Aotearoa New Zealand, Imagine Better and the University of Waikato to create new knowledges, practices and spaces of belonging. The overall aim of the project is to understand disabled people’s experiences of belonging, place and community. The project addresses political struggles, exclusion and marginalisation of disabled people within everyday social, economic, and political places and spaces.

**Why is this research important?**

Disabled people are often considered as not belonging or as being ‘out of place’. Everyday spaces – such as schools, streets, workplaces – often exclude disabled people. There are many challenges for disabled people to access, occupy, and use places and spaces. Built environments and transport do not often consider bodily or cognitive differences. Additionally, discriminatory social attitudes and behaviours may be felt in particular places.

In disability‐related social policy, ‘access’ and ‘participation’ have become the main drivers for understanding inclusion. Yet, as some disability writers suggest, this may lead to disabled people living ‘in but not of’ their spaces and. Governments spend large amounts of time and money counting, categorising and monitoring disabled people, documenting their differences. While baseline quantitative data is important, it only tells a partial story of the lived experiences of being disabled. It may be easy to suggest that inclusion has been achieved by counting an increasing number of disabled people in community. It is less easy to conclude that inclusion has been achieved by asking disabled people how they feel about their experience of being in community spaces. There is a noticeable absence of the accounts of people’s lived experience of being in and out of place in research and policy.

Belonging as a concept has the potential to move beyond a simple critique of disabling power towards the construction of new knowledge that enhances understandings of difference, diversity and disability. Belonging can help widen understandings of what it means to feel in and / or out of place by drawing attention to the lived – embodied and emotional – elements. Belonging, unlike common understandings of inclusion, is not something that can be easily quantified and measured.

**Who was involved?**

Participants were a diverse group. Ages ranged from early 20s to 65 plus, and they had a range of occupations. Many of them work (9), in both paid and unpaid roles, in the disability sector. Some are unemployed and others work part-time. Incomes ranged from less than $25,000 per annum to over $65,000 per annum. An even number own and rent their houses. Five men and 10 women participated in the research.

Some people identified as straight or heterosexual, others identified as queer or bisexual, and others chose not to specify their sexual identity. They have a range of relationship statuses, including married, defacto, and single. The majority identified as Pākehā or New Zealand European. One person identified as Māori and one as Pacifica.

Eleven participants are disabled and four are family members of someone who has a disability. They spoke of a range of impairments and bodily differences, including: chronic illness; mobility impairment; sensory impairment; acquired and congenital impairment; mental illness; and, learning disability. Some talked about their disability as visible and/or invisible.

**What did the research involve?**

Fifteen people were interviewed about their experience of belonging / not belonging. In-depth semi structured individual and focus group interviews provide rich insights into embodiment, feelings of (not) belonging, place, and the importance of other aspects of identity, such as age, gender, sexuality, and ethnicity.

This research places disabled people’s experiences at the centre. Participants were able to speak about the highs and lows of their everyday lives, places that inhabit, as well as places they avoid. Disability research invariably continues to be researcher-oriented, and based around the intentions and agendas of (non-disabled) researchers and funding agencies, rather than the subjects of the research. The knowledge of ‘experts’ continues to be privileged over disabled people’s expert knowledge about their own lives. This research challenges the exclusion of disabled people and their concerns from the production of knowledge

**Some emerging themes**

1. **Importance of disability spaces**

People reflected on intentionally created disability spaces – organisations or groups – as well as improvised spaces – disabled people who identified each other and connected in non-disability specific spaces. These spaces formed around both political and social reasons. Some noted that disability-specific spaces help create feelings of safety and strength.

Some disability spaces create comfort for people, because accessibility and/or inclusion could be expected; that needs would be understood and accommodated automatically, or that there would be little questioning of needs. This was an important difference to non-disability spaces.

Others spoke about the frustration of disability spaces where needs were still not met, despite assumptions that they would be. Some talked about feeling as though they didn’t fit within existing disability spaces, or fearing that you wouldn’t be accepted by other disabled people, because of age, race, impairment, among other things. Some people didn’t feel that they belonged in, but would like to be part of, disability spaces.

Some people spent little time in disability spaces, either by choice or not, and had ambivalent feelings about how or if they wanted to be in these spaces more. Others spent a lot of time in disability spaces – and had different and/or variable senses of comfort and belonging in those spaces.

Disability spaces gave people opportunities to identify common experiences as common experiences; learn new ways of talking about and understanding disability; and to share useful information about resources, systems, technology, or strategies that helped navigate the experience of disability. All of these conversations pushed beyond ideas of ‘inclusion’, to what did or did not create a sense of ‘belonging.’

1. **Encounters in public spaces**

People spoke about a range of public spaces, including cafés, libraries, hobby clubs, playgrounds, pubs, and on the street. In particular, conversations focused on the types of interactions they have with people in public spaces, how people respond to them, and how people’s responses made them feel. They talked about interactions with strangers, people they see regularly but don’t know well, as well people you were just getting to know.

Conversations highlighted the attitudes and reactions of people that they meet in public spaces. For the most part, they talked about people’s discriminatory attitudes. People staring, laughing, unsolicited offers of ‘help’, inappropriate questions about bodies, and judgement and assumptions about impairment were discussed. There was a feeling that the way in which non-disabled people react towards disabled people effects disabled people’s sense of belonging.

People’s responses to access-needs also was discussed in relation to belonging. It was suggested that acknowledgement of the diversity of people’s access needs - even if needs could not be met - is important for making a space feel inclusive. Alternatively, it could signal that disabled people were not welcome or even considered in a space.

1. **School**

For those of you with lived experience of disability, it was clear that school had a huge impact on your sense of self, both as children and as adults. Many people reflected back to their time at school and recounted, in detail, stories about the difficulty of finding a place at school to belong. There was talk about the education system being informed by a medical model of disability, which prioritises therapy and intervention over education. It seemed that many of you carried the memories of school - and the emotions involved - into adulthood.

Parents of disabled children spoke about the importance of their children having friends. For parents, their sense of belonging seemed to be intimately connected to how well they felt their child is accepted and included at school. Uneven power relations between parents and teachers was talked about as challenging parents’ sense of belonging.

1. **Work spaces**

Work spaces also received a lot of attention. Some of you work in traditional workspaces, such as offices, and some of you are self-employed and work from home. Conversations highlighted the way in which able-bodied assumptions are often built into workplaces. For example, there are expectations about: hours of work and inflexible working conditions; offices with standing desks; invasive questions from colleagues about equipment; and, limited understandings about impairment and disability.

Work is a place, where for some participants, you feel that you are under surveillance and scrutiny. There was conversation about feeling as though your bodies - and ability to perform your work duties - were on display. Some of you talked about feeling judged and so use different strategies to minimise the visibility of your impairment.

1. **Dating and Relationship**

One of the topics that arose from the interviews was about sex, dating, gender and sexual identities. We note, from other research, that not many disabled people have had the chance to speak about sex and dating. Some of you talked about ‘sexy encounters’, including where and how sexual encounters do(not) take place. Cafès, restaurants, bars and online dating websites are some of the places where people felt in (and) or out of place.