**Summary**

The *Space, Place and Relationships* project explored how young people with cognitive disability living in regional areas of Australia view and experience belonging and connection. By asking young people to answer research questions about belonging and connection through interviews, pictorial mapping and a photographic project, the research provided new evidence to support the development of policy and programs that are responsive to the expressed needs and desires of young people.

Three groups of young people, aged 12 to 24, participated in the project, from Gladstone (Queensland), Central Gippsland (Victoria) and Lismore (NSW). An online survey of young people with cognitive disability in other regional communities was undertaken. The project was a partnership of university and community researchers, led by the Centre for Children and Young People at Southern Cross University and the UNSW Social Policy Research Centre, Strathclyde University (UK), NSW Council for Intellectual Disability and Children with Disability Australia.

**Background**

Little is known about the ways that young people with cognitive disability connect with places and people, or about their perspectives on belonging, particularly within regional communities. Researchers and policy makers don’t really know what helps young people with disability feel like they matter. We do know that connectedness and a sense of belonging are not only critically important for wellbeing but also for understanding inclusion and exclusion. In order to support responsive social policy aimed at providing well-targeted, individualised support for young people with cognitive disability, there is a very evident need to improve understandings of the ways in which they develop meaningful and fulfilling relational connections within and beyond families, schools, programs and services, and the local community.

This research investigated the lived experience of belonging and connection for young people with cognitive disability living in regional communities. Specifically, the research supported young people to explore the enablers and barriers to belonging and connection, including any perceived impact of living in a regional community. The views of young people on participating in research and potentially influencing policy decisions at local, state and federal levels were also gathered through the research process.

**Learning**

The project team learnt a lot about working at a distance in this project. A creative approach was required in order to keep participants engaged. Young people learnt skills in photography and research. They developed stronger understanding about personal identity and contributed meaningfully as co-researchers.

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**Exploring how young people with cognitive disability living in regional areas of Australia view and experience belonging and connection through the Space, Place and Relationships project**

**Dr Sally Robinson and Professor Anne Graham**
Centre for Children and Young People

In collaboration with **Malcolm Hill Emeritus Professor** Childhood Studies Strathclyde University; **Karen Fisher Associate Professor** UNSW Social Policy Research Centre; **Kylie Valentine** NSW Council for Intellectual Disability Children with Disability Australia.
and collaborators. Service providers were both engaged and challenged by a number of elements of the project. As the photographic projects progressed, they conceptualised their ‘service users’ as more complex individual people as a result of observing and facilitating their involvement in the research.

**Outcomes**

Three groups of young people completed photographic research projects in their local communities in Gladstone, Central Gippsland and Lismore documenting the people, places and activities important to them.

All participants in the project were involved in the analysis of their data, identifying the most important images and selecting those they wished to show others. Early analysis of the research data revealed new knowledge emerging from this approach around relationships, work and friendship.

These selected images formed the foundation of public exhibitions of their work as artists and researchers in each community, profiled in regional art galleries and at high status events.

This project was considered significant because of its inclusive methodology, the new knowledge it is bringing to the field, and its regional focus.

**Impact**

Young people with cognitive disability benefitted from their direct participation in the project, developing capacity as photographers and researchers. They reported enjoying the research process and demonstrated significant learning about research and about belonging.

Support workers, their organisations and the family members of people who participated in the research benefitted from seeing the person they know viewed as someone other than a service user. Many comments were made about how much workers in particular learned about young people in the course of the project, and how much they know, and have conveyed.

The research community benefits from the successful demonstration and application of an inclusive research methodology which involved people with significant cognitive disability in the conceptualisation, data collection, data analysis, report writing and dissemination of results.

The funders of the research, the Department of Social Services, benefitted from the findings of the research to inform future policy and program development. The project was funded under the National Disability Strategy, and the outcomes have direct implications for current large scale change occurring at regional and national levels, most notably the operationalisation of the National Disability Insurance Scheme. Research outcomes will contribute to broader, important research agendas concerning wellbeing and the development of identity, resilience and personal safety.

The constant to-and-fro generated by the intensive nature of the photographic research projects in each site has built strong research relationships with each of the three groups. The public photographic exhibition in each location which concludes the project for young people enables the project to finish with a demonstration of their capacity, perceptiveness and artistic ability.

**Recognition**

This project received the Excellence in Community Engagement Award for Community Engaged Research in 2013. It was also awarded the Vice Chancellor’s Award for Excellence in Community Engagement in 2013.

**Awards Category**

Community Engaged Research

**Good practice principles**

Empowerment, young people, inclusiveness, participation, trust, respect, community engaged research.

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