

**Participation in Government Disability Advisory
Bodies in Australia: An Intellectual Disability
perspective**

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Table of Contents

Acknowledgements	ii
List of Tables	viii
List of Case Studies.....	ix
List of Figures	ix
Abstract	x
Statement of authorship	xii
Chapter One	1
Introduction.....	1
Introduction	1
Identifying the research need.....	1
Policy context for the study	3
Significance of this study	4
Research questions and thesis structure	9
Summary	12
Chapter Two	13
A review of the literature	13
Introduction	13
Citizenship and the right to participate	14
Forums for citizen participation	21
People with an intellectual disability participating: Having a real say	25
Empowerment.....	34
Self advocacy and participation	39

Supporting participation	43
Summary	46
Chapter Three	49
Policy context	49
Introduction	49
The growth of participatory policymaking in Australia	50
Political participation: Representation and representativeness.....	53
Rights-based legislation and policy: Enabling participation.....	55
Intellectual disability and participation.....	58
Self Advocacy and participation.....	63
Participation and different levels of government	66
The current Australian disability policy context	69
The USA approach	76
The Canadian approach	79
The UK approach.....	85
Summary	91
Chapter Four	94
Methodology	94
Introduction	94
Research questions	94
Theoretical perspective.....	95
Research with people with an intellectual disability	97
Research methods.....	100
The researcher in the research.....	102
Research design.....	104

Data collection	117
Data Analysis.....	128
Limitations.....	135
Summary	138
Chapter Five.....	139
Personal and political orientations to participation.....	139
Introduction	139
Introducing the people	140
Democratic orientation: Participation as a right.....	143
Summarising the democratic orientation.....	155
Professional orientation: Participation as a status	157
Summarising the professional orientation	166
Communitarian orientation: Participation as community involvement	169
Summarising the communitarian orientation.....	178
A typology of participation orientation	179
Summary	183
Chapter Six.....	187
Disability advisory bodies: Structure, function and the participatory experience	187
Introduction	187
Experiences of participation.....	192
Mediating factors: Level of government and terms of reference	219
Participating in meetings.....	224
Summary	228

Chapter Seven.....	231
Supporting participation	231
Introduction	231
Support for citizen participation: Challenges for people with an intellectual disability	233
Equality of opportunity to participate	235
Supportive relationships.....	236
Types of participation support within disability advisory bodies	239
Individual support.....	242
Shared and collegiate support	255
Procedural support	264
Greentown advisory body: A composite model of support	272
Outcomes of support: Empowerment?.....	275
Summary	279
Chapter Eight.....	282
Conclusions	282
Introduction	282
Orientation and representation	283
Supporting participation through changing structures and building supportive relationships	288
Conclusion and implications for practice.....	294
Implications for policy and practice	296
References	302
Appendix One Overview of the Disability Advisory Bodies	319
Appendix Two Central Research Participants.....	321
Appendix Three Description of Advisory Bodies	322

Appendix Four Consent Form.....	334
Appendix Five Information Form.....	335
Appendix Six Information Form (words and pictures)	339
Appendix Seven Advisory Body Information and Consent Form	340
Appendix Eight Interview Framework	341
Appendix Nine Secondary Respondent Interview Schedule	344

LIST OF TABLES

Table 1.	Research Participants	114
Table 2.	Study sites	115
Table 3.	Secondary participants	116
Table 4.	Data collection methods	118
Table 5.	Complete data set	135
Table 6.	Overview of people and their participatory experiences	142
Table 7.	Participation orientation typology	180
Table 8.	Indicators of level of formality	188
Table 9.	Approaches to participation support	241

LIST OF CASE STUDIES

Case study 1	Democratic orientation: Jana and Karla	143
Case study 2	Professional orientation: Hanna and Andy	158
Case study 3	Communitarian orientation: Phillip, Martin, Tyler and Christine	169
Case study 4	Highly Formal: Northern disability advisory body	194
Case study 5	Semi formal: Southern disability advisory body	204
Case study 6	Informal: Greentown disability advisory body	211
Case study 7	Individual support: Karla and Nancy	243
Case study 8	Individual support: Jana and Sandy	244
Case study 9	Individual support: Andy and Sandy	245
Case study 10	Shared and collegiate support: Seascape disability advisory body	257
Case study eleven	Shared and collegiate support: Hilltown disability advisory body	259
Case study twelve	Procedural support: Northern disability advisory body	266
Case study thirteen	Procedural support: Southern disability advisory body	268
Case study fourteen	Composite support: Greentown disability advisory body	273

LIST OF FIGURES

Figure 1	Components of meaningful participation	298
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ABSTRACT

This qualitative study examined the participatory experiences of people with an intellectual disability as members of government disability advisory bodies in Australia. These forums are one of the strategies adopted by governments to enable people with an intellectual disability to participate in the formulation of social policy. Such opportunities have arisen from progressive policy that frames people with an intellectual disability as full citizens with equal rights to inclusion and participation in society.

Little research has considered how people with an intellectual disability experience the participatory opportunities that have grown from this recognition of their rights. This reflects the more traditional focus on their status and participation as consumers and service users. The central question of this study is how people with an intellectual disability experience participation in government advisory bodies, and how such forums can be inclusive and meaningful.

This study positions people with an intellectual disability as the experts about their own experiences by relying primarily on their first person accounts of their experiences. Ethnographic and case study methods were employed including in-depth interviews with the central participants, document analysis, observation of the work of the advisory bodies and interviews with others involved in advisory

bodies. Analysis led to the development of a typology of participation that describes the political and personal orientations people have to participation. The study found that structures and the processes used by advisory bodies can mediate people's experiences; however more significantly, the experiences of people with intellectual disability are shaped by their perception of how they are regarded by others. Central to this is the efficacy of support based on the development of collegiate relationships, similar to the notion of civic friendship described by Reinders (2002), rather than support that is solely focussed on tangible accommodations

The study concludes that citizen participation bodies have not fully recognised the personal and political potential of members with an intellectual disability. It presents evidence that people with an intellectual disability are capable of this form of participation, can provide legitimate and informed perspectives on policy and can engage meaningfully, given full recognition of their capacity to participate as well as structures and processes that enable this.

STATEMENT OF AUTHORSHIP

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