Disability Work Matters: Employment Opportunities for Disabled People in the New Zealand Disability Sector

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Abstract

Although disabled citizens represent almost a quarter of the total population in Aotearoa New Zealand, they experience significant and persistent barriers to employment. This research examined the barriers and enablers to employment for disabled New Zealanders, both generally and those specifically relevant to the disability sector. The research had four aims: to examine the navigation of family, identity, and education by disabled people; to identify barriers to paid employment in both mainstream and disability sector settings; to investigate potential employment enablers; and develop recommendations. This research employed a qualitative thematic analysis approach, underpinned by the social model of disability and the theoretical concepts of Pierre Bourdieu, guiding interpretation of results. The study began with a focus group of six disabled people, to discuss possible themes for the research. Results from the focus group were then developed further to inform interviews with 13 disabled and 12 nondisabled people, on topics relating to: the navigation of family, identity, and education by disabled people; barriers to paid employment in mainstream and disability sector employment; and potential employment enablers.

Key research findings include: the development of individual agency is critical to build the resilience necessary to navigate many environmental, structural, and attitudinal barriers encountered in education and employment; similar employment barriers are experienced by disabled people in all employment settings; the creation of opportunities for employers to meet with disabled people could be valuable and may lead to job offers; time-limited voluntary work, which includes pathways to paid employment, may assist to both allay employer apprehension, and enable disabled people to demonstrate capability. Research strongly suggests that the disability sector would benefit from including the lived experience of disability as a key competency for employment within a sector which exists in the name of disabled people. Ensuring disabled people achieve greater authority in their sector is an equity issue in urgent need of attention, and this study takes a step forward to address this need.

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Dedication

To Don, who initially suggested I begin academic study as long ago as 1985. Little did he know how much time would ultimately be devoted to this. Without you, none of this would have been possible.

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Abbreviations

ACC – Accident Compensation Corporation

ADA – Americans with Disabilities Act

DP – Disabled person

EEO – Equal employment opportunity/ies

EGL – Enabling Good Lives

DPOs – Disabled People’s Organisations

DPOs Coalition – Disabled People’s Organisations Coalition

GFC – Global financial crisis

HRC – Human Rights Commission

MS – Microsoft

MSD – Ministry of Social Development

NGO – Non-governmental organisation

NZDS – New Zealand Disability Strategy

NZDSN – New Zealand Disability Support Network

ODI – Office for Disability Issues

PDF – Portable Document Format

PS – Public Service

SSC – State Services Commission

UK – United Kingdom

USA – United States of America

UNCRPD – United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities

WHO –World Health Organization

Glossary

Term	Definition
Agency	An agentic capacity to control various aspects of life through self-directed actions (Delva et al., 2021; Målqvist, 2018).
Capital	Individuals determining their positions within the social structure, and influencing social behaviours through accruing not only economic, but also social and cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1986).
Disability disclosure	Where some disabled people reveal impairment related information and associated impacts (The South Western and Western Sydney National Disability Officer Coordinator Program, 2021).
Disability movement	The general name given to the Disability Rights Movement, a global social movement seeking equal opportunities and rights for all disabled people (Stace, 2015).
Disability pride	The uniqueness of disabled people is acknowledged as being part of the diversity of humanity. Pride is often manifested through the collective holding of events within the disabled community or as individual acts where disabled people express confidence in, and positively affirm, their disability identity (De Vault, 2023).
Disability responsiveness	Social model based training developed and delivered by disabled people to educate nondisabled people to become more responsive to the needs of disabled people (Office for Disability Issues, n.d.).
Disability sector	Includes organisations designed to work on disability related policies, programmes, and advocacy for disabled people in government workplaces and non-governmental organisations (Office for Disability Issues, 2022d).
Disability support service providers	Charitable organisations traditionally lead and managed by largely nondisabled people, that provide a set level of funded

	services to disabled people.
Disabled People’s Organisations	National and locally-based organisations sanctioned by the United Nations to advocate for disabled people, largely managed and staffed by nondisabled people (Office for Disability Issues, 2023a).
Diversity	The practice or quality of including or involving people from different minority groups, such as disabled people.
Enabling Good Lives (EGL) approach	A set of principles and tools which affirm the right of disabled people to choose what a good life looks like for them, with financial and other supports (Enabling Good Lives, n.d.).
Environmental barriers	Barriers encountered by disabled people to the social, built and digital environments (Workbridge, 2020).
Equal Employment Opportunities	The practice of hiring ‘the best person for the job’, regardless of characteristics such as disability (Benshoff et al., 2014).
Eugenics	The belief that medicine could produce perfect human beings and end social ills through controlling genetic heredity. Methods employed included the sterilisation, segregation, and social exclusion of individuals deemed genetically unfit to reproduce (Galton, 1883).
Field	Bordieusian theory which identifies various domains or fields, within which capital can be accumulated.
Functional limitation	Limitation(s) in areas such as seeing, hearing, physical mobility, communication, cognition, and self-care (World Health Organization, 2001).
Habitus	Bordieusian theory which describes a set of skills and social resources developed in childhood and shaped throughout life, that govern the interactions of individuals with the world around them (Huang, 2019). Different habitus exist for people from different environments/backgrounds and each habitus comes with its own set of knowledge and skills.

Learning disability	Disabled people who experience difficulties accessing education, knowledge, and skills due to impairment to cognitive functioning. People with learning disabilities may need additional supports or accommodations to participate in society through having, for example, information available in Easy Read, plain language, or visual formats and other practices (Mencap, n.d.).
Lived experience of disability	The experience of living a disabled life (Wheeler, 2004).
Mainstream participation	Inclusion of disabled people in all aspects of community life, rather than directing participation through ‘special’, segregated, repetitive and routinised activities within institutions (United Nations Relief and Works Agency, 2013).
Medical model of disability	A belief that disabled people are a problem to be fixed, or institutionalised if this is not possible (Office for Disability Issues, 2022d).
Mental distress	Sometimes referred to as psychological distress, it refers to non-specific symptoms of stress, anxiety, and depression that people may experience (Healthe-University, n.d.).
Mimetic forces	A process where organisations and individuals imitate the desires of other human beings, often with the desire to be as successful as other individuals or organisations, sometimes referred to as 'mediated desire’ (Wheeler, 2004).
Narrative data	Process that organises data into a specific structure crafting a visual story instead of presenting figures (Delve, 2020).
Neurodiversity	Describes the concept that people experience and interact with the environment around them in many different ways. Neurodiversity commonly refers to the brain diversity of all people but is most commonly used when referring to specific neurodivergent groups such as autistic people, people with ADHD, or who have learning disabilities (Baumer & Frueh, 2021).

Nondisabled	People who do not identify as disabled (National Center on Disability and Journalism, 2021).
Personalised budgets	One of the tools of the EGL approach, which can be used by disabled people to purchase goods and services that help them to achieve a good life (Enabling Good Lives, 2023).
Praxis	Accepted practice or custom.
Psychosocial disability	Arises where someone experiencing mental distress interacts with a social environment that presents a barrier to their equality with others (NSW Health, 2023).
Quantitative approach	Research technique used to collect and analyse numerical data which can then be used to find patterns and averages, test causal relationships and general results to wider population groups (Bhandari, 2023).
Reasonable accommodations	Changes that can be made to working environments, work practices or elements of a job, to ensure that a disabled person can successfully perform in the workplace (Ministry of Social Development, n.d.).
Social model of disability	Concept which holds that disability is socially constructed through the interactions of people with impairments and environments where there are physical, attitudinal, communication, and/or social barriers in place which disable them (Oliver, 2013).
Stigmatisation	The act of regarding someone unfairly through societal disapproval based on personal characteristics such as disability.
Supported employment	A six-step approach to meeting the needs of some disabled people to gain and retain employment with ongoing support (New Zealand Disability Support Network, n.d.).
Symbolic violence	Bourdieusian theory of accounting for the tacit, almost unconscious modes of cultural/social domination occurring

	within the everyday social habits maintained over conscious subjects (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 2005).
Thematic analysis	A method for analysing information derived from qualitative methods that involves looking for patterns to find themes (Dovetail, 2023).

Locating the Researcher

I am a mature blind woman, who experienced considerable periods of unemployment and underemployment after leaving school at 15 years of age. I have long felt frustrated by the negative attitudes and assumptions of nondisabled people, relating to the capabilities of disabled people, particularly with respect to employment. A good deal of my life has therefore been spent questioning and challenging these negative attitudes, often at considerable cost to my own career opportunities, through lengthy periods of unemployment, and chronic underemployment, to being denied employment opportunities based on bigotry.

My academic journey began with strong encouragement from my husband, who believed I was capable not only of achieving academically, but also establishing a worthwhile career. My professional work-life began in 1989, when I started a three-year career as a social worker, first in care and protection, and then community social work. After moving from my home in Christchurch to the Hutt Valley, I began what turned out to be an 18-year role as National Manager of the (then) Mainstream Supported Employment Programme, mostly based at the (then) State Services Commission, now Public Service Commission.

In 2010 I began working for myself, managing several contracts for both State and disability sector non-governmental organisations. During this time, I was also employed part-time at the office of the Health and Disability Commissioner, followed by a position with the (then) Capital and Coast District Health Board, now Te Whatu Ora – Health New Zealand. After successfully completing a two-year full-time role focusing on quality improvement in residential disability support services at the Ministry of Health, I launched my company Disability Responsiveness New Zealand Ltd in 2016, to provide disability-related education and training. I am currently working as a Principal Advisor to the Royal Commission into Abuse in Care.

The present research is a natural progression from my own unemployment and employment experiences, and those of other disabled people with whom I have been fortunate enough to connect. The establishment of Whaikaha, the Ministry of Disabled People, and the forthcoming rollout of Enabling Good Lives, makes this a particularly interesting time to conduct and complete disability- and employment-focused research, especially that which relates to leadership and management of the New Zealand disability sector by disabled people. The research was conducted between 2018 and 2023.

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Chapter One: Introduction

Introduction

The issue of employment for disabled people remains, in the words of a 1998 study by Barnes et al., “a moving target for research” (p. 4). Indeed, research on employment barriers and enablers relevant to disabled people has been undertaken for many years (Fadyl et al., 2022; Fuchs, 1949). Studies have examined various obstructions and mitigations to work, such as how particular types of impairment impact employment opportunities, from the perspectives of both disabled people and employers (Abidi & Sharma, 2014; Agovino et al., 2019; Bonaccio et al., 2020; Friedman, 2020; Netto et al., 2016). However, much of the research has highlighted the obstacles, with less attention being focused on practical recommendations for barrier mitigation (Levitt, 2017; Van Dalen, 2018, 2019). Moreover, research does not appear to have focused on barriers and enablers to employment of disabled people in the disability sector itself (Davies & Butler, 2022; Te Pou o Te Whakaaro Nui [Te Pou], 2013). The present study investigates the employment opportunities, barriers, and factors for success experienced by disabled people wishing to work in the New Zealand disability sector, and those already employed in the sector, seeking promotion. The present research takes the position that disabled people are the natural leaders and managers of the disability sector (Branfield, 1998). Taking a disabled person first approach may have policy implications, since while many of the obstacles applicable to disabled people examined in this thesis are common across all employment settings, several barriers are specific to the disability sector. Such barriers often relate to the embodied experience of impairment, and what disability is perceived to mean to disability sector organisations. The present study asserts that lived experience of disability is a critical competency in a sector established to serve disabled people and should be considered as such by all who speak or act in their name, including politicians and policy makers (Branfield, 1998).

The research utilises the writings of French theorist Pierre Bourdieu (1977, 1980, 1986, 1996b) to highlight the influence of early childhood and identity-building on the capability of disabled people to deploy self-determination and build networks that can lead to employment. The ability to utilise an agentic capacity to control various aspects of life through self-directed actions (Delva et al., 2021; Målqvist, 2018), is a critical enabler disabled people can deploy to mitigate a number of challenges associated with daily life including in employment.

This chapter introduces the present study, beginning with a discussion of differences between disability and impairment. The importance of work is highlighted, including aspects of employment and unemployment relating to disabled people. The genesis of the study is considered, and the theoretical perspectives utilised are outlined.

Disability and Impairment

Taking a social model view, the British Council of Organisations of Disabled People (as cited in Engster, 2015) stated:

> Disability is the disadvantage or restriction of activity caused by a society which takes little or no account of people who have impairments and thus excludes them from mainstream activity. Therefore, disability, like racism or sexism, is discrimination and social oppression. (p. 2)

Disability occurs when a dominant group designs built and other environments, based on their world view, without considering the needs of disabled people (Oliver, 2013). People may also be ‘disabled’ by impairment (Lindsay, 2011; Wheeler, 2004), lack of agency (Delva et al., 2021; Wheeler, 2017), limited access to community support (Cavanagh et al., 2017; Low, 2001), and the negative attitudes and assumptions which exist in the minds of many individuals (Finkelstein, 1980; Friedman, 2019). Some employers take the view that impairment equates to an insurmountable barrier to work, for disabled people (Gustafsson et al., 2013). However, while some barriers can be removed through individual effort, for instance learning to use the technological solutions available at a given time, other obstacles may not be as relevant to particular individuals (Wheeler, 2004), for instance physical access issues might be irrelevant to someone with a neurological impairment. Where disabled people possess the agency and the means to action that agency, they can take an atomised view of barriers and decide for themselves whether to make the effort to try to remove them, or ignore them completely (Danieli & Wheeler, 2006).

Although the social model offers some useful guidance relating to social and environmental barriers which are acknowledged as representing major challenges to disabled people, the current study illustrates that disabled research participants clearly adopt strategies based on their agency to overcome many discriminatory challenges.

The Importance of Work

Employment is a defining measure of identity, worth, and social validation in western society (Fadyl et al., 2022; Modini et al., 2016; Netto et al., 2016). Paid work is widely acknowledged as an important source of financial independence (Bealing et al., 2017), self-esteem (Kulik, 2018), social status (Lewis et al., 2011), and mental wellbeing (Long et al., 2019; Scullion et al., 2019). Research indicates that similar work ethics and values tend to be held by the majority of people with respect to employment and what this means to them (Amankwah & Boxall, 2022). However, while it appears that men and women employed full-time with tertiary level qualifications are more concerned with pay and career prospects than those who work part-time (Johri, 2005), job security and the quality of employment have been reported as outranking pay and career mobility, in terms of importance, for working people around the world (Amankwah & Boxall, 2022).

It is well established that the motivating factors related to seeking employment, such as access to financial security and social benefits, are generally equivalent for both nondisabled and disabled people (Fadyl et al., 2022; Gustafsson et al., 2013; Sundar et al., 2018). While many disabled individuals want to work (Workbridge, 2020), research indicates that individuals not in employment experience material hardship (Carey, 2022), including living in poverty (Allen, 2004; Emerson & Hatton, 2007; Wheeler, 2017). Additional negative influences that prohibit inclusion can also prevent disabled people from accessing the education and training necessary to gain employment (Ameri et al., 2015; Bendick, 2018; Francis et al., 2018; Hart, 2019), accessible transport (Dolmage, 2017, p. 117; Kitching, 2014; Malhotra & Rowe, 2014; Woodley & Metzger, 2012), impairment specific supports, such as reasonable accommodations (Gluck, 2014; Kaye et al., 2011; Murfitt et al., 2018; Telwatte et al., 2017), the built, digital and social environments (Workbridge, 2020), and good quality healthcare (Francis et al., 2018; Hart, 2019; Morrison & MacNeill, 2022; Murfitt et al., 2018). Indeed, a vicious circle may develop whereby some disabled people require greater access to costly healthcare, exacerbating poverty, which further reduces access to education and employment opportunities, negatively impacting their health (Donald Beasley Institute, 2022; Perry et al., 2020). Moreover, the social and economic consequences of COVID-19 have aggravated the severity of adverse health conditions for many (Shakespeare et al., 2021; United Nations, 2020). Continuous exposure to such obstacles can ultimately erode the motivation and ability of disabled individuals to seek employment (Carroll et al., 2018).

While many disabled people wish to gain and retain paid work, including exercising choice about working full- or part-time, and whether to seek promotion, a number of structural and institutional barriers exist relating to their participation in the workforce, including within the disability sector itself. Misconceptions about the ability of disabled people to perform at work persist, and the supposed high costs of hiring disabled staff are regularly discussed in the literature (Fadyl et al., 2022; New Zealand Productivity Commission, 2013; Van Dalen, 2018, 2019). Such misconceptions are often fuelled by media marginalisation (Ford & MacNeill, 2017; Workbridge, 2020).

Disability issues have for many years been marginalised within the mainstream media, and the majority of nondisabled people control a narrative which is often wildly inaccurate (Orcan, 2019). The media strongly influences public perception, reinforcing unhelpful stereotypes, negatively impacting the lives of disabled New Zealanders, including their access to employment opportunities. Moreover, representations about disabled people within both the mainstream and social media tend to be unimaginative, for example presenting all blind people as possessing superhuman hearing (Beatson, 1981), objectifying disabled people as inspirational heroes for living ordinary lives (Young, 2014), or completely excluding the lived realities of disabled people (Ford & MacNeill, 2017).

Journalists wield tremendous power and influence (Bourdieu, 1996a). Representatives from all forms of media are in a privileged position in what Bourdieu refers to as the 'symbolic struggle' to ensure information is seen, heard, and believed. Further, the exclusion of disabled people from articles and stories about unemployment, together with the portrayal of them as interesting only when their stories inspire others, amounts to symbolic violence (Bourdieu, 1996a). Bourdieu viewed symbolic violence as being difficult to detect and even invisible to its victims (Dirk, 2020; Von Holdt, 2018).

The silencing of the life experiences, hopes, and dreams of disabled people in the broadcast media was a catalyst for the present study. On Sunday 4 March 2018, Radio New Zealand’s RNZ National aired an Insight documentary subtitled 'No Job, No Training, No Hope?' (Radio New Zealand, 2018). The website introduction to the documentary noted:

> The economy is going gangbusters and we’re in the middle of a construction boom, yet 80,000 young New Zealanders are not in work or training while immigrants are brought in to work as builders and bricklayers. How does a young person end up unemployed and uneducated, and are there processes in place to help those people get back on the ladder?

While the programme advised that the unemployment rate in New Zealand stood at 4.5% at that time, those not in employment, education or training (NEETs) made up 11.5%, as at February 2017. Māori and Pacific peoples, aggregated, represented 40% of NEETs, and 15% or 12,000 people were described as young women caregivers. Moreover, it was reported that each NEET was costing the country just over $21,000 annually in benefits and lost productivity. This equated to $1.5 billion each year. Since the previous census had reported that almost 70% of working-age disabled people were not in employment or undertaking education or training, it might have been expected that disabled youth would have featured strongly in this programme. However, this was not the case. The absence of information about disabled youth was particularly noticeable in light of benefit payments and lost tax revenue that accounted for $1.1 billion in 2016 (Workbridge / Allen & Clarke, 2016). However, the only mention of disabled people at all was in the passive role of those being cared for by young women "looking after an elderly or disabled relative".

The media holds symbolic capital through their power, and individuals or agents within this field often either completely ignore the lives of disabled people, or use the power associated with their status to misrepresent people who may hold little or no symbolic capital themselves. Further, the media must recognise and accept responsibility when exercising its symbolic power relating to the language they use in stories (Orcan, 2019). This is of critical importance, since language transmits assumptions that influence how disabled people both view themselves and are regarded by others (Gold & Auslander, 1999). For example, words such as suffering (Saetersdal, 1997), victim (Segarra, n.d.), and unfortunate (Holloway, 1991), along with frequent repetition of emotive and inaccurate phrases such as 'wheelchair bound' (Royal Australasian College of Surgeons, 2022), 'courageous in the face of adversity' (Bates, 2021), and assumptions of being 'endowed with special gifts' as compensation for affliction (Health and Disability Commissioner, n.d.), perpetuate negative stereotypes and convey useless pity for people already considered to be largely incapable (Young, 2014). Moreover, promulgation of unhelpful terminology such as ‘turning a blind eye’ or ‘experiencing crippling debt’ further negatively impacts the image employers and others have of disabled people and their abilities (Workbridge, 2020). The more negative this image is, the less likely employers are to consider hiring disabled people (Adams & Oldfield, 2012; Bendick, 2018; Burke et al., 2013). Rather than constantly perpetuating stigmatisation through stereotypical portrayals, the media could instead use its privileged position and influence to educate, represent, advocate, and promote responsiveness towards disabled people’s access to employment.

Researcher Positionality

Upon considering the absence of any disability perspective in the latter broadcast, I began to reflect on the many news items that discuss the needs of those who ‘care’ for disabled people, without including the views of disabled people themselves. The questions I considered at that time included:

- On rare occasions when media representatives are willing to discuss issues such as employment and unemployment rates of disabled people, why does this get filtered through largely nondisabled people, instead of being discussed directly with disabled people?
- Where does the mandate come from for relatives or organisations to speak on behalf of disabled people?
- Why can’t the media stop treating disabled people like museum specimens (Opie, 1957)?

It is not difficult to envisage how it might feel if a husband or wife or some agency professing to be experts on you, were the only people others spoke to about you and your life. Disabled youth should not have been excluded from representation in the RNZ documentary. These thoughts led to consideration of the way in which disabled people tend to be excluded from discussions about ourselves within our own sector, including the critical matter of employment within that sector.

This research builds on earlier master's-level study completed in 2004 by the author under her maiden name of Crothall, which focused on barriers and success factors pertinent to employment experienced by totally blind New Zealanders (Crothall, 2004). The research influenced reinstatement of job-search facilitators at that time, in the (then) Royal New Zealand Foundation for the Blind, now Blind and Low Vision New Zealand. The present study broadens the scope to include people with a range of impairments and employment issues within the broader workforce, and ultimately narrows the focus to the New Zealand disability sector.

Disability Sector Employment

In order for disabled people to be fairly represented in the workforce they must be included at all levels, and in all occupations. Such occupations include those designed to serve disabled people in government workplaces and non-governmental organisations (NGOs). According to the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD) (United Nations, 2006a), "disability results from the interaction between persons with impairments and attitudinal and environmental barriers that hinders their full and effective participation in society on an equal basis with others" (p. 1). Since there is a clear link between enabling disabled people to mitigate barriers and their representation in decision-making positions or positions of power, article 27(g) of the UNCRPD urges member nations to "Employ persons with disabilities in the public sector" (p. 20). While it could be assumed that a high number of disabled people may be employed in work specifically relating to issues pertaining to disability service provision, including in both government organisations and NGOs, this did not appear to be the case within the New Zealand government at least, prior to this study. For example, the New Zealand Public Service Commission (formerly State Services Commission) was no longer collecting disability-employment data for the State Sector in 2017 (OIA request response, 14 December 2017). Today, Statistics New Zealand only compares rates of employment for this group with the wider employment sector, where numbers of disabled people in employment are few and the disability pay gap is not so obvious. It is however acknowledged that there is now one New Zealand Public Service Chief Executive who identifies as disabled.

The present study aims to highlight barriers to employment participation for disabled people within the wider disability sector, and suggest mitigations to employment obstacles.

Theoretical Perspectives

A social constructionist epistemology (Burr, 2015; Good, 2001), the social model of disability (Berghs et al, 2019; Oliver, 1990b, 2013), and Pierre Bourdieu's theory of power (Bourdieu, 1977, 1980, 1986, 1996b), underpins this study. Social constructionism rejects the notion of one truth, pointing out the influence of historical beliefs and cultural norms and values in which people are imbedded (Burr, 2015). The social constructionist perspective is concerned with interactions between people and the role of language in constructing reality (Good, 2001; Mercadal, 2013; Walker, 2015). Thus, reality is constructed through discourse or conversation (Gergen, 2015; Sommers-Flanagan, 2015; Walker, 2015). This epistemological position addresses the nature of knowledge and the construction of meaning, in a way that is complementary to both the social model of disability and the works of Pierre Bourdieu.

The social model of disability arose in response to the medical model of disability, which was prominent in much of the western world during the first half of the 20th century. The medical model had earlier established professional power and control over disabled people who were considered incompetent and not worthwhile, although some were deemed suitable for treatment (Clifton, 2020). The International Classification of Impairments, Disabilities and Handicaps, published by the World Health Organization (WHO) in 1980, separated impairment from disability, linking disability to impairment only through deficit, and characterising the disadvantage as a ‘handicap’. At the time, the WHO believed that the individual was maladapted to the environment, while the social model of disability cited the environment and attitudinal negativity as constituting barriers to inclusion. However, the WHO acknowledged the role of environment in its updated International Classification of Functioning, Disability and Health in 2001 (WHO, 2001).

The concept known as the social model of disability was first discussed and documented by the Union of Physically Impaired Against Segregation and the Disability Alliance (1976). The idea that disability is external to, and not part of, people with impairments was further developed by Dr Vic Finkelstein in 1980. The model was eventually refined and enlarged upon by Dr Mike Oliver (1990b), into what is now generally referred to as the social model of disability. The social model has subsequently become a central philosophical tenet of the disability movement, promoted worldwide via the UNCRPD (United Nations, 2006a), to which many countries have acceded. Indeed, the model is at the centre of New Zealand legislation and strategic policies promoting personalised budgets for disabled people, such as Enabling Good Lives (EGL) (2019). The social model promotes equality of opportunity. It seeks to draw attention away from the medically orientated drive to minimise or eliminate impairment(s), and instead focus attention on removing barriers to the participation of disabled people in all aspects of community life (Beatson, 2004; Berghs et al, 2019; Iacovou, 2021). Overall, the model is concerned with the elimination of obstructions to participation experienced by disabled people, rather than focusing on medical diagnoses and cures (Good et al., 2017; Oliver, 2013).

The social model includes two major components relating to marginalisation: everyday structural barriers rooted in physical environments, that may not necessarily be relevant to many with health conditions, sensory or cognitive impairments, or neurodiversity; and the attitudinal aspects of others that tend to be experienced by many disabled people, particularly those with obvious functional limitations (Crothall, 2004; Wheeler, 2004). Attitudinal aspects are metaphysical, in that they are shaped by the values, beliefs, and assumptions made by many nondisabled people, about what it might be like to be disabled. However, such assumptions tend to be based on the world view of nondisabled people and may not include lived experience of disability (Wheeler, 2012). The social model holds that disability is both an equity and political issue, and not a medical problem to be fixed (Oliver, 2013).

While Finkelstein (2001) contended that disability oppression was initially largely medical, Wheeler (2004) argued that charities were the main cause and disseminators of such oppression. Indeed, the charitable model adopted by the majority of disability service providers and Disabled People's Organisations (DPOs), particularly in western countries, has tended to portray disabled people as figures of pity, deserving of sympathy from others (Wheeler, 2012). This philanthropic focus has kept disabled people in a state of excluded oppression, being done for and spoken about, by nondisabled people who often have little or no experience of disability. Wheeler contends that disability support services must be reframed to empower disabled people, rather than providing charity for them.

The social model has been described as a socially constructed classification with associated external experiences (Edwards & Imrie, 2003). However, this description appears to conflate impairment and disability somewhat. Perhaps a more helpful classification might be to define a medical model of impairment and a social model of disability.

While the social model (Oliver, 1990b, 2013) is referenced as an important framework within which to examine the social structural obstacles that beset disabled people, this study challenges the social model focus on external barriers, arguing that impairment is a critical part of the experience of disability that links embodiment to identity (Sherry, 2016). Attention to embodied experience does not mean that the research supports the medical model approach often associated with the eugenics movement (Galton, 1883), or in any way supports the standardisation of the human condition. Neither does it seek to individualise disability in favour of medical discourses (Wheeler, 2012), or disempower the political force of the disability movement (Campbell & Oliver, 1996). Rather, it simply recognises that the intersections between disabled embodiment and the built, digital, and social environments, work to produce different experiences of disability (Clifton, 2020). Therefore, disability research needs to take account of the contextual impacts of impairment (Huot et al., 2021), and what this may mean to individuals.

The details of the social model do not appear to be so important when most western economies are buoyant. However, when the global financial crisis (GFC) occurred in 2008, the situation deteriorated quickly for disabled people in the United Kingdom (Oliver, 2013). The GFC resulted in a greater emphasis being placed once again on impairment and difference, with less attention being focused on barriers. The resulting economic difficulties left disabled people at the mercy of neoliberal governments and self-interested charities (Wheeler, 2017). Cuts to social security benefits forced disabled people and non-governmental organisations (NGOs) to embrace the charitable model once again, pleading their case (with government and the public, often promulgated through social media) based on impairment, instead of focusing on the removal of barriers to participation in the community (Oliver, 2013). Disability-focused charities were forced to shrink and many closed (Wheeler, 2017). Oliver concluded that the GFC set the disability movement back 30 years prior to the introduction of the social model. It is therefore somewhat daunting to speculate on the possible long-term economic consequences on employment for disabled people in New Zealand resulting from recent climate change-related weather events, and COVID-19. Indeed, the pandemic has already highlighted the existing gap between employers who had previously brought workers into New Zealand to undertake low-status jobs, and the large pool of disabled people willing to work. While some disabled employees benefited from the labour shortage, access to many forms of employment may be short-lived now that overseas labour is once again available (J. Mosen, Workbridge Chief Executive, personal communication, July 11, 2022).

Along with the structural framework provided by the social model, this thesis draws heavily on Pierre Bourdieu’s concepts of primary and secondary habitus, capital, and field to highlight participant experiences of childhood influences, disability-identity, education, and employment.

The concept of habitus is the organisational and classificatory principles developed throughout life, upon which people form attitudes and base life decisions (Bourdieu, 1990; Huang, 2019). Habitus features two distinctions: primary habitus, formed through the norms, values and attitudes learned within the family; and secondary habitus, which includes formal and informal education and life experience. Bourdieu’s notion of the habitus not only plays a role in how disabled people are viewed by family and others, but also how they view themselves. This includes the way a person thinks, orientates, and interacts with the world and is judged by others, influenced by position in the field and by bodily capital. The notion of ‘otherness’ is relevant to the present study since it limits access by disabled people to the field of employment and the forms of capital that are recognised within this domain.

Bourdieu’s work is pertinent to the exclusion, marginalisation, and oppression experienced by disabled people, through his concept of capitals operating within given fields. In this case the field is the intersection between the employment and disability sectors. Bourdieu discusses the forms of capital central to providing positions within the field, such as economic capital, social capital (networks and connections), cultural capital (qualifications), and symbolic capital (the value given to the other forms of capital) (Bourdieu, 1986). The forms of capital that operate within the field structure the field and the opportunities for disabled people within that field.

Bourdieu’s constructs are concerned with identifying the social and cultural implications of systemic inequality, and are therefore considered most pertinent to the present study. While Bourdieu did not overtly recognise disability as a discreet identity in the development of his concepts, this research draws extensively on his work, because the concepts of habitus, capital, and field relate to many of the themes discussed by participants in this research. Bourdieu’s construct of symbolic violence is also highlighted from time to time, with respect to discrimination, exclusion, misrepresentation, and stigma.

Consideration of disability-employment from both the social model and Bourdieu’s perspectives point to a possible next step in the evolution of social models of disability, focusing on human rights, the individual impacts of impairment, and the criticality of agency. Such a focus is timely given the imminent introduction of personal budgets for disabled New Zealanders that will require that they both possess agency and know how to deploy it to achieve a good life.

Since the early 1970s, many disabled activists have challenged dominant ideologies and power structures by arguing, from a structuralist perspective, that disability is not linked to impaired bodies. Rather, disability has tended to be viewed as reducible to environmental barriers, coupled with negative attitudes, which create and reinforce disabling effects. The present research attempts to move theory forward by questioning the exclusion of impairment as a disabling factor within the social model. Including impairment alongside other forms of embodied difference, such as gender and ethnicity, facilitates recognition that oppression on the basis of disability is not experienced equally by disabled people. For example, “ … being Indigenous, having experiences of colonisation and institutionalisation, experiences of racism and discrimination, and living with disabilities gives rise to multiple identities that go unseen by people with or without experiences of disability" (Hickey & Wilson, 2017, p 2.). The present study takes the position that impairment has effects that can differentially disadvantage and disable, while also illustrating how disabled people use their agency to manage impairment and structural barriers. By applying Bourdieu's theory, this thesis attempts to overcome the inherent combined problems of structure and agency that are underdeveloped within the social model. Bourdieu's work illustrates that while structures exist inside organisations, many of which are symbolic and intangible, such as organisational culture, rather than merely describing these as barriers to be overcome each can be regarded as capital that can be accumulated through individual knowledge and praxis to metaphorically climb organisational hierarchies. The present study identifies that examining the lived experiences of disabled people requires a much more nuanced approach, one that can acknowledge the individual agency of disabled people to challenge structural issues and overcome some disabling effects within society.

Both the social model of disability and Bourdieu's concepts mesh with a social constructionist framework because disability is socially constructed. Although Bourdieu did not apply his theory of power to disability issues, his concepts have been examined and found to be valuable in relation to disability literature (Von Holdt, 2018). Thus, Bourdieu's work, alongside the social model of disability and a social constructionist epistemology, provides important perspectives highly relevant to this study.

Research Question and Objectives

The question addressed by this research is: what are the barriers, opportunities and factors for employment success experienced by disabled people working, or wishing to work, in the New Zealand disability sector? For the purposes of this study, the disability sector includes all work undertaken in the name of disabled people, within government departments (including the Public Service), and charitable NGOs, including providers of disability support services, and Disabled People’s Organisations.

This study includes the following objectives relating to the research question: (1) identify the impact of family, identity and education on the employment trajectory of disabled people; (2) outline and discuss the barriers to employment experienced by disabled New Zealanders, generally and those pertinent to the disability sector; (3) highlight enablers to employment success in all sectors; and (4) recommend strategies for the practical application of research findings that ultimately enable disabled people to lead and manage a sector that exists in their name.

Challenges continue to exist for disabled people seeking work in the commercial sector, and employment is also difficult for disabled people to obtain in the disability sector (Te Pou, 2013). Major gaps exist with respect to the literature regarding exploration of the experiences of disabled people seeking employment and promotion in their own sector.

Significance of Research

Current theories regarding the exclusion and marginalisation of disabled people with respect to employment have been largely dominated by academics and disabled activists. Such activists regard discrimination and marginalisation as products of the capitalist drive to maximise profit created from nondisabled workers (Albrecht, 1992; Armstrong, 1983; Barnes, 1990, 1991, 1999). Although research exists that associates work and personal characteristics among disabled people, the literature includes few analyses of subjective aspects of employment experienced by such individuals. However, an example of disabled people who obtained full and equal employment, albeit in times of extraordinary political and economic turmoil during World War II, was that included by Wheeler (2004) in his extensive review of the history of employment of disabled people in the United Kingdom. Wheeler’s research illustrated that full employment was possible for disabled people, providing the political will existed to remove the many structural and attitudinal barriers which perpetuated the myth that disabled people were less productive in employment. Once environmental and attitudinal barriers were removed, disabled people were able to ‘craft’ their work and environment to demonstrate equal participation without loss of productivity (Wheeler, 2004).

The present research builds from the theoretical standpoint taken by Wheeler (2004), providing a unique insight into a marginalised group of disabled people largely disenfranchised from employment in a sector established to serve them. Thus, research fills some gaps in the current literature relating to employment barriers, opportunities, and enablers associated with employment for disabled people in general, and critically suggests strategies to support capacity and capability building within the disability sector. Supporting this aim, the thesis proposes that social model thinking be broadened to acknowledge impairment as a disabler, and include individual agency as an enabler, to produce a greater understanding of the lived experience of disabled people. This is achieved by inclusion of the philosophical perspectives of Bourdieu (1980), enabling an appreciation of power, situating disabled people as not being merely passive recipients of dominant ideologies and oppressive regimes, but also proactive agents of change. The study is relatively unique in that it is conducted as ‘insider research’ by a disabled person familiar with the issues of disability and employment, from both consumer and provider perspectives.

Methodology and Methods

The qualitative research design presented in this thesis uses a social constructionist epistemology, thematic analysis, and Bourdieu’s theory of practice. Social constructionism is consistent with the social model of disability which recognises that disability is created through structural and environmental barriers as well as negative attitudes. Bourdieu’s theories relating to habitus, capital, and field (Bourdieu, 1977, 1980, 1986, 1996b), provided the main interpretive framework for the thesis.

A small reference group of three people from the disability sector provided initial advice and supported the research process. The principal methods for this study included a literature review, a focus group with six disabled people, individual interviews with 13 disabled people and 12 disability sector employers. The total number of research participants was 31, 23 women and 8 men. Ages of participants ranged between 30 and 66 years. The research design was developed to enable an exploration of barriers and enablers to employment for disabled New Zealanders in the wider workforce and in the disability sector in particular. The findings are described, and recommendations are proposed.

The next section provides a brief discussion of key findings identified by research.

Key Research Findings

Family inclusion and support are critical to disabled children, shaping their habitus and the ability to acquire and utilise social and cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1986), profoundly impacting the trajectory of their lives. Support to build resilience is crucial to combat unfavourable external influences, and avoid the internalisation of negativity about capability. Experiences which result in failure and success are both important, to build the confidence and self-determination necessary to exert individual agency and achieve desired goals relating to education and employment. Despite a range of barriers faced by several disabled research participants, it was possible for many of them to resist oppression and act independently to assert their rights and navigate the obstacles to participation encountered. However, barriers to employment often proved to be insurmountable for many of those interviewed.

Disabled participants in this study reported experiencing as much difficulty gaining work in the New Zealand disability sector as in any other employment setting they had attempted to access. Several reported a number of physical barriers within the built environment, along with structural and attitudinal challenges.

Employers interviewed for this research identified that it may be useful to intentionally create networking opportunities for them to meet with disabled jobseekers, to forge connections and gain greater understanding of one another’s perspectives. Access to regular disability responsiveness training for employers, developed and facilitated by disabled people, may also help to break down some barriers caused by fear of the unknown. Rather than employers including disability in job application processes, any accommodations that may be required could be discussed after recruitment and during induction, unless earlier raised by disabled applicants at job interviews. Likewise, willingness by disabled jobseekers to discuss impairment management at interviews can demonstrate motivation and capability, and highlight lateral thinking skills. Therefore, it may be helpful for disabled applicants to carefully review the specifications for roles they plan to apply for and be prepared to discuss how some tasks might be managed differently to achieve desired results, in order to assuage any doubts in the minds of employers.

The acquisition of knowledge and experience of work, through undertaking voluntary tasks, may lead to paid employment for some disabled people, provided such opportunities are strictly time limited, and include planned pathways to meaningful paid work. Greater flexibility relating to the current support funding provided by the Ministry of Social Development (MSD) to eligible recipients, and/or the forthcoming rollout of personalised budgets through EGL, could significantly improve the chances of those requiring support to access voluntary or paid work. However, some training would need to be developed and facilitated by disabled people, relating to technological requirements, and the ways in which disabled people can control a number of aspects of managing personal budgets.

A number of disabled research participants struggled to access the disability sector field as long-term employees, and none reported being offered promotion unless this was expedient through particular circumstances. The present study finds that the nature of the New Zealand disability sector, reinforced by neoliberal meritocratic principles and policies evident in contracting arrangements between government and NGOs, effectively keeps many disabled people at arm's length, due to an unwillingness to relinquish power to those who, while possessing the cultural capital which drives the disability sector's raison d'être, may nevertheless be considered to be inferior to nondisabled people. However, were the concept of merit to be more broadly considered to include lived disability experience within voluntary and paid disability sector roles, employers may not so readily overlook people who might bring substantial cultural and social capital to disability sector workplaces. The employment of far greater numbers of disabled people, particularly in positions of leadership, could herald the beginning of positive change, not only to employment practices, but also to the fundamental operation of the New Zealand disability sector. In order to ensure greater participation by disabled people in the sector workforce, it is critical to include lived disability experience as key cultural capital throughout all aspects of Public Service and NGO disability work, including in strategic and business planning, in position descriptions, and in induction and ongoing training.

This chapter now moves to outline the thesis structure.

Thesis Outline and Structure

This thesis comprises seven chapters.

Chapter One: introduces the thesis, including briefly reviewing the theoretical perspectives framing research, methodology, methods and key study findings.

Chapter Two: backgrounds the legislative and strategic instruments relevant to disability operating in many western countries including Aotearoa New Zealand, contextualising the later review of employment barriers and enablers applicable to disabled people in all employment settings.

Chapter Three: outlines the methodology and methods used in this research, notably the theoretical underpinnings of social constructionism, the social model of disability, and Pierre Bourdieu’s theory of practice.

The substantive findings from the research are presented in chapters four, five, and six, where themes raised by disabled people seeking work or promotion in the disability sector, together with nondisabled disability sector employers, are discussed.

Chapter Four: provides some context to early life experienced by disabled study participants, including discussion of identity and navigation of the education system.

Chapter Five: identifies the barriers to employment for disabled people in regular employment settings, including lack of opportunity to enter the paid workforce, bureaucratic pitfalls, and false assumptions. The chapter then moves to focus on barriers to employment in the disability sector, such as the obstacle of merit, additional recruitment challenges, working in the sector, and leadership and management of the sector by disabled people.

Chapter Six: provides insight into potential employment enablers, such as unpaid volunteering leading to paid work, reasonable accommodations, supported employment, EGL, deployment of individual agency, and lived disability experience. Many of the employment barriers and enablers identified are common to both mainstream and disability sector work.

Chapter Seven: concludes the thesis by bringing together key findings, highlighting the study’s original contribution to disability sector knowledge for Aotearoa New Zealand and internationally, acknowledges limitations, makes recommendations for possible practical application of the findings, and provides suggestions for further research.

The next chapter reviews the literature applicable to employment for disabled people.

Chapter Two: Literature Review

Introduction

This review of the literature highlights the importance of employment for disabled people, and sets the scene for the present investigation into barriers and enablers to employment within the New Zealand disability sector. Critical discussion of disability-related legislation and strategic instruments, operating in many western countries including Aotearoa New Zealand, and which directly impact employment opportunities, backgrounds the review. Knowledge gaps relating to the mitigation of some employment barriers, including those relevant to the disability sector, are outlined to highlight the challenges faced by disabled people within their own sector. The chapter also includes some significant reflections on the literature. Although research exists that identifies comparable aims to the present study (Davies & Butler, 2022; Te Pou, 2013; Todd, 2018), little information appears to be available relating specifically to disabled people managing their own sector.

In adopting the UNCRPD, the right to work has been enshrined in both legislation and various strategies operating in many western countries (Berghs & Dyson, 2022). The following section summarises a selection of these laws and instruments, providing context to a later discussion on employment barriers and enablers.

Legislation and Strategic Instruments

Various pieces of legislation, and practical initiatives resulting from these, have contributed to the removal of some barriers to participation in all areas of life, including in employment, for disabled New Zealanders. Some of the major New Zealand initiatives are reviewed against those operating in countries with which we tend to compare ourselves, most notably Australia, Canada, the United Kingdom (UK), and the United States of America (USA).

Like New Zealand, these countries are English-speaking democracies with Westminster-style parliamentary systems, with the exception of the USA, which operates a congressional system.

Political Context

Current neoliberal environments operating in many western countries influence a range of policies, which can impact positively or negatively on disabled people (Berghs & Dyson, 2022; Huot et al., 2021). Neoliberalism is a strongly market-driven approach, which emphasises minimal state involvement and maximal individual responsibility (Martel, 2016). Such approaches emphasise pressure to work, a deregulated labour market, and minimum income support payments, which are most often means-tested (Grimshaw & Rubery, 2012; Sakellariou & Rotarou, 2017). Neoliberal policies focus on economic units rather than human rights indicators, and can produce inequities and disempowerment between and amongst disabled people, whose employment needs become subordinated to that of the market (Mladenov, 2015).

Support for disabled people is both complex and contentious, as demonstrated by the way in which neoliberal policies and funding criteria have determined profound organisational change in the disability sector, and the consequent impact on both providers and consumers, for instance through changes in service provision dictated largely by what the state is prepared to purchase (Wheeler, 2017). Since their introduction in New Zealand and elsewhere, essentially fee-for-service funding contracts have been subjected to open tenders within and outside traditional disability sector organisations under market conditions (New Zealand Disability Support Network [NZDSN], 2021). Adoption of competitive business models, together with the associated ideological contradictions, have impacted the New Zealand disability sector, necessitating business relationships with more powerful organisations within supply chains (Hogg & Baines, 2011). Given that such organisations do not necessarily embrace the social model of disability, lack of commitment to its principles may negatively impact decisions about recruitment and selection of disabled people (Wheeler, 2017).

The result of continual cost-shifting and transfer of responsibilities, most notably through the move to rigid outcomes-focused contractual arrangements with many disability support providers, has the potential to disrupt the disability sector, where such transfers result in disparities in the quantity and quality of service provision (Joseph, 2019; Lynch, 2006). Two factors for possible mitigation of the consequences of the contracting landscape are the advent of Disabled People's Organisations (DPOs) and the rollout of personalised budgets, discussed later in this section. However, it is necessary to first highlight various New Zealand and international human rights provisions and strategies, in order to contextualise later discussion.

Human Rights Provisions

New Zealand has developed similar laws and strategies against disability discrimination to those countries under discussion, particularly in the area of employment for disabled people. One of the most significant pieces of human rights legislation for disabled New Zealanders was passed in the early 1990s. The New Zealand Human Rights Act 1993 prohibits the exclusion of disabled people from employment for which they are qualified, or by insisting on tasks difficult or impossible for disabled individuals to perform, and which are not essential to the job.

Between 2018 and 2022, the Human Rights Commission (HRC) received 450 complaints relating to unlawful discrimination on the grounds of disability in employment, including pre-employment complaints. The Commission assisted with more than 370 of these (Personal communication with HRC, April 28, 2023).

The Australian Federal Disability Discrimination Act 1992 (Disability Discrimination Act 1992), includes similar anti-discrimination provisions to those in New Zealand. However, while the New Zealand legislation covers all citizens, the Australian Act specifically applies to disabled people. The Canadian Human Rights Act (1985) is similar to New Zealand and Australian human rights provisions, permitting people to take complaints on several grounds, including discrimination relating to employment, to the Canadian Human Rights Commission and its associated tribunals. Further, the Accessible Canada Act (2019) is complementary to the Canadian Human Rights Act, covering a number of areas directly impacting the ability of disabled Canadians to work, such as access to the built and physical environments, transport, communications, and information (Government of Canada, 2020). The UK Equality Act 2010 forbids discrimination on a number of grounds including disability and employment (GOV.UK, 2015). Legislation to ensure non-discrimination and civil rights for disabled Americans includes the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) of 1990 which specifically prohibits discrimination on the basis of disability in employment (Maroto & Pettinicchio, 2015). The ADA also applies to the United States Congress.

The legislative provisions in the countries discussed here form the basis of a range of strategic measures to combat disability discrimination.

Disability Strategies

New Zealand was a pioneer in the development of a bespoke disability strategy in 2001 (MSD, 2016). The strategy called for disabled people to participate in “a meaningful partnership with Government, communities and support agencies, based on respect and equality” (L. Sullivan, Chief Disability Advisor, Royal Commission into Abuse in Care, personal communication, December 23, 2022). The New Zealand Disability Strategy (NZDS) was developed in consultation with disabled people, including disabled Public Servants (personal professional recollection), and the wider disability sector. The social model of disability was reflected in this first iteration of the strategy, which described disability as the restrictions caused by society’s failure to provide equitable social and structural support, according to the needs of disabled people (Crothall, 2004). The 2001 disability strategy was the first policy acknowledgement within New Zealand that while physical, sensory, or intellectual variations may result in individual functional differences, these do not necessarily lead to disability, unless society fails to take account of and intentionally include people with respect to their individual needs (L. Sullivan, personal communication, December 23, 2022). The NZDS specifically identified negative attitudes towards disabled people as the greatest barrier facing this group, particularly in areas such as employment (Ministry of Health, 2001). The updated 2016–2026 strategy highlights the persistence of employment and other barriers to community participation (MSD, 2016). It contains eight outcome areas in: education, employment and economic security, health and wellbeing, rights protection and justice, accessibility, attitudes, choice and control, and leadership. The key components of the first NZDS were closely mirrored by those later included in the UNCRPD, such as improved outcomes sought to education, health, accessibility, and employment (MSD, 2016). The strategy specifically sets out how its employment-related outcomes can be actioned, in areas such as transition to work, expanding the number and range of employment options, and increasing employer confidence. Removal of wage exemptions is also a goal of the strategy, although this goal has not yet been achieved. The NZDS challenged the medical hegemony of disability at the time, as a functional analysis of the body as being broken and needing to be fixed, in order to conform with normative values (Donald Beasley Institute, 2022).

Prior to the introduction of the disability strategy in 2001, New Zealand had created a world first organisation to support rehabilitation and return to work for citizens disabled through accident and injury, via the New Zealand Accident Compensation Act 1972. The Accident Compensation Commission (later Corporation) resulted from the 1967 Woodhouse Report. The commission provides earnings-related compensation, medical support, and rehabilitation to people who acquire impairments through injury, with a view to their eventual return to work

(Accident Compensation Corporation [ACC], 2022; Forster, 2022). The Disabled Persons Community Welfare Act 1975 sought to partially bridge the gap for some disabled people not eligible for ACC, by providing support to purchase some adaptive equipment, or making adaptations to motor vehicles and housing, which could enhance employment and other opportunities for participation (Office for Disability Issues [ODI], 2022b). Nevertheless, separate provision which supports some but not all disabled New Zealanders continues to preserve anomalies between those in receipt of ACC and those with congenital impairments, who may or may not meet the limited economic eligibility criteria for income support through Work and Income New Zealand (Donald Beasley Institute, 2022), perpetuating inequity based on spurious and unwarranted hierarchies of impairment and perceptions of disability (Forster, 2022; Harpur et al., 2017).

The Australian government launched its Disability Strategy (2021–2031) on 3 December 2021. The strategy provides a national framework, signed by federal, state, and territory governments, with the intention of improving the lives of disabled people across the country. This includes greater access to and participation in employment (Department of Social Services, 2021). Like New Zealand and Australia, the UK operates a bespoke disability strategy which sets out requirements to create and meet a cross-government plan to remove barriers to participation, including those specific to employment (Department of Justice, 2020; GOV.UK, 2021). In 2023, the UK government released ‘Transforming Support: The Health and Disability White Paper’, which focuses on employment of disabled people and proposes changes to the way assessments for work capacity (which enable or remove conditional eligibility for disability benefits) are undertaken. The white paper has been criticised by some disability groups on the basis that “having unqualified ‘job coaches’ making decisions about our health and fitness for work opens up an opportunity for more abuse, gaslighting and harassment of disabled people” (Pring, 2023).

Canada’s Disability Inclusion Action Plan 2022 requires the federal government to regularly consult with disabled people, disability organisations, and other groups regarding work priorities, such as those targeted at getting disabled people into higher quality jobs, and contributing to building a barrier-free Canada by 2040 (Government of Canada, 2022). Although no unified disability strategy operates throughout the USA, a number of federal laws established between 1973 and 2010 seek to protect the rights of disabled people and promote their community inclusion (U.S. Department of Labor, n.d.).

United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities

New Zealand played a significant part in the development of the UNCRPD through its Office for Disability Issues (ODI, 2022b). The evolution of the convention followed decades of work to change attitudes and approaches to disabled people worldwide (ODI, 2022b). The UNCRPD was adopted by the United Nations General Assembly via resolution A/RES/61/106 on 13 December 2006, commenced on 3 May 2008, and was ratified by New Zealand on 25 September 2008 (Ministry of Justice, n.d.). New Zealand acceded to the Optional Protocol to the convention on 5 October 2016, and this came into force on 4 November 2016 (ODI, 2022b). Accession to the optional protocol enables disabled New Zealanders to submit complaints directly to the United Nations after exhausting all domestic means, such as lodging concerns with the HRC and/or the Office of the Ombudsman. The UNCRPD (United Nations, 2006a) was explicitly developed as a human rights instrument, the purpose of which is to:

> promote, protect and ensure the full and equal enjoyment of all human rights and fundamental freedoms by all persons with disabilities, and to promote respect for their inherent dignity (p. 4).

The convention does not provide separate or additional rights to disabled people, other than those few specifically relating to their status, such as article 26, habilitation and rehabilitation. Rather, it generally brings together the rights routinely conferred on all citizens, such as those pertaining to justice, privacy, education, health, and employment (United Nations, 2006a). To date, 164 countries have signed the convention, with 185 having ratified its optional protocol (United Nations, n.d.). The development of the UNCRPD has profoundly influenced policy and legislation provisions for disabled people in much of the western world. It is however acknowledged that the USA has signed but not yet ratified the convention through Congress. Ratification is required by signatories in order for them to accede to, and then be bound by, the convention.

Convention article 33(3) requires that signatories must enable the monitoring and implementation of the precepts of the convention by disabled people and DPOs, and regularly report to the United Nations Committee on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities. General comment 7 provides detailed clarification of States parties' obligations under article 33(3) and its implementation (United Nations, 2018). New Zealand meets its responsibilities under Article 33(3) through an independent monitoring mechanism, consisting of the HRC, Office of the Ombudsman, and the New Zealand Disabled People's Organisations Coalition (DPOs Coalition). The coalition includes representatives from DPOs (ODI, 2023a). In its list of issues requiring remediation in 2018, the United Nations Committee on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities specifically requested that New Zealand report against article 27, which focuses on employment (ODI, 2022c). However, in its concluding observations on the second and third periodic reports of New Zealand in 2022, the United Nations Committee (United Nations, 2022) restated concerns relating to:

> (a) The continued low rate, compared with the general population, of labour force participation and the low rate of employment of persons with disabilities in the open labour market;
>
> (b) The continued segregated employment programmes for persons with disabilities ("business enterprises") and the use of minimum wage exemption permits. (p. 11)

The Committee recommended that New Zealand:

> (a) Expedite the development of the Disability Employment Action Plan in close consultation with and with the active involvement of persons with disabilities, including women with disabilities, Māori with disabilities and Pasifika persons with disabilities;
>
> (b) Incorporate concrete measures in the Disability Employment Action Plan, with resources, time frames and monitoring mechanisms that ensure the transition from segregated employment to the open labour market;
>
> (c) Repeal section 8 of the Minimum Wage Act of 1983 and ensure that persons with disabilities are paid on the principle of equal pay for work of equal value. (p. 11)

Although the UNCRPD has been cited in employment and other policies and programmes relating to disabled people since its inception (Munneke, 2006), it has had little positive impact on the employment rates of disabled people in New Zealand (Statistics New Zealand, 2017, 2022). This may be due to the Human Rights Act (HRA) 1993, largely predicated on the medical model of disability (Jeffery, 2018), not having been amended to reflect key employment-related aspects of the UNCRPD. One such critical aspect is that of the provision of reasonable accommodations in employment, noted in Article 2 of the convention (United Nations, 2006b). Reasonable accommodations are defined as:

> . . . necessary and appropriate modification and adjustments not imposing a disproportionate or undue burden, where needed in a particular case, to ensure to persons with disabilities the enjoyment or exercise on an equal basis with others of all human rights and fundamental freedoms.

The HRA has not been accorded supreme law status in New Zealand, so does not override other laws or practises which may nevertheless be discriminatory (Butler, 2011). Thus, despite 36.5% of all disability discrimination complaints having been made to the HRC in 2008 relating to failure to provide reasonable accommodations by employers, uncertainty has persisted regarding what constitutes reasonable accommodations (Butler, 2011). However, more positive attitudes were recently reported towards employing disabled people requiring reasonable accommodations, once the concept was explained to them (D’Souza & Kuntz, 2023). The development of the UNCRPD has moved the perception of disabled individuals and their lives from being objects of medicalised charity to that of citizens with rights, capable of making decisions for themselves based on exertion of their self-determination (ODI, 2022a).

Enabling Good Lives

A fundamental way in which disabled people determine their own futures is through choice and control of funding mechanisms designed for their specific use (Foley et al., 2021). Economic capital is tailored to meet the needs of disabled individuals, rather than funding a proscriptive set of programmes, which may have only been formerly available from charity-orientated providers of disability support services. New Zealand has been moving down the pathway towards self-directed funding through personalised budgets for more than a decade. In 2011, the (then) minister for disability issues, Hon. Tariana Turia, brought together an independent working group representing the disability community. The Working Group was supported by the Ministries of Health and Social Development (EGL, 2011). The group's purpose was to co-design a new approach to inclusion in the community and day services. The recognition that a new approach was imperative had arisen from the inadequacy of the former fragmented system of supports, leaving disabled people and their families with no options other than partially funded day services outside the shared spaces of community.

> The system did not allow for the individual needs, skills, abilities and aspirations of disabled people, and worked to keep people dependent on congregated settings within routinised and repetitive group activities. (L. Sullivan personal communication, November 24, 2022)

Later that year, Minister Turia directed Public Service officials to engage with the disability community regarding how to progress what had become known as the 'enabling good lives' (EGL) approach.

The eight major principles of EGL are: (1) self-determination; (2) beginning early; (3) person-centred; (4) ordinary life outcomes; (5) mainstream first; (6) mana enhancing; (7) easy to use; and (8) relationship building (EGL, n.d.). EGL moves away from the restrictive individualised funding policy established in the early 2000s, managed by Needs and Assessment Services Coordination organisations throughout New Zealand, towards personalised budgets, affording disabled people, and their families where applicable, greater flexibility relating to the use of their allocated funding. The economic principles underpinning such funding models transfer some disability-related resources from traditional disability support services to the provision of personal budgets to disabled individuals, who choose what impairment-related goods and services they wish to purchase (David & West, 2017). This funding can be managed by the person themselves (Foley et al., 2021). Alternatively, a disabled person can choose to have their funding allocated to a provider of their choice, or they may self-manage some components of their budget, while other budget components are allocated to a chosen provider (R. Cameron, Service Manager, Tari Whaikaha, personal communication, August 3, 2022). Allies of disabled people, including family, support staff, and DPOs, are often considered to be partners in decision-making about the level of funding required and what this should purchase (Broady, 2014). Decisions on the management of each personalised budget can be made or changed at any time at the discretion of the disabled person. People who require additional support can be assisted by an EGL connector or kaitūhono, who works as an ally, assisting the disabled person and their family to establish goals and plans, and connect with their local community (EGL, 2022). The connector is not an advocate as such, although they may at times play an advocacy role. This may be required because of a lack of any formal advocacy structure within the system, and resistance from the disability sector, the education system, and the community about responding to the needs of disabled people and families (L. Sullivan, personal communication, December 14, 2022).

The EGL principles, together with the EGL vision, provide the framework for Enabling Good Lives, while the flexibility of personal budgets and the support of the connector provide the implementation tools. However, commentators recognise that while choice about the range and funding of disability-related goods and services is increasingly demanded by consumers, normative forces relating to public funding can ultimately act in direct opposition to radical approaches to the fulfilment of goals such as independent living and employment (Wheeler, 2017). In promoting such policies, the state claims to be respecting the goals and wishes of disabled people for autonomy and self-determination (Stroman, 2003), while shifting the costs associated with service provision to the marketplace (Abramovitz, 2019; Dursin et al., 2021; Lynch, 2006).

A nationwide rollout of EGL was announced by the New Zealand Government on 29 October 2021 (MSD, 2021). Management of the funding to extend this support is to be undertaken centrally by Whaikaha, a newly established disability-focused ministry (currently hosted and supported by the MSD), between 2022 and 2026 (MSD, 2021). Although not strictly focused on employment as such, EGL may well provide a foundation upon which to build a framework for responding to the disability employment gap, the difference between the employment rate for disabled and nondisabled people, in New Zealand. The policy relating to personalised budgets ties funding to EGL principles, and the additional economic capital available to disabled citizens may enable some to exercise autonomy and choose what supports might enhance their employment options.

However, a number of challenges remain to the implementation of EGL. For example, questions relating to ensuring volume and continuity of funding, effective participation by disabled people in policy design, the place of current providers of disability support services, and eligibility coverage, have not yet been adequately addressed. For example, people who use mental health services but do not have a co-occurring physical or sensory impairment that qualifies them for Disability Support Services, have been excluded from EGL since it began, despite having equal rights as disabled people under the UNCRPD. Neither has a comprehensive commitment to capacity and capability building for disabled people been undertaken. These gaps in planning and development represent significant potential impediments to the ability of EGL to achieve its vision and intent.

Human rights and specifically targeted employment provisions, such as equal employment and diversity management programmes discussed next, have the potential to mitigate negative fiscal impacts to some extent (State Services Commission [SSC], 2002). However, these need to be practical and demonstrable, promoting disabled people as the authentic and rightful leaders in the development of disability policy, advocacy, and the provision of services.

State Sector Employment

It is the self-proclaimed role of the New Zealand State Sector (including the Public Service and Crown Entities) to illustrate ways in which disabled people can be effective in helping shape both policy and services which are relevant to their lives, and to employing them in a meaningful way (MSD, 2020; SSC, 2002). The State Sector Act 1988 was the first to specifically mention disabled people as an employment disadvantaged group, alongside Māori, Pacific peoples, women, and ethnic communities. In a report published by the (then) SSC in 2002, entitled *Moving Forward: EEO for People with Disabilities in the Public Service – A Practical Guide*, provision of equal employment opportunities was highlighted with respect to the needs of disabled people (SSC, 2002). Nevertheless, progress reports published by the SSC between 1994 and 2001 illustrated a diminishing number of people with impairments being appointed to Public Service positions. Indeed, the trend was for disabled people to leave, rather than join the Public Service (Crothall, 2004). This trend appears to have continued, since levels of employment of disabled people in Public Service positions have fallen over the past 20 years. To illustrate this point, the number of disabled people working across the whole of the New

Zealand Public Service in 2002 was just 7% (SSC, 2002), and this has decreased even further to 5.5% (Te Kawa Mataaho Public Service Commission, 2021). The need for State Sector inclusion in employment options for disabled people was recognised in a recent action plan published by the MSD. The plan, entitled *Working Matters: An Action Plan to ensure disabled people and people with health conditions have an equal opportunity to access employment*, confirmed that the New Zealand State Sector needs to take a leading role in the employment of disabled New Zealanders, thereby role-modelling possibilities for the wider employment sector (MSD, 2020). While the business case for employing disabled people described several benefits to organisations, the action plan does not outline any specific targets or pledge additional resources. The State Sector Act was superseded by the Public Sector Act 2019. This includes a generalised equal employment opportunities clause, which refers to 'marginalised groups', but does not specify group membership.

The New Zealand State Sector has produced a number of strategies and programmes over many years, designed to highlight ways in which disabled people can play a role in shaping policy and delivering services which positively impact such individuals. However, greater emphasis may need to be focused on purposefully recruiting and promoting larger numbers of disabled people, in order to begin to realise equal opportunity and diversity management objectives for this group.

Commercial Sector Employment

Although disabled people are included in New Zealand’s labour laws, the extension of minimum wage provisions is relatively recent. Legislation applicable to the promotion of employment for disabled people in the commercial sector includes the Disabled Persons Employment Promotion Repeal Act 2007. This repealed the Disabled Persons Employment Promotion Act 1960, which had, to that date, permitted some disabled people to be employed via minimum wage exemptions, with few protections under labour law. Under the updated provisions, most disabled workers gained the right to be employed on at least the minimum wage, with the same working conditions as nondisabled people (Dyson, 2007). However, pressure from sheltered workshops enabled minimum wage exemptions to be granted on a case-by-case basis, and these can still be granted today. Thus, the United Nations (2022) continues to call for removal of all such exemptions.

It is acknowledged that despite a range of strategic instruments having been implemented and operating in New Zealand for a number of years, little observable change has so far been reflected in the number of disabled people gaining, retaining, and being promoted in employment during this century (Fadyl et al., 2022; SSC, 2001; Workbridge, 2020). Many disabled New Zealanders have high hopes that the provision of personalised budgets will enhance their lives, for example through access to accessible transport and equipment, which may assist them to experience greater employment success.

The Political Economy of Disability Employment

In the June 2017 quarter, for the first time, Statistics New Zealand's Household Labour Force Survey included data on the disability status of survey respondents. In September 2017, Statistics New Zealand published a suite of labour market figures broken down by disability status. The data provided here is based on responses from people aged 15–64 years.

In June 2017, the labour force participation rate for disabled people was 45.1%, as against 81.2% for nondisabled people. At this time, an employment rate of 39.2% was recorded for disabled people, versus 77.3% for nondisabled people. An unemployment rate of 12.9% was noted for disabled people, versus 4.7% for nondisabled people. Disabled people experienced high rates of unemployment in the 15–24 years age group at 40.0%, versus 12.6% for the same age group in the nondisabled labour force (Statistics New Zealand, 2022).

Disability labour force data by gender was released by Statistics New Zealand for the first time in August 2018 with the publication of data for the June 2018 quarter. That release also included data by gender for the June 2017 quarter. Employment statistics by gender remained largely static for both disabled and nondisabled labour force participants during the 2017–2023 period (Statistics New Zealand, 2023).

The unemployment rate for disabled people (aged 15–64 years, employed, unemployed and not in the labour force) dropped from 12.9% in June 2017 to 7.9% in June 2022 (Statistics New Zealand, 2022). This reduction in the percentage of unemployed disabled people during this time is likely to have been directly attributable to the impacts of COVID-19, when New Zealand borders were closed and employers turned to all sectors of society to find workers (Workbridge, 2020). The unemployment rate for nondisabled people was even lower than that of disabled people, falling from 4.7% in June 2017 to a record low of 3.3% in June 2022 (Statistics New Zealand, 2022).

The income gap between disabled and nondisabled people (aged 15–64 years) remained significant throughout the 2017–2022 period. When median gross hourly wages and salaries were compared for both disabled and nondisabled employees in 2017, these showed hourly earnings of $21.50 per hour for disabled employees and $24.51 per hour for nondisabled workers, constituting a pay gap of $3.01 per hour (Statistics New Zealand, 2022). By 2022, hourly rates had risen to $24.51 for disabled workers and $29.73 for nondisabled employees, a pay gap of $5.22 per hour (Statistics New Zealand, 2022), showing an increase in the differential.

By 2023, the employment situation for disabled people had deteriorated markedly, despite low overall unemployment rates continuing to be registered.

The labour force participation rate for disabled people still remained largely static at 44.1% compared to 84.7% for nondisabled people. (Statistics New Zealand, 2023). While participation rates had increased since 2017 for both disabled and nondisabled people, this can be attributed to the growth in the overall number of people in the workforce over this period.

The June 2023 figures also illustrated a dramatic rise in disability unemployment since the previous year as disabled people registered a 10.7% unemployment rate against only 3.5% for nondisabled people (Statistics New Zealand, 2023). While the labour market began to loosen due to growing stagflation (high inflation combined with lower growth), the considerable rise in the number of disabled people registering as unemployed compared to 2022 was very noticeable giving credence to the anecdotal observation that disabled people are amongst the ‘last hired and first fired’ by employers within labour markets.

The income gap between disabled and nondisabled people continued to persist into 2023. While the hourly pay rates of both nondisabled and disabled people had increased to $33.05 and $37.44 respectively, this differential still represented a pay gap of $4.39 (Statistics New Zealand, 2023). While representing a slight improvement since the previous year, it marked another year where the disability pay gap remained largely unchanged.

The publication of the first ever series of employment statistics relating to disabled people confirmed the persistent high levels of unemployment and underemployment for this group. During the 2017–2023 period, the dial hardly shifted with respect to the difference between employment and unemployment of disabled people compared with nondisabled people in Aotearoa New Zealand. The rate of unemployment experienced by disabled people may have been due to their exodus from the job market due to discrimination, given the ongoing low rates of labour market participation by disabled people recorded over this period, compared with nondisabled people. No figures were available for Māori with impairments. Disadvantaged groups, such as Māori disabled, need to be included in statistics relating to employment and unemployment, proportionate to their representation in society, in order for them to achieve equity.

Employment Barriers

Research confirms that disabled people struggle to gain and retain employment, due to a number of influences, including various impairment effects, and the often-unhelpful attitudes of employers and others (Fadyl et al., 2022). Unemployment can have several negative impacts on overall health, social integration, maintenance of career development, and currency of qualifications (Adams & Oldfield, 2012; Saunders et al., 2015; Workbridge, 2020). Moreover, promotion is often unattainable for those disabled people participating in the workforce, who often struggle to convince their employers that they are capable of managing greater responsibility.

Research shows that barriers and enablers to employment for disabled individuals are societal, structural, and individual (Lunt & Pernice, 1999; Sundar et al., 2018). The paucity of access to experience of work when young has a major impact on skill acquisition and later access to employment for many disabled youth (Crothall, 2004; Fabian et al., 2021; Workbridge, 2020). Much of the New Zealand and international literature available to date confirms that restricted access to a range of resources, lack of workplace accommodations and, critically, discriminatory attitudes and practices, such as stigmatisation and inaccessible recruitment processes, prevent many disabled people from gaining employment and building up workplace experience (Harris et al., 2017; Levitt, 2017; Lindsay, 2011; Manaf et al., 2019). Given that jobs are often gained through word of mouth in New Zealand, and many disabled people have few social networks, the ability to call on others for support represents an additional obstacle to employment (Crothall, 2004). Moreover, abatement levels relating to income support can incentivise disabled people to remain unemployed (Adams & Oldfield, 2012; Bendick, 2018; Workbridge, 2020), secondary tax disincentivises employment, where some income support is received, since earnings are then taxed at the higher secondary rate. Part-time work often comes with a full-time workload, with little access to training and promotion (Efimov et al., 2022). Furthermore, full-time work can impact energy levels, quality time for various relationships, fitness, health, and nutrition (Boersema et al., 2021). It may also be assumed by employers and others that disabled people are fully supported by the benefit system and by disability support services, so do not need to work (Bonnacio et al., 2020). Once they gain employment, disabled people may then be plagued by stereotypic disability-related myths, such as the belief that disabled people necessarily require additional and costly support to fix ‘their problems’ (New Zealand Productivity Commission, 2013; Van Dalen, 2018, 2019).

It has been suggested by several commentators that impairment itself is the major obstacle to securing and maintaining employment (Duff et al., 2007; Lindsay, 2011; Rosenthal et al., 2012; Sundar et al., 2018). Indeed, the optics surrounding disability and impairment often have a greater impact on employment opportunities than do lack of workplace accommodations (Shier et al., 2009). Thus, the role of functional limitations in the acquisition and maintenance of employment are important to consider, and impairment effects, that is, the impact of the type and significance of those functional limitations relating to work tasks, cannot be underestimated. Moreover, knowledge of the commonly experienced employment barriers across all impairment types is critical in order to understand before any mitigations can be reviewed, for example, by making adjustments to the physical work environment and/or through the use of technology (Fadyl et al., 2022). Nevertheless, while impairment should be recognised, care must be taken not to locate employment and other barriers as existing only within disabled people.

Attitudinal Obstacles

It has long been recognised that the adverse attitudes of many work colleagues, friends, family, disability service providers, and others can be major barriers to building the confidence and competence necessary for disabled people to gain and maintain employment (Rosenthal et al., 2012). The most prevalent of these negative attitudes is the propensity of others to focus solely on what they believe the impairments represent (MSD, 2016), rather than the skills and abilities many disabled people can bring to employment (Wheeler, 2016). Thus, lack of opportunity to enter the workforce is a considerable obstacle which often results from the unhelpful attitudes and assumptions of others, including some employers (Baker et al., 2018; Brittain et al., 2020; Fadyl et al., 2022; Ju et al., 2013; Nelissen et al., 2016; Von Schrader et al., 2014). Research confirms that employers often focus on what they believe could be the negative outcomes resulting from employing disabled workers. Adverse consequences cited include health and safety concerns, possible negative attitudes of co-workers and management, and the accommodation costs assumed to be associated with employing disabled individuals (Manaf et al., 2019; Moon & Baker, 2012). Unhelpful employer attitudes towards disabled jobseekers have been reported in various policy and academic papers over many years as representing the greatest barrier to their employment opportunities (Abberley, 1987; Baker et al., 2018; Fadyl et al., 2022; MSD, 2016; World Health Organization & World Bank, 2011). Indeed, it appears to be a prevalent belief amongst employers that disabled people are unable to work as well as others (Manaf et al., 2019), cannot perform physical or office-based work (Fraser et al., 2010), and do not possess the ability to use initiative to troubleshoot workplace issues (Unger, 2002). Therefore, employers may be basing their hiring decisions on their own incorrect assumptions of incapability, rather than reviewing the abilities of particular job candidates (Baker et al., 2018; Burke et al., 2013; Gustafsson et al., 2013). Conversely, the literature acknowledges that the job performance of disabled employees tends to be similar to that of nondisabled workers (Hernandez & McDonald, 2010; New Zealand Productivity Commission, 2013).

Nevertheless, many employers believe that lack of competence and ability are inextricably linked to disability, including sometimes erroneous views about type and degree of impairment (Baker et al., 2018; Bendick, 2018; Fabian et al., 2021; Manaf et al., 2019). Such negative perspectives tend to reflect those prevalent within the wider community, which rationalise and perpetuate assumptions of inferiority (Abberley, 1987; Crothall, 2004; Fadyl et al., 2022). Continual proliferation of such incorrect information, through both traditional and social media, ensures that inaccurate and often disparaging attitudes about impairment persist (Adams & Oldfield, 2012; Baker et al., 2018; Bendick, 2018; Jans et al., 2012; Young, 2014). One such example is that of stigmatising attitudes relating to disability, which generally view disabled people as a homogeneous group of little importance (Darling, 2013; Zapata, 2020). Stigmatisation conflates perceived negative attributes about disability with the disabled person's appearance, health status, and/or competence, which is then wrongly attributed to impairment (McLaughlin, 2017). Stigmatised views which represent disabled people as being generally undesirable may confirm for employers and co-workers that the pigeonholes within which they place disabled people are correct (Robert & Harlan, 2006), justifying the dominant discourse that disabled people are not only lacking in capability, but are completely incompetent (Carey, 2022).

It is often reported that many employers are reluctant to consider hiring disabled people because they believe the presence of such individuals might cause staff and customers to feel uncomfortable (Fadyl et al., 2022; Te Pou, 2013), while others, along with potential co-workers, may express a preference to work only with people with certain types of impairment (Pullen et al., 2020; Schnitzler, 2021; Sharma et al., 2019). For example, it has been found that potential co-workers of disabled employees may state a desire to work alongside people with physical impairments, rather than those with sensory impairments, learning disabilities, or those managing mental distress. Such views continue to be in evidence, even though they are largely based on incorrect stereotypical beliefs (Dolmage, 2017; Fadyl et al., 2022; Pullen et al., 2020; Schnitzler, 2021). Thus, even where knowledge, skills, and capability are present in disabled job candidates, such attributes may not be recognised by employers and others, if they hold prejudicial beliefs (Bendick, 2018; Vornholt et al., 2018). In such cases, lack of recognition of formal qualifications can contribute to the chronic and persistent unemployment and underemployment experienced by many disabled people (Drew, 2015; Fraser et al., 2010).

Harmful Generalisations

While the advantages to hiring disabled workers commonly reported in the literature include low rates of sickness and absenteeism, higher productivity, loyalty, improved company image, and fewer workplace accommodations and adjustments required than is generally assumed (EGL, n.d.), such inferences can be harmful. Indeed, a range of generalised attributes were recently cited as good reasons to employ disabled people, by disabled activist and Australian of the Year, Dylan Alcott, at the Australian Jobs and Skills summit, held on 1–2 September 2022. However, while such seemingly positive aspects of hiring disabled workers may motivate some employers to include them on staff, it is acknowledged that generalised statistics can impact disabled individuals negatively, by spreading fictional stereotypes about their work ethics and abilities. Stereotyping, which includes such general fictional conventions as those characterising disabled people as always getting to work on time, taking fewer sick days than others, and being more loyal than other staff, together with more specific fictionalisations portraying blind people as being endowed with superior hearing, or Deaf having exceptional vision, constitute major challenges to this diverse group of people (Abberley, 1987; Albrecht & Levy, 1981; Bonaccio et al., 2020; Jans et al., 2012; Riddell & Watson, 2014). Assumptions of homogeneity between and among different impairment types are unrealistic, set some people up to fail, and are essentially ableist (Bogart & Dunn, 2019).

Ableism is a worldview that presumes nondisabled superiority over the perceived inferiority of disabled people (Brittain et al., 2020; Carey, 2022; Ramachandra et al., 2017). It is characterised by exclusion, stereotypical attitudes, and the inability to accept that multiple means can achieve similar ends. It has been demonstrated that ableism is an under-recognised but powerful organising principle within workplaces; it occurs when stigmatised views are specifically directed at disabled people and used to justify discrimination, lack of engagement, alienation, and harassment (Bendick, 2018; Bogart & Dunn, 2019; Robert, 2003). The concept sees the power bestowed on nondisabled people through their status within workplaces utilised to exclude disabled people from employment or promotion, since those excluded are considered to be inferior (Jammaers et al., 2019). Such exclusion limits not only access to employment but also upward career mobility, which could lead to organisational leadership and management. Thus, ableist norms operating in workplaces, together with the low status of disabled individuals, can negatively impact the disabled person’s ability to acquire not only economic but social and cultural resources (Jammaers et al., 2019).

Supply and Demand

Much of the research associated with unemployment rates of disabled people has emphasised supply-side solutions (Chan et al., 2010; Gustafsson et al., 2013; Karpur & VanLooy, 2013; Scullion et al., 2019). Such solutions tend to highlight impairment-related details from a deficit perspective, often locating the problem in disabled people, rather than as a barrier for them (Fadyl et al., 2022). The supply-side perspective focuses on increased education, and generalised skill and workplace training of disabled people, to address employment disparities between them and nondisabled people. However, focusing effort in this area appears to have made little significant difference to employment outcomes for disabled people to date (Fadyl et al., 2022; Froyland et al., 2018).

Access to work is recognized as an important human right adopted by those countries where the UNCRPD has been ratified. Yet this right, along with the practical measures to monitor workplace participation by disabled people, remains absent from most corporate social responsibility plans (Kwan, 2020). Such plans promote equal employment opportunities (EEO), sometimes also known as diversity management, yet they often lack the specificity required to ensure employment, retention, and promotion goals are met (MacNeill, 2020). While it is acknowledged that inclusive employment practices based on cost-benefit diversity models have resulted in the inclusion of some representatives from certain disability groups, particularly those who do not require accommodations involving additional financial cost, evidence suggests that such practices have tended to benefit only a small number of people (Diversity Works, 2019; Fadyl et al., 2022; Folmer et al., 2020; Shaw et al., 2022). Thus, although EEO and similar programmes were introduced in response to well-recognised systemic and structural obstacles, research confirms that equal representation in the workforce continues to be elusive, and employment rates remain low for disabled people (Abberley, 1987; Benshoff et al., 2014; Carey, 2022; Mayne, 2022; Pulrang, 2022). This is unsurprising given the cumulative disadvantages and lack of opportunities for employment faced by many disabled people widely reported in the literature (Carroll et al., 2018; Fadyl et al., 2022; Francis et al., 2018; Watson, 2012; Workbridge, 2020; Workbridge / Allen & Clarke, 2016).

Lack of access to employment is largely systemic, resulting from structures that perpetuate inequality (Heaphy et al., 2011; Perry et al., 2020), such as standard yet inaccessible recruitment and other human resource practices, challenging built and virtual environments, and inflexible work tasks (Harris et al., 2017; Levitt, 2017; Manaf et al., 2019; Sundar et al., 2018). Systemic factors are multi-faceted, complex, and persistent (Perry et al., 2020). They do not necessarily respond to single-point solutions, such as EEO or diversity programmes, or hold themselves to account. Moreover, such systems and the structures resulting from them tend to assume all people are the same. Thus, despite apparent business interest in the advantages of programmes promoting EEO and diversity in general, beginning in the late 1990s and continuing into the 21st century, disabled people continue to struggle for recognition of their skills and qualifications (Araten-Bergman, 2016; Bonaccio et al., 2018; Fadyl et al., 2022; Kwan, 2020).

Some observers believe that more successful outcomes may be obtained for disabled people by greater consideration of the impact of demand-side factors, which seek to address employment inequities at a practical, organisational level (Burke et al., 2013; Chan et al., 2010; Gustafsson et al., 2013; Habeck et al., 2007). Indeed, research has shown that interventions tend to be most successful where they come directly from senior management, secure disability as a major factor in existing diversity policies, and are then regularly monitored to ensure they result in greatly improved human resource practices with positive outcomes (Chan et al., 2010; Phillips et al., 2019). Such practices and outcomes can also positively impact wider workplace culture (Byrd, 2014; Schur et al., 2014), for example, by ensuring web-based job vacancies are accessible to screen readers, removing EEO questions from job applications to avoid diverse applicants being consciously or unconsciously screened out of contention, reducing overly proscribed job tasks, and improving employer and co-worker attitudes through provision of authentically-led disability responsiveness training (Fadyl et al.,2022; Karpur & VanLooy, 2013; Sevak et al., 2015; Workbridge, 2020). Moreover, apprenticeships which include workplace training could go some way to assist those disabled people who may require additional skills and/or educational attainment (Saunders et al., 2015).

Barriers Within Workplaces

Several lines of evidence suggest that those disabled individuals who gain work can be subject to occupational deprivation and segregation, often working in basic grade, casual, and frequently part-time jobs, for minimal remuneration, with little opportunity for upward mobility (Adams & Oldfield, 2012; Bendick, 2018; Snyder et al., 2010; Sundar et al., 2018; Te Pou, 2013). Research has suggested that they face major systemic and individual inequities within the workplace (Forster, 2022), for instance, experiencing considerable difficulty gaining acceptance with peers and advancing in their respective careers (Bates-Harris, 2012; Graham, 2020; Milner et al., 2015). Such environments can lead to structural and inter-personal discrimination against many disabled people (Berghs & Dyson, 2022), making disclosure of functional limitations risky (Von Schrader et al., 2014). Moreover, those with unseen impairments can become isolated should they need to disclose functional limitations in order to gain reasonable accommodations, such as additional computer software (McGunnigle, 2022). Then, once the impairment becomes known, the likelihood of bullying, including gas-lighting, where the need for accommodations and even the impairment itself may be continually questioned, can increase (Bendick, 2018; Koch et al., 2022). Furthermore, job retention may be diminished, due to workplace harassment, and employer fears about future costs of accommodating impairment (Von Schrader et al., 2014).

Retention and Promotion

Previous studies have concluded that job retention is seldom addressed in vocational endeavours, since current practice tends to centre on front-door hiring practices, while neglecting back-door retention and promotion of disabled workers (Fadyl et al., 2022; Habeck et al., 2007; Workbridge, 2020). Both retention of employment and promotion may be positively influenced by the role of disability responsiveness training, provided to ensure nondisabled employees comprehend the barriers faced by disabled colleagues, and are supportive of their presence in the workplace (MacNeill, 2020). However, views diverge regarding whether such training is more successful when provided by disabled people in-house (Habeck et al., 2007), or when facilitated by largely nondisabled, external vocational support people, who may also be in a position to provide brokerage, guidance, and troubleshooting for employers (Burke et al., 2013; Fraser et al., 2010; Gustafsson et al., 2013). It is in either case important that training providers are guided by the specific requirements of employers (Chan et al., 2010; Hemphill & Kulik, 2016), for example, by ensuring bespoke educational interventions are relevant to the workplace, thereby having the greatest chance of being effective and efficient in the particular context (Fraser et al., 2010). These are most meaningful when developed and facilitated by disabled people, who can model possibilities to employers and co-workers (Workbridge, 2020), thus addressing the fear factor often associated with disability issues by nondisabled people (Crothall, 2004).

It has been observed that disabled people can be held back and not considered for promotion, because employers may underestimate their abilities (Gustafsson et al., 2013). Indeed, some employers are unwilling to seek ways in which existing disabled employee capability might be harnessed within the workplace, due to prevailing negative attitudes and stereotypical assumptions which underestimate them and make negative assumptions about their capabilities (Adams & Oldfield, 2012; Sundar et al., 2018). Furthermore, some employers appear to believe that impairment equates to an insurmountable barrier to the achievement of management positions (Gustafsson et al., 2013). Thus, rather than being able to work to capacity, disabled employees may be forced to spend considerable time attempting to adapt to shifting workplace expectations, while also managing a number of workplace barriers (Adams & Oldfield, 2012).

A commonly discussed issue fundamental to gaining, retaining, and being promoted in employment, is that of the individual and changing nature of reasonable accommodation requirements by disabled people. Such accommodations include purposeful modification to work tasks and/or the working environment, designed to enable disabled individuals to participate in employment (Delva et al., 2021; Hawker, 2017). The real and perceived costs associated with accommodating disabled people at work may erect additional barriers to their employment, in the minds of some employers (Gluck, 2014; Kalargyrou, 2012; Kaye et al., 2011; Moon & Baker, 2012; Murfitt et al., 2018). A common belief reported in the literature is the employer assumption that disabled people are expensive to employ, due to the cost of accommodations, and an assumed decrease in productivity (Alban-Metcalfe, 2007; Gluck, 2014; Kalargyrou, 2012). However, evidence suggests that, while disabled people may be more likely to seek workplace accommodations, the costs, categories, and benefits of the accommodations sought are often similar to those requested by nondisabled people (Schur et al., 2014). Such accommodations commonly include ergonomic desks and seating, flexible working hours and, increasingly, working from home options. It is recognised that any workplace accommodations required depend on both impairment effects, and the attitudinal and other workplace barriers which may be present in the workplace (Supple & Agbenyega, 2015; Wheeler, 2004, 2017). Nevertheless, accommodations are often unfairly considered by managers and co-workers as constituting ‘special treatment’ (McLaughlin et al., 2004), and such views are particularly prevalent where co-workers have to make some adjustments to their own work schedule to accommodate the disabled person. While some research has established that the costs of accommodations for some disabled people may be minimal (Hernandez & McDonald, 2010; Job Accommodation Network, 2023; Schartz et al., 2006), others report that the employer-perceived reasonableness of requested accommodations continues to be mediated by their individual empathy, and interpretation of necessity and cost (Nelissen et al., 2016). It should be noted that while accommodations are often put in place when someone begins a job, these are not always reviewed and amended to meet changing requirements. Therefore, they need to be reassessed periodically along the employment pathway (Habeck et al., 2007; Murfitt et al., 2018). Such accommodations should be viewed as part of the continuum of human rights and experience, and singling disabled people out as being the only employees in need of accommodations should be avoided, since this is not only false, but such views can lead to negative stereotyping (Berghs et al., 2019; Fraser et al., 2010).

Various studies have assessed the critical role of employment in western countries, and many have focused on factors associated with the challenges which beset disabled people seeking employment (Baker et al., 2018; Bendick, 2018; Bogart & Dunn, 2019; Fadyl et al., 2022). The New Zealand research echoes findings in the international literature, citing negative attitudes, lack of workplace accommodations, and a range of access issues, including those relating to digitisation, as major obstacles to disabled people wishing to work (Carrol et al., 2018; Fadyl et al., 2022). Employment barriers remain an ongoing fact of life for disabled people, whether new to the workforce or well on the way to fulfilling long held career aspirations (Amado et al., 2013; Crudden & McKnight, 2022; Levitt, 2017; Milner & Kelly, 2009). Nevertheless, rather than passively accepting such difficulties as insurmountable, many disabled people actively seek employment themselves, and successfully negotiate obstacles at work, contributing to the economic wellbeing of the community (Bealing et al., 2017; Saunders et al., 2015; Sundar et al., 2018). Research into the impact on the New Zealand economy of increasing access to work for disabled people echoes the sentiment of other authors by urging the removal of barriers to employment as a key issue in need of addressing (Bealing et al., 2017). Advocacy by disabled people and other disability sector representatives will need to play a major role in ensuring such barriers are recognised and mitigated in future where possible. This section now turns to examine what might diminish some of these barriers and facilitate employment opportunities for disabled people into the future.

Enablers to Employment

Several facilitators of employment for disabled people have been researched and discussed over many years. Employment enablers tend to fall into two broad categories: those which are structural, requiring systemic change leading to barrier removal; and those which are facilitated by disabled people themselves, sometimes with support. Structural enablers can include adaptive technology and training, personalised budgets, job trialling, managing for diversity, access to reasonable accommodations, and supported employment options (Adams & Oldfield, 2012; Hayhoe et al., 2015; Moon & Baker, 2012; Rosenthal et al., 2012; Schur et al., 2014). Facilitators of employment that disabled people can themselves deploy include willingness to disclose impairment-related information where applicable, and taking responsibility for their own upskilling (Crothall, 2004; Crudden & Steverson, 2022).

Building Capability to Work

Various strategies have been suggested to identify, support, and improve capability and confidence building to facilitate access to work by disabled people (Sundar et al., 2018), for example, mentoring for and by peers (Walker & Bryant, 2013; World Health Organization & World Bank, 2011). While it is critical to acknowledge and prevent exploitation of disabled people in work that would be paid for any other group (Davies & Butler, 2022; Shandra, 2020; Watson & Alcorso, 2018), volunteering is an important aspect of New Zealand culture (Workbridge, 2020). Working voluntarily with other disabled people can provide exposure to additional knowledge and skills, useful for future employment (Lindsay, 2016; Marková, 2018). Moreover, a number of additional positive benefits to self-esteem, motivation, and satisfaction levels have been reported as being beneficial to disabled volunteers (Kulik, 2018). This activity provides the chance to support other disabled people, while building up workplace skills (Balandin et al., 2006). Shared lived experience of disability can increase the likelihood of establishing trusting long-term relationships (Lindsay, 2016; Webb et al., 2002), facilitating purposeful action informed by experience. Moreover, volunteering helps to establish social networks which may lead to offers of paid work (Yanay-Ventura, 2019).

Recruitment, Retention, and Promotion

Several observers have highlighted a number of approaches to the elimination of barriers to the recruitment, retention, and promotion of disabled employees (Adams & Oldfield, 2012; Fadyl et al., 2022; Jans et al., 2012; Rosenthal et al., 2012; Sundar et al., 2018). Such approaches recognise that positive employer attitudes, and understanding the need for diversity, are prerequisites to the genuine valuing and inclusion of disabled people in the workplace (Baker et al., 2018; Ju et al., 2013). The purposeful creation of opportunities for disabled individuals and employers to meet and converse may be the simplest way to increase access to employment, since some employers have reported their experience of working with disabled people tended to dispel any fears they had previously held (Adams & Oldfield, 2012; Fadyl et al., 2022). It is further suggested that fostering positive attitudes is possible through strategies such as provision of regular disability responsiveness training, developed and facilitated by disabled people.

Supported Employment

Supported employment has been discussed as a largely successful strategy to place disabled people into created employment over many years (Bennie, 1996b; MacNeill, 2006). Initially developed in the USA for those with learning disabilities, supported employment can provide options for those disabled people with significant functional limitations, who may not manage to gain employment on an equal basis with others, and may require on-the-job training. The primary vocational objective of supported employment focuses on the support and resources required to enable participation of disabled people in the regular workforce (Crothall, 2004; Munneke, 2006; Shogren et al., 2020), thus reversing the traditional emphasis on training first, which can lead to long delays in job placement (Bennie, 1991, 1996b). The six major elements in traditional approaches to supported employment are: (1) place/train/support, represented by job placement first, followed by on-the-job training and assistance, rather like an apprenticeship; (2) ongoing natural supports which are provided by family members and co-workers; (3) real work undertaken for the pay applicable to the job; (4) universal eligibility for all impairment types; (5) integrated settings where disabled people are employed in regular workplaces alongside nondisabled employees; and (6) career development which is driven by the choice and control of disabled individuals themselves (Baker et al., 2018; Crothall, 2004; Gustafsson et al., 2013; Rosenthal et al., 2012; Shogren et al., 2020; Van Dalen, 2018). Although participation in supported employment programmes may cost companies in time and funds to meet accommodations, some employers report high levels of satisfaction with employees whom they point out they would not have considered hiring if not for discovering supported employment, and the assistance available from participating disability support services (Munneke, 2006; Rosenthal et al., 2012; Shogren et al., 2020).

Impact of COVID-19

Although not an enabler traditionally cited in the literature, COVID-19 contributed to the employment opportunities available to some disabled workers in New Zealand. The supply of largely nondisabled migrant workers diminished during 2020 and 2021, due to fewer being able to enter the country. Indeed, opportunities continue to exist particularly in agriculture and security. “Employers are now seeking workers they previously may have considered to be less productive, and possibly viewed as health/safety risks” (J. Mosen, Workbridge Chief Executive, personal communication, July 11, 2022). Prior to the spread and impact of COVID-19, there had been a growing demand from employers for fully trained and experienced employees (Burke et al., 2013), and many employers had been reluctant to provide on-the-job training to new hires, preferring to employ fully qualified staff (Burke et al., 2013; New Zealand Productivity Commission, 2019). This represented a barrier to many disabled people who have not had the opportunity to acquire work-related skills. The presence of COVID-19 appears to have encouraged employers to provide greater workplace flexibility, accept different ways to achieve essential tasks, and generally think more laterally about reasonable accommodations (Schur et al., 2020). However, it is acknowledged that the range of positions which support working from home is minimal. While COVID-19 brought with it some benefits for some jobseekers, it also prevented others with various immunocompromised conditions from retaining employment, due to the possibility of long-term consequences from respiratory illness.

Although the global pandemic and associated financial impacts have provided some opportunities for disabled people to enter workplaces where they would traditionally not have been visible, this trend may well reverse again once worldwide infection is brought under control (Workbridge, 2020). In order to ensure ongoing recruitment of disabled people post-pandemic, the responsibility for implementation plans and regular monitoring of hiring practices needs to sit with senior managers in the public and commercial sectors (Chan et al., 2010; Workbridge, 2020).

Self-determination

A strong link has been reported between gaining and retaining employment, being promoted in the workplace, and the motivation and self-determination shown by disabled people to ensure their own success (Saunders et al., 2015; Sevak et al., 2015; Sundar et al., 2018; Wehmeyer, 2020). Self-determination is a disability rights-based approach which promotes motivation to achieve autonomy and competence in a range of areas, including in employment. The personal attributes associated with successful employment outcomes disabled people can themselves deploy, whether in supported or regular employment settings, include being self-motivated, seeking and working with mentors, taking responsibility to advocate for rights, and being prepared to take the risks necessary to achieve desired outcomes (Crothall, 2004; Crudden & Steverson, 2022; Fadyl et al., 2022; McDonnall et al., 2023; Todd, 2018). Disabled individuals can enable themselves through willingness to disclose functional limitations to potential employers, explaining that these do not necessarily impact ability, and by being prepared to discuss mitigation strategies they have developed, including any adaptive technology used (Crothall, 2004; Crudden & Steverson, 2022; Fadyl et al., 2022).

Impact of Technology

Many predictions have been made about the role of technology in everyday life, and in the labour market (New Zealand Productivity Commission, 2019). Computers, smart phones, artificial intelligence, and virtual reality play an increasing part in the lives of everyone now, and are likely to do so into the future (Citizens Advice Bureau, 2020; Raja, 2016). However, the future role of technology relating to employment for disabled people is uncertain. Digital inequities already represent a major barrier to participation by some disabled people today, particularly in the area of employment (Workbridge, 2020). While access to, and training in, the use of digital technologies could greatly enhance positive educational and employment outcomes in future (Hayhoe et al., 2015), technology can be both an enabler of, and an excluder from, employment for many disabled people (Workbridge, 2020). The majority of access issues relate to resourcing and fall into three main categories: (1) the accessibility and usability of the technology itself; (2) the ability to purchase the technology; and (3) access to ongoing training to use the technology and subsequent iterations, for instance, updated versions of software. The trend worldwide is for citizens to do more of their transactions with the state via the internet. Many job tasks also require good internet skills. For blind and vision-impaired people who use speech output via screen reading software, and those with physical impairments who use speech input via speech dictation software, there are generally two levels of access which are important when accessing websites: (1) learning-access – each website is different so the user must learn about what is on the site and how to use it; (2) adaptive-access – learning and employing various techniques to use the site, including pictures, graphics, text labels, dictation software commands and screen reading software keystrokes. For sighted people who use no adaptations, the whole screen is available and information can be comprehended readily. For someone with low or no vision, for example, only that which the cursor is running over is heard, and only provided it is text-labelled, and there is no global comprehension possible. This means that for many disabled people, there may in fact be three levels of access, when also considering (3) consistency access – the operating systems used on computers and smartphones change regularly, as does the configuration of many websites. Thus, not only does the user of adaptive software or techniques have to initially learn about the website, but they must also be able to use the software or techniques to comprehend the web content, and then be patient enough to relearn everything again and again, as software and websites are updated. So usability is also a factor (MacNeill, 2020; Workbridge, 2020). It is therefore essential that a high degree of digital literacy is obtained and maintained. Future employment success for disabled people will depend on their inclusion in the design of vocational interventions which include or rely on technology, that meet their specific employment needs and aspirations in the public, commercial, and disability sectors (Workbridge, 2020). Advocacy by disability service providers and disabled people themselves will also need to play a major role in ensuring the above access issues are addressed and routinely monitored (Workbridge, 2020).

The removal of societal and structural barriers, alongside the willingness of disabled people to exercise self-determination, are critical enablers to employment. As the digital age continues, all of these strategies will be necessary to further the employment objectives of disabled people, which include not only gaining work, but also job retention, and being promoted to senior positions.

Next Steps

Although government-sponsored studies and academic papers relating to disability employment are regularly published in New Zealand, and some are noted here, there is little research available which provides new information about employment barriers or success factors for disabled people in the New Zealand literature. Several reviews of disability employment policies and practices over many years have discussed some of the major barriers to paid employment for this group, noting these tend to be structural, institutional, societal, and individual (Bascand, 1987; Kydd et al., 2018; Lunt & Pernice, 1999; MSD, 2020; New Zealand Productivity Commission, 2013; Van Dalen, 2018, 2019; Workbridge / Allen & Clarke, 2016). Issues discussed in both qualitative and quantitative studies have included the role of employer attitude towards disabled people (Forster, 2022; Todd, 2018), whether the type and degree of impairment influences employment outcomes (Fadyl et al., 2022), and whether employment opportunities diminish sharply in accordance with the significance of impairment (Jensen et al., 2005). A number of New Zealand studies over many years have been impairment specific, for example, quantifying the barriers and enablers relevant to employment for blind and vision-impaired people (Beatson, 1981; Crothall, 2004; La Grow, 2003; Vision Australia, CNIB Foundation, & Blind Foundation of New Zealand, 2018).

Research into the impact on the New Zealand economy of increasing access to work for disabled people echoes the sentiment of many authors in New Zealand and overseas, by pointing out that while full-time employment is possible and desirable for many, policies must be developed to reduce the current marginalisation of disabled people in the workplace (Jensen et al., 2005), and urging the removal of employment barriers as a key issue in need of exploring and addressing (Bealing et al., 2017). However, little practical advice is available which specifically suggests how to address these barriers.

Four major gaps in knowledge relating to employment enablers for disabled New Zealanders have been identified during the course of writing this literature review: (1) the ways in which disabled people can be empowered to manage personalised budgets to support their lives, including employment endeavours; (2) the creation of opportunities for disabled people and employers to meet and establish common ground leading to job offers; (3) retention and promotion once in the workforce; and (4) job opportunities available within the disability sector, including at senior management level.

Managing Personal Budgets

While it has been suggested that New Zealand income support systems could be modified to minimise or eliminate benefit abatement levels and other inequities, providing greater flexibility for those requiring assistance from the state (Fadyl et al., 2022), the current move towards provision of personalised budgets via the EGL approach, discussed earlier, may represent a comprehensive solution for those wishing to work. This might be achieved by placing the resources to obtain bespoke disability-related goods and services, such as accessible transport, sign language interpreters, Braille production, adaptive technologies and training, and personal care supports, directly into the hands of disabled people. A funding model which enables disabled people and their families to exercise greater autonomy over available supports is broadly supported politically and within the community. While it is acknowledged that some reservations have been expressed regarding the neoliberal basis for policies which shift the costs of administration from the state to the individual, including the associated political trade-offs between policy and disability activist agendas, this appears to have been necessary to achieve the goals of such funding for disabled people (Abramovitz, 2019; David & West, 2017; Dursin et al., 2021; Joseph, 2019; Van Toorn, 2021). Indeed, international research has confirmed that increased access to this type of financial support has the potential to mitigate many employment and other inequities, resulting from lack of access to various supports (Murfitt et al., 2018; Rosenthal et al., 2012; Saunders et al., 2015; Sundar et al., 2018). Moreover, research on the impacts of providing personal budgets to disabled people in Europe, the USA, Canada, and Australia has found that quality of life was greatly improved as a direct result of the choices this provided (Fleming et al., 2019).

An assumption apparent in the choice and control paradigm underpinning personal budgets is that disabled people will necessarily have the knowledge and skill necessary to organise a range of aspects associated with the funding, such as budget management, employment of support staff, and information technology. While some commentators have acknowledged the need for disabled people to be able to quickly navigate a complex funding landscape (Skinner et al., 2022; Yates et al., 2021), others have pointed out several barriers to managing budgets, particularly for certain impairment cohorts, related to a number of access issues and other complexities (Devine et al., 2022). For example, technological systems designed to manage personal budgets currently in place in New Zealand remain inaccessible for many disabled people, who would nevertheless prefer to manage their funding independently (Whaikaha Ministry of Disabled People, n.d.).

Australia has funded personal budgets to many disabled citizens through the National Disability Insurance Scheme (NDIS) for many years. While much of the Australian literature relating to the NDIS has discussed access issues in detail (Cherry et al., 2021; Van Toorn, 2021), they do not address the means by which disabled people themselves access the capability building and training necessary to ensure such funding is truly self-directed. Rather, the focus tends to be on the need for provision of training to undertake these aspects by family members (Tracey et al., 2018), and/or external third parties (Moskos & Isherwood, 2019; Topping et al., 2022). Research is urgently required into the ways in which recipients of personal budgets might obtain knowledge and skills in areas such as money and staff management, and the technological training to manage various digital environments, which represent the fundamental first steps necessary to meet the demands inherent in responsibility for their funding resources. Such training may best be provided by disabled people who have already successfully navigated such tasks. If those disabled people new to the concept of exercising self-determination through management of personal budgets do not possess the knowledge and skills necessary, it will be left to nondisabled people to exercise the choice and control which EGL and similar overseas programmes were designed to place into the hands of disabled people.

Making Connections

Some employers have agreed that the negative attitudes of peers represent a significant obstacle to the employment of disabled people (Woodley & Metzger, 2012). However, others have refuted accusations of discrimination, claiming that they do not know how to locate suitably qualified disabled people (Manaf et al., 2019). It seems likely that the most effective employment enabler may simply be having disabled people present in the workplace, thereby banishing negative myths. It is therefore of critical importance for disabled people to participate in opportunities which establish and build social networks, and to ensure that employers and disabled people can meet and make social connections (Adams & Oldfield, 2012; Fadyl et al., 2022; Yenas, 2019). Given this need for social connection, research is required into how opportunities might be purposefully created to enable employers and disabled people to meet and establish social relationships. It is postulated that such opportunities may lead to offers of work, either directly or through employer networks.

In-work Support

It is recognised that the chronic unemployment of disabled people, together with restrictive contractual arrangements with the state, can drive vocational services towards the placement of such individuals, without necessarily possessing the capacity to support their retention in work (Fadyl et al., 2022; Workbridge, 2020). Although it has been suggested that disabled people's individual responsibility plays a major part in employment retention (Thomas & Morgan, 2021), further research is urgently required into additional aspects of job retention and promotion, which would not only ensure better use of the limited resources available for vocational support to disabled people, but could support greater numbers at all levels within workplaces (Crudden & McKnight, 2022; Crudden & Steverson, 2022).

The Disability Sector

A major gap existing within the current literature on employment barriers and enablers is that relating to the disability sector itself. Indeed, the sector has received little attention as an employer to date. Exceptions are those of a small quantitative New Zealand study commissioned by the Ministry of Health and produced by Te Pou o Te Whakaaro Nui in 2013, Todd's 2018 qualitative investigation on learnings from Australia and New Zealand relating to developing leadership by disabled people in the sector, and most recently, a review which specifically focused on the Australian disability sector (Davies & Butler, 2022).

The report published by Te Pou o Te Whakaaro Nui (2013) stemmed directly from a commitment made in Ministry of Health key publications: the *Disability Support Services Workforce Action Plan 2009*, and the *Strategic Plan 2010–2014*, that the number of disabled people employed in the disability workforce needed to increase. The mixed method study by Te Pou (2013) specifically addressed barriers to recruitment and retention, along with enablers to employment, for 12 disabled people working in a small sample of those New Zealand disability support services contracted by the Ministry of Health. The attitude of the 10 employers surveyed appeared to be more positive than that of employers outside the sector, based on general surveys relating to disability employment (Te Pou, 2013). Nevertheless, barriers reported by disabled people included poor attitudes and stereotypes, the sometimes-negative reactions of customers and colleagues, assumptions that disabled people are not as productive as their peers, and the belief that disabled employees receive special treatment. A major limitation of this study was the very small sample of both sector employers and disabled employees interviewed and surveyed (via questionnaire). Furthermore, the composition of the disabled employee group by impairment type was very limited. The experiences of people with learning disabilities, neurodiverse people, and those with multiple impairments were not represented. The researcher did however ensure a representational spread of ethnicities, age groups, and gender balance, in terms of the number of disabled men and women interviewed. A good geographical spread was also achieved.

The report found that a greater focus on demand-side aspects of employment, providing disabled people with practical, organisational level opportunities and support to enter and remain in the disability workforce, worked best for them. Furthermore, it was noted that disabled people require ongoing exposure to a range of skills and experiences, due to the changing nature of work from ‘a job for life’ to a portfolio working life. The report concludes with a call for further research to be undertaken in the area of employment of disabled people within ministry-funded Disability Support Services.

A somewhat larger qualitative investigation of what supports and promotes leadership development of disabled people in the Australasian disability sector was undertaken in 2018. It was intended that findings inform the promotion of disability leadership in the UK (Todd, 2018). This research found that the disability sector needs to be open to a range of people and ideas, including opportunities for mixed abilities and experiences, peer mentoring, and long-term developmental engagement, within climates supportive of mutual learning.

A recent snapshot of employment of disabled people in the Australian disability sector reviewed job types, requirements, and the descriptive language used in relation to the work (Davies & Butler, 2022). Focusing on the role and value of mentoring of disabled people by their peers, the presence of consumers as a distinct professional grouping within the disability sector was emphasised, particularly the value of their lived experience. However, it was reported that this growing sector does not appear to reflect greater employment opportunities for disabled people in general (Davies & Butler, 2022). Findings included the need to reform disability sector recruitment processes to reflect inclusion principles, by purposefully utilising the expertise of disabled people to guide the development of recruitment policies and processes. The harnessing of lived experience of disability was highlighted as the key to ensuring creativity and accessibility of position descriptions, advertising, and application processes. Finally, this research acknowledged that greater involvement of disabled people could attract a wider diversity to the sector. Unfortunately, the critical issues of job retention and promotion were not included in this study.

The disability sector remains one of the very few settings not led and managed by its own consumers. The sector has for many years been overwhelmingly staffed by nondisabled people (Blackmore & Hodgkins, 2012; Branfield, 1998; Oliver, 2013). Thus, a case exists for investigation of the obstacles and facilitators of disability sector employment, including in leadership and management roles. This thesis takes up that case. Investigation into the barriers to work and the enablers of employment in the New Zealand disability sector will include the views and experiences of disabled people, staff of DPOs, disability support service providers, and disability programmes and services managed by the state. Focusing inward to leadership and management of the disability sector is a natural extension of the current framework for disability transformation underway in New Zealand, including the choice and control paradigm upon which EGL is based. It appears that much work is required in this area to overcome institutional boundaries within government and disability sector organisations, to ensure disabled New Zealanders can exercise their self-determination about what they choose and how this is controlled (Forster, 2022).

Moving Theory Forward

Many debates have focused on whether disability is purely a structural construct created by dominant power relations held within a predominantly nondisabled society (Barnes, 1990; Finkelstein, 1993; Oliver, 1990b). Other critical voices from within the disability movement have argued that a purely structuralist analysis ignores the corporeal experiences lived by people with impairments (Berghs et al., 2019; Levitt, 2017; Sherry, 2016). Hence the ground on which the analysis of what constitutes the cause of disability is a contentious one, with little sign of opposing parties coming close to finding an acceptable agreed definition. The author's lived experience of disability clearly influences understandings of the causes of disability; however, these subjective views have been reinforced by disabled participants in this research, clearly and articulately expressing how their experience of everyday life is negotiated as disabled people.

With respect to current theoretical perspectives relating to the social model of disability, this thesis moves understandings of social model thinking away from structuralism alone, to recognition of impairment as an employment barrier, and incorporating individual agency as being of critical importance, to produce a more comprehensive understanding of the lived experience of disability. In order to be ontologically consistent with this move, the philosophical perspectives of Bourdieu are extensively applied, which enable a comprehensive appreciation of power, positioning disabled people not as simply passive recipients of dominant and often oppressive regimes, but as proactive self-determined agents of change.

Critical Reflections on the Literature

Many of the disability and employment studies accessed for this literature review examined employment barriers relevant to a cross-section of disabled people, with a variety of impairments and functional limitations (Bonaccio et al., 2020; Hemphill & Kulik, 2016; Koch et al., 2022; Pulrang, 2022; Schur et al., 2020; Shaw et al., 2022). However, a number of authors focused on employment issues for people with single impairments. For example, several related to those who are vision-impaired or blind (Beatson, 1981; Bulk et al., 2020; Butler et al., 2002; Crothall, 2004; Crudden & McKnight, 2022; Crudden & Steverson, 2022; La Grow, 2003; McDonnall & Antonelli, 2019; McDonnall et al., 2023). The remainder of the literature which focused on specific impairment types included psychosocial impairment and mental distress (Campbell, 2001; Devine et al., 2022; Harper & Thompson, 2012; Harvey et al., 2013; Kydd et al., 2018; Modini et al., 2016; Netto et al., 2016; Walker & Bryant, 2013), and learning disability (Abbas, 2012; Bigby, 2020; Cherry et al., 2021; Logeswaran et al., 2019; Neely-Barnes et al., 2010; O'Brien et al., 2022). While other impairment types were represented, for instance, deafness (Fordyce & Riddell, 2015; Leigh & O’Brien, 2019), only one related to autism spectrum impairments (Unger, 2002). Neurodiversity is an increasingly studied area of disability. However, the impact of functional, occupational barriers to employment for this group appears to be under-researched and therefore requires further study (Doyle, 2020).

While it is recognised that research includes some degree of power imbalance between the researcher and study participant (Glas, 2021; Henwood, 2008), studies involving nondisabled people as the researchers and disabled people as the participants can exacerbate such power imbalances (Wheeler, 2012). Research can itself be disabling due to the perception of the nondisabled researcher as an authority figure by the disabled participant, and may result in an adversely imbalanced research process.

Some of the research reviewed was understandably limited in scope. For example, Rosenthal et al. (2012) echoed the observations made by many other authors relating to the implications of confining research to a particular cohort, and/or accessing limited sample sizes. As a totally blind PhD student Wheeler (2004) faced limitations in both time and resourcing necessary to research additional historical information for his PhD thesis. He observed:

> The very discourse of research with its emphasis on 'observation' assumes a sighted researcher whilst the entire academic process with its heavy reliance on the written word, privileges the non-blind . . . largely because it is not possible to submit a thesis in anything other than a written format. (p. 271)

While it cannot necessarily be assumed that those researching disability issues are themselves disabled, a few authors do overtly state that they identify as disabled people, such as the late Dr Mike Oliver and Dr Colin Barnes. Other exceptions reviewed for this chapter include Dr Jonathan Levitt, Dr Peter Beatson, and Dr Peter Wheeler. Zara Todd and the author of this thesis (writing as both Crothall and MacNeill) also identify as disabled people. However, given the majority of the research about employment prospects for disabled people appears to come from mostly nondisabled researchers, the knowledge and lived experience of disabled people may not be fully reflected in the development of various research processes, which in turn could diminish the credibility of the research produced. Further, the paucity and lack of prominence of the research undertaken by disabled people silences, or at best limits, their authentic voice (Wheeler, 2012). Nondisabled researchers remain dominant in the field, preventing disabled people from gaining paid opportunities and experience as authors and/or co-authors.

A good deal of the literature, which was produced by disabled and nondisabled researchers alike, used a social model perspective to guide their studies (Beatson, 2003, 2004; Crothall, 2004). More recently, researchers who have built on the initial work of Mike Oliver and others have questioned the veracity of the model (Berghs et al., 2019; Brittain et al., 2020; Fadyl et al., 2022; Iacovou, 2021) to gain new insights into the many ways in which disabled people can assist to determine their own success, through the use of self-determination and motivation (Crothall, 2004; Wheeler, 2004). A more diverse research community would result from the inclusion of the experiences of disabled researchers as part of mainstream research practice. In considering the paradox of undertaking studies as a blind researcher, Wheeler (2012) asks that:

> researchers . . . reflect on their experiences of any impairments i.e. lack or limitations in the functioning of their own body and to consider how this can affect the process of conducting research. This can lead to greater diversity within the research community, and provide more diverse alternative methods for conducting research. (p. 92)

Indeed, greater and more diverse reflexive accounts of disabled research participants are possible in studies where disabled people are themselves the researchers (French & Swain, 1997; Macbeth, 2010; Teusner, 2016).

Conclusion

Despite the literature having reviewed both the barriers and facilitators of employment for disabled people over many years, further research is required to discover ways in which both systemic and individual obstacles might be addressed, to enable disabled people to achieve equality with other citizens, particularly relating to employment (Fadyl et al., 2022; Workbridge, 2020). Such research could greatly facilitate the employment goals of disabled New Zealanders. Given the disability system transformation currently underway in Aotearoa New Zealand, it is timely to address the gap in research relating specifically to disabled people’s employment within the New Zealand disability sector, to inform the future development of capacity and capability building within the sector, and enable disabled people to become leaders and managers of a sector that exists in their name. This research will contribute to theory by highlighting the importance of the inclusion of the everyday experiences of impairment and disability as key competencies for employment in the disability sector, and illustrate the importance of both negation of structural barriers and the criticality of self-determination, to enable disabled people to make choices about the trajectory of their lives, and their sector.

The next chapter will review the methods and methodology utilised for this study.

Chapter Three: Methodology and Methods

Introduction

The purpose of this research was to investigate the barriers and enablers to employment for disabled New Zealanders in the disability sector. The aims and processes relevant to using a qualitative methodology, including design and methods, are discussed. Establishing a study reference group, conducting a focus group, and undertaking individual interviews, are highlighted. Bourdieu's theory of power, and social models of disability, are outlined, and the thematic approach, including credibility and trustworthiness, is examined. The process and important considerations involved in gaining human ethics approval for the research are also included.

Theoretical framework

Epistemology

Epistemology is concerned with how researchers create, acquire, and communicate knowledge (Henwood, 2008; Karnilowicz et al., 2014). Disability research is underpinned by a motivation to capture the ontological stories of those that are frequently silenced in research and ultimately excluded from contributing to knowledge. The view that only disabled people are qualified to undertake research on disability-related matters has been expressed for many years (Branfield, 1998; Lester & Nusbaum, 2017), and disabled researchers remain under-represented in academia (Kosanich, 2018). Indeed, research has tended to be conducted with disabled people as subjects only, within an oppressive theoretical paradigm and set of social relations, which privilege being nondisabled (Stone & Priestley, 1996; Wheeler, 2004). However, a growing body of researchers pragmatically believe that support from nondisabled people is valid and useful, while also emphasising the critical importance of disabled people in such research endeavours (Montgomery et al., 2022).

While many proponents of the social model tend to focus on terminology (Iacovou, 2021), or structural forms of power imbalances over individual responsibility and effort (Oliver, 2013), and the present study does not necessarily contradict the impacts of all forms of oppression, the research adds an additional dimension of analysis to the current study by highlighting the critical role of human agency. Participants have been facilitated to tell their own stories of discrimination and power imbalances, which aligns the ontology for this study with a social constructionist approach to research (Good, 2001). Moreover, placing the social and material relations of knowledge production into the hands of participants closely follows the emancipatory disability research agenda prescribed by Barnes and Oliver (1993). A persistent problem relating to undertaking disability research has traditionally been the vesting of power in the hands of nondisabled academics (Brown & Ramlackhan, 2022), who tend to impose their own ontological positions with respect to the meaning of disability and how best to resolve discrimination (Montgomery et al., 2022). Indeed, some nondisabled researchers ‘specialising’ in disability have themselves been accused of being exclusionary, contributing to the erection of barriers to participation and advancement by disabled researchers (Lester & Nusbaum, 2017). This study takes a critical disability perspective which asserts that failure to acknowledge the necessary role of disabled researchers in research about disabled people may therefore be problematic, since they may include ableist notions of superiority in their work (Mladenov, 2015). The present study goes some way to being an inclusive and potentially emancipatory project because the researcher is an insider in the disabled community, and able to align social constructionism with the emancipatory potential of enabling disabled people to position their arguments and convictions to guide, direct, and inform research (Liddiard et al., 2018; Walmsley, 2004). For example, the establishment of a reference group of disabled people to guide the initial research endeavour in the present study ensured the focus was influenced and directed by disabled people (Kitchin, 2000). Likewise, bringing together a focus group of disabled people to consider the consequences of the minimal influence of disabled New Zealanders working in the disability sector ensured freedom from restraint or influence from nondisabled service providers and others, thus ensuring the abilities and capability of disabled people was central to the research (Brown & Ramlackhan, 2022; Liddiard et al., 2018). The roles of both the reference group and focus group are outlined later in this chapter.

Social Constructionism

Social constructionism was formulated more than 40 years ago, to explain the nature of reality from a sociological rather than a psychological perspective (Mercadal, 2013; Walker, 2015). The sociological view is that reality can never be knowable, and all knowledge is constructed (Good, 2001). Social constructionism is multidisciplinary, influenced by philosophy, sociology, and linguistics (Mercadal, 2013). A constructionist approach recognises hierarchical power relationships, and the political work of binary oppositions, which tend to operate within language (Gergen, 2015; Walker, 2015); it rejects the notion of universal truth, maintaining that humans are heavily influenced by the historical beliefs and cultural norms and values in which they are imbedded (Burr, 2015). Further, macro social constructionism interrogates power relationships, including institutional practices (Burr, 2015).

Social constructionists are concerned with how reality is created through interactions between people. Thus, social constructionism is the interpretation of reality through action, discourse, or conversation (Gergen, 2015; Sommers-Flanagan, 2015; Walker, 2015). Moreover, an additional perspective valuable to the present study is the way in which social constructionism rejects biological determination through highlighting social relationships including group identity (Mercadal, 2013). The repudiation of biological ascription is particularly relevant to disability, which has been reflected in societal attitudes towards disabled people, entrenched in a history of eugenics, based on the desire to protect communities from ‘mentally defective’ people (Galton, 1883; Mental Defectives Act, 1911). The social constructionist epistemological position identifies stratified power differentials which operate within language (Gergen, 2015; Walker, 2015). It also concurs with the underlying assumptions of the present research relating to the nature of reality and knowledge. A social constructionist epistemology operates at the intersection between existing beliefs and new information, informing the manner in which individuals learn, experience, and construct meaning (Mercadal, 2013). A social constructionist approach is therefore a positive means for what Gergen (2015) refers to as creative collaboration through partnership with research participants. The social constructionist epistemology underpinning the present research reflects the contested nature of the knowledge about disability and impairment and provides a useful framework for the current study. The inclusion of social constructionism also addresses the issue of the construction of meaning, in a way which is complementary to both the social model of disability and Bourdieu's theory of power. Adoption of Bourdieu’s concept of agency, alongside structure, also adds another dimension of power to the analytical lens developed.

Social constructionism intersects with the critical lenses positioned in this thesis. Socio-historic dynamics influence and shape the views of disabled research participants regarding the trajectory of their employment journeys. Bringing together conflict theory with symbolic interactionalism enables examination of how historical, social, cultural, economic, and political contexts construct individual perspectives on the world, and on individuals (Heiner, 2012).

Ontology

The ontological position taken in this thesis is that power resides in a combination of where disabled people sit in the social class structure, how much individual agency they possess, and critically, whether they can exercise this agency to assert their rights. Simply insisting on the removal of physical barriers and negative attitudes is not enough to bring about the changes required to the lives of disabled people who wish to determine their own employment choices. The simplistic dualism inherent in the social model alone does not assist with an understanding about how discrimination is first located within the habitus of family life, becoming embedded and reproduced over time. However, the inclusion of Bourdieu's concept of habitus in this research allows for critical insight into the position of disabled children within families, and the consequent impact on identity building and education. Bourdieu's theories also highlight the importance of economic capital, while also providing additional elements of social, cultural, and symbolic capital necessary to support the growth and utilisation of individual agency (Bourdieu, 1984). The ability to recognise and excerpt agency is critical to disabled individuals who wish to assert the rights-based approach inherent in the social model of disability.

The Social Model of Disability and Bourdieu

Both the social model of disability and the writings of Bourdieu were employed as analytical tools to draw out relevant themes in the three substantive chapters in this thesis.

The disability advocacy movement in the western world has tended to focus on whether disability is purely a product of impairment (Jammaers et al., 2019), or is socially constructed through barriers to participation and negative attitudes (Andrews, 2017; Barnes, 2003; Oliver, 1990b, 2013; Perry et al., 2020; Retief & Letšosa, 2018). The social model may best be thought of as a way to explain disability in social terms (Watson, 2012). The major strengths of the model are that: (1) it provides an identity-based banner under which disabled people have built a social movement (Iacovou, 2021); (2) it is easy to explain and understand (Shakespeare, 2013); (3) it places responsibility for the removal of barriers on to educational and other systems led mostly by nondisabled people, rather than viewing impairment as an individual shortcoming

(Clifton, 2020); and (4) it promotes the empowerment of disabled people, who may be persecuted for their functional limitations (Shakespeare, 2013). The social model is used throughout this thesis to contrast sometimes insurmountable structural barriers including functional limitations which may be ameliorated by the deployment of individual agency.

While not focused on disability as such, the writings of Pierre Bourdieu have contributed to the knowledge about the social structures relevant to the evolution and advancement of inclusive theoretical perspectives. Bourdieu's conceptual tools are highly relevant to issues of impairment and disability, since they can serve to clarify the ways in which oppression and exclusion impact disabled people (Chennat, 2019). Blending social constructionist and social model elements, such as the constructed nature of disability, with Bourdieu’s understanding of habitus, capital, and field, expands the analysis to take account of the impact of functional limitations and the notion of individual agency. The concepts of structure and agency are terms which explain both the limitations of human individuality, and the capacity to think and act as individuals. While structure provides humanity with an organisational framework, agency relates to the thoughts and actions of individuals within that framework (Wheeler, 2004). Individual agency is limited by a range of societal and cultural barriers which apply to most people. Where barriers are erected which prevent people with impairments from participating in everyday life, they can become disabled. However, it is possible for a disabled person to deploy their individual agency to navigate many access barriers relevant to employment, while also advocating for change by the removal of structural barriers. This thesis presents an overview of the research relating to these inequalities and highlights the views and experiences of study participants regarding disability sector employment, which results in their unequal access to work. By including both structure and agency in the thesis, an attempt is made to acknowledge and incorporate the corporeal experiences of impairment, while also recognising the value and utility of self-determination (Moola, 2015; Saunders et al., 2015; Wheeler, 2004, 2012).

Pierre Bourdieu highlighted the organisation of social class and that of elites. Here the field of power has three capital hierarchies: (1) social space; (2) domination within a social space such as academia or politics; and (3) power itself, with respect to dominating positions (Hjekllbrekke & Prieur, 2018). Bourdieu spurned the idea of society in favour of his concepts of field and habitus, a set of structured and structuring dispositions (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 2005). Field is relevant to those players within its boundaries and, rather like a sports field, certain norms and power relationships are observed (Bourdieu, 1996b, p. 37). For Bourdieu, habitus and field are relevant to one another. Habitus enables field theory to account for individual agency within a range of fields. Throughout life, people develop, internalise, and maintain schemas – attitudinal and behavioural characteristics – which are built on and adjusted, as individuals are exposed to educational and other learnings from life, including the attitudes and influence of the family. These attitudinal and behavioural characteristics are incorporated into the habitus (Bourdieu, 1980; Soro, 2018), a permanent and transposable set of principles for classification and organisation (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 2005). Such principles tend to be maintained throughout life, apart from some adjustments caused by exposure to learning and experience acquired when moving through different fields. Bourdieu believed that timing was of critical importance in the development of habitus, and the acquisition of different types of capital, identifying the difficulty of ‘catching up’ later in life. However, while habitus is of high importance, it does not necessarily have to define future activity or confine agents to the life of their parents. Further, the impact of rapidly changing technologies which can impact positively or negatively on quality of life cannot be underestimated (Hart, 2019).

Attitudes and beliefs heavily influence the formation of the primary habitus and the evolution of the secondary habitus (Bourdieu, 1980). This evolution incorporates experiences in a range of contexts, such as education and, later, employment (Schirato & Roberts, 2018). Experiences include those relevant to disability (Brittain et al., 2020; Robert & Harlan, 2006).

The habitus is inscribed on the body through ways of thinking, dressing, talking, and moving. In this regard habitus is the social made body. Bourdieu referred to these different dispositions as bodily hexis (Bourdieu, 1986). Impairment is part of a disabled individual’s habitus, from the time functional limitations are first experienced, and becomes integrated with other influences, including the development of capitals (Wheeler, 2016). Thus, habitus works in conjunction with capital and field to create relational practice (Richardson, 2010).

Bourdieu viewed capital as more than mere economics, but as a resource which bestows power on the holder, for instance culturally and socially. Therefore, capital is any resource that produces excess value. The notion of capital includes social, economic, cultural, and symbolic aspects (Bourdieu, 1986, 1980). Competition for control of various forms of capital takes place within the field (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 2005). The forms of capital that operate within the field structure that field. For Bourdieu, the species of capital that are central to providing positions within fields include: (1) economic capital, accumulated from investments for instance; (2) social capital, the resources available through social networks and connections; (3) cultural capital, including accumulated knowledge. Cultural capital has three states: embodied, for example knowledge, objectified, such as literature, and institutionalised, which includes formal qualifications; (4) symbolic capital, represented by an individual’s reputation built up over time, which can be used to advantage.; (5) specific capital, including that which is considered to be of value within a particular field; and (6) meta capital, which positively impacts the value of societal fields (Soro, 2018). Fields are the social and professional settings in which individuals, or what Bourdieu refers to as ‘agents’, function and in which they are positioned and compete. Agents are also subjectively viewed through the learning and use of discursive practices, which recognise how people are ‘positioned’ through the invocation and meaning deployed within speech/conversation (Davies & Harré, 1990). Capital may be specific to different fields. For example, the field of politics includes meta capital which impacts all other fields.

Nomos is a term used by Bourdieu to indicate the norms specific to a given field, ‘the way we do things around here’ (Bower, 2003). Norms are most often unspoken yet they are understood as reflecting those forms of capital valued within the field. The nomos within a particular field is grounded in the notion of vision, legitimating the existing world view within that field, and division, which divides individuals and groups into hierarchies (Soro, 2018). Closely related to nomos is the concept of doxa. This is the state that exists amid a range of commonly held beliefs and views within a field. Thus, the norms are held to be hegemonic or self-evident, supporting the hierarchical authority within that field.

The research question, along with the aims and objectives of research, is outlined next.

Research Question and Objectives

The central question addressed by the present study is: what are the barriers, opportunities and factors for employment success experienced by disabled people working, or wishing to work, in the New Zealand disability sector? The disability sector includes all work undertaken largely for disabled people, in government departments, and charitable NGOs.

The following objectives relate to the central research question: (1) identify the impact of family, identity, and education on the employment trajectory of disabled people; (2) outline and discuss the barriers to employment experienced by disabled New Zealanders, generally and those pertinent to the disability sector; (3) highlight enablers to employment success in all sectors; and (4) recommend strategies for the practical application of research findings that ultimately enable disabled people to lead and manage a sector that exists in their name. The research question and objectives resulted from personal interest and experiences, discussion with the supervision team, consultation with the reference group, and reviewing the literature relating to a range of theoretical perspectives, together with that regarding barriers to employment for disabled people.

Methodology

A qualitative lens is applied to research in this thesis. Qualitative approaches generally involve the collection and analysis of words, rather than numbers. Such information is concerned with depth, as opposed to quantity of findings (Smith, 2013). People are both constructed by and constructors of their own reality. Indeed, multiple versions of reality may exist, even for the same person (Arghode, 2012). There is no certainty in qualitative research, since this approach does not aim for replication (Braun & Clarke, 2006). While research is conducted, meanings are constructed and reconstructed (Denzin & Lincoln, 1998); as the social world is engaged, multiple subjective realities are possible, suggesting the absence of one overarching truth (Fetterman, 2012). A qualitative methodology provides a foundation upon which decisions are made about research, including selection of participants.

The term qualitative research applies to both the paradigm and the collection of information (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Paradigm refers to the world view or underlying assumptions of researchers about the nature of reality and knowledge, based on an interpretive framework. The framework encompasses the beliefs, assumptions, values, and practices shared by a research community (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Most qualitative researchers share a set of assumptions, for example the recognition that research is not and can never be value free (Good, 2001; O'Day & Killeen, 2002). An interpretivist, qualitative paradigm acknowledges the local construction of knowledge, allowing for useful information to be generated by examining meaning using small samples, with the researcher at the centre of this process (Arghode, 2012; Braun & Clarke, 2006; Patton, 2015; Vivar et al., 2013). Rather than distancing themselves from research participants, qualitative researchers empathise with and may be part of the group whose experiences are being researched. The qualitative researcher understands and can relate experiences from the participant’s viewpoint and give voice to those who may not get the opportunity to be heard.

A variety of methods may be used by qualitative researchers to collect information, such as focus groups, individual interviews, readings, observations, e-mails, social situations, TV, radio, and archival materials (O'Day & Killeen, 2002). Plausibility is established by qualitative researchers with respect to study findings, convincing others of the veracity of these using persuasive argument (Walker, 2015). The epistemological focus is on knowledge about what is being studied and the rationale for the research (Arghode, 2012). The use of qualitative methods in this study enabled an in-depth enquiry into, and understanding of, experiences and events relevant to the research (Vivar et al., 2013).

Strengths of Qualitative Research

The role of the qualitative researcher is acknowledged as part of the research process, including prior assumptions, beliefs, and experiences, which inevitably influence the research endeavour (Alvesson & Skoldberg, 2000; Pease, 2006). The interactive nature of qualitative research is one of its major strengths. It is useful for systematically collecting, organising, and interpreting information; it is highly subjective and reflexive (Astalin, 2013). Qualitative research has the potential for both immediate and practical use, since it can capture the experiences of individuals, and the multiplicity of institutions and groups with which they interact (O’Day & Killeen, 2002). Such methodologies enable the collection of information and analysis of descriptions which highlight the nature and complexity of participant views and experiences (Yilmaz, 2013). For example, open-ended questions provide study participants with an opportunity to reflect on their understanding, rather than being restricted to multiple-choice questions (Mack et al., 2005). Moreover, the open-ended nature of qualitative questions facilitates participants to provide detailed responses which capture their own views and experiences (Mack et al., 2005). Thus, a major strength of this framework is the close relationship between the subjective experiences of the researcher and what is being studied (Goldberg et al., 2005; Smith, 2013; Yin, 2011).

A multitude of topics can be explored using qualitative methods (Yin, 2011), the aim of which is to illustrate how research participants interpret their own employment experiences within the context of their environment. The perceptions of research participants are of critical importance to assess a given situation and generate new knowledge; the constraints shaping inquiry also influence study outcomes (Arghode, 2012). The emphasis is on understanding processes. Qualitative research captures well the complexities of the lived experience of disabled people (O'Day & Killeen, 2002). Thus, qualitative research methods were considered appropriate for the present study, given its focus on an exploration of meaning, as understood and experienced by research participants (Arghode, 2012).

Applicability to the Present Study

The aim of qualitative research with disabled people in the present study was to illustrate how study participants interpret their own experiences within the context of their environment. The concept of meaning is particularly important to consider when examining the subjective experiences of disabled people seeking employment or promotion in the disability sector, to assess their situations, and generate new knowledge. The qualitative interpretive framework of thematic analysis used involved descriptive and interpretive content, consistent with the research objectives in which the experiences of disabled people and other disability sector stakeholders were explored. The research methods for this study, a focus group and individual interviews, were selected because they appeared to be the most appropriate to answer the research question. The choice of research methods was also prompted by the need to accommodate the functional limitations of the researcher and many of the participants. The criteria for those who took part in individual interviews was that participants were: (1) disabled people seeking work or promotion in the New Zealand disability sector; (2) employers from government organisations undertaking work specifically relevant to disabled people; or (3) employers from NGOs, such as disability support services or DPOs, providing direct support services, and/or advocacy to disabled people.

Sources of Knowledge

This section examines the utility of the methods used in this study, including the establishment of a reference group, bringing together a focus group, and conducting individual interviews. Additional details specific to this study are highlighted in the ‘research design and methods’ section, discussed later in the chapter.

Including a reference group in disability research is not only considered to be good practice, but it enhances the focus, relevance, and outcomes of the research (Kitchin, 2000; Lewis et al., 2008). Moreover, the involvement of a reference group of people with lived experience of disability can provide additional benefits for researchers, disabled people, and policy makers, specifically relating to the authentic experience of disability (Kitchin, 2000; Lewis et al., 2008).

A focus group is a method of information collection which sees several study participants gather together to discuss a number of aspects relating to the research topic (Mack et al., 2005). They provide a useful method for gathering knowledge from those who may be excluded from other forms of information collection, for example, when developing and evaluating health services and research (Kroll et al., 2007). Both the researcher and participants play an integral role with respect to shaping and constructing the experiences of those involved (Garthwaite, 2008). Focus groups provide a useful means to capture a range of responses, in a comfortable atmosphere which promotes sharing and comparing, enabling cultural norms to be identified (Curry, 2015). Many focus groups are now conducted online, and using the method in this way can bring even greater diversity to group discussions, since it enables people to participate from a wider geographical area (Westermann et al., 2022).

The generation of information within focus groups is spontaneous, as members of the group interact (Guest et al., 2017). Participants in qualitative studies are often selected based on personal characteristics relevant to the phenomenon being studied (Flick, 2007). This approach is known as purposive or convenience sampling: choosing only those people with specific characteristics and/or experiences to include in the research. The convenience method of sampling is particularly useful when organising a focus group (Stewart & Shamdasani, 1990), the advantage being the ability to obtain participants quickly and relatively easily.

Focus groups promote the generation of unique insights into shared experiences through group discussion, including questioning and commenting on each other’s viewpoints (Duggleby, 2005; Guest et al., 2017; Lambert & Loiselle, 2008). Focus groups are also particularly suitable for conducting research with people from less privileged and more marginalised communities (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Kroll et al., 2007), including disabled people. However, given that this method can surface forgotten details about experiences, it is critical to appreciate that such groups can also provide an opportunity for participants to be exposed to confronting issues (Curry, 2015; Sim & Waterfield, 2019). It is therefore critical to be aware of the potential harm that may befall them, due to participation. The focus group moderator can establish mechanisms to anticipate and mitigate potential harm, using methods such as: (1) including clear and detailed information relating to the consent process, before, during, and after the focus group session; (2) agreeing a set of ground rules with focus group participants before commencing the session; (3) ensuring opportunity for equal participation of all focus group members in discussions; (4) offering support to participants where necessary, by remaining in the room at the conclusion of the focus group, to discuss any issues which may have arisen for individual participants; and (5) debriefing as part of the provision of summarised focus group material to participants (Kroll et al., 2007; Sim & Waterfield, 2019).

Individual interviews provide an opportunity for research participants to share their expertise, in the process of answering open-ended questions, while the researcher adopts the role of student (Mack et al., 2005). The use of open-ended and follow-up questions provides research participants with opportunity for self-reflection, as opposed to making choices, for example from either/or standardised questionnaires (Mack et al., 2005). Moreover, the open-ended nature of questions enables participants to provide responses which are detailed and culturally salient (Patton, 2015). The major strength of undertaking individual interviews using open-ended questions is that the path of trajectory is unknowable (Curry, 2015; Guest et al., 2017). Interviews as part of disability studies enable disabled people to tell their own stories in their own way (Kitchin, 2000; O'Day & Killeen, 2002).

Analysis

The thematic analysis approach used to interpret information collected in this research involves analytic processes which are shared by the majority of qualitative research methods (University of Auckland, 2019). It is a theoretically flexible and accessible qualitative tool. Thematic analysis draws out meaning from often hidden themes and enables these to be identified and analysed (Harper & Thompson, 2012). In recognition of the active process of analysis, the approach allows researchers to identify salient participant viewpoints and patterns of meaning for analysis (McLeod, 2011; Speziale & Carpenter, 2011). The methodology provides a sound basis for qualitative scrutiny, meeting most of the requirements of qualitative theories for analysing interview transcripts, but without too much theoretical paraphernalia (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The goal is to attain understanding of key aspects of a given circumstance or set of circumstances. Further, reflexive thematic analysis can be deployed as a methodical framework in which to organise, identify, analyse, and report themes across the information gathered (University of Auckland, 2019). The reflexive approach is flexible and not tied to any particular epistemology as such; it includes researcher transcription of interviews as part of the analytical process. Although Aronson (1995) refers to emerging patterns of experience and meaning to ultimately provide information that can be used to answer the research question, Braun and Clarke (2013, p. 8) refute the concept of themes ‘emerging’, since this diminishes the active role of the researcher.

The Disabled Researcher

The sometimes-disabling nature of research can be overlooked as an issue for attention when designing disability-related studies, especially the critical inclusion of disabled people in the research endeavour (Barnes, 1992; Branfield, 1998; Lester & Nusbaum, 2017; Oliver & Barnes, 2010). Whilst methodological texts include a great deal of advice about the interviewing process, along with the ways in which writers, researchers, and participants may be affected by intersecting characteristics such as gender, race, class, and age, they do not tend to consider whether or how the interview process is affected by disabled people as interviewers and/or participants (Wheeler, 2004, 2012). Little relevant advice is offered to disabled researchers, let alone to those with particular types of impairment (Oliver & Barnes, 1997). Much of the generic advice available simply presumes researchers are nondisabled and can therefore conform to traditional methodological prescriptions (Lester & Nusbaum, 2017; Wheeler, 2012). For example, some authors believe that the physical positioning of the researcher and study participant, together with the establishment of eye-contact, are critical to aid the construction of the ‘story’ (Mishler, 1986). Indeed, some go as far as to assert that ‘vision' is critical to observation (Slack & Rowley, 2000). However, it could be argued that the interpretation of nonverbal communications by a sighted researcher, such as gestures and body language, could reinforce their own subjective opinions (McCracken, 1988). Disability research requires greater and more detailed reflexive accounts of the experiences of disabled researchers (Branfield, 1998; French & Swain, 1997; Macbeth, 2010; Teusner, 2016), and inclusion of an emic or insider perspective can achieve greater reflexivity when seeking insight into the world of research participants (Fetterman, 2012; Harris & Roberts, 2003). Asking questions about the participant's experience as an insider enables discussion of commonly understood concepts, empowering participants to frame their thoughts and feelings about various situations in ways most meaningful to them (Worth, 2008).

It is becoming established practice to centrally place disabled people in research about them (Donald Beasley Institute, n.d.; ODI, 2023b), and co-designed studies are increasingly popular (Montgomery et al., 2022). While few disability-related studies include paid disabled researchers, some attention is being focused on, for instance, examining ways to create capacity amongst people with learning disabilities to gain employment as researchers (O'Brien et al., 2022). Regular auditing of progress against articles of the UNCRPD by signatories requires that monitoring be undertaken by disabled people (Donald Beasley Institute, n.d.). For example, New Zealand’s ongoing research and monitoring of the convention is entirely disability-led, and the project coordinators, monitors, transcribers, and research participants must all be disabled people (Donald Beasley Institute, n.d.).

The consequences of power and possible imbalances in research relationships are next discussed, together with a critical reflection on undertaking disability research as a disabled person.

Critical Self-reflection on Undertaking the Doctorate

This critical self-reflection is a subjective piece of writing based on my own personal experiences of the issues encountered during my time at Massey; it reflects my understanding of how a bureaucratic structure, never designed for someone like me, created barriers which became reinforced as staff simply followed practices and policies that were inherently discriminatory. It is not intended to be objective, but reflects how I felt about undertaking the doctorate.

Some of the issues which surfaced for me during the course of conducting interviews are considered, from my own personal, experiential knowledge as a totally blind woman.

As a blind woman, I have sought ways to achieve standard milestones and goals, while also managing some of the attitudes encountered relating to fixed procedures associated with undertaking doctoral work. The methods employed to achieve the outcomes required themselves illustrate how both structural and attitudinal barriers had to be overcome, to enable my participation. For example, I had to both possess and deploy my own agency to advocate and act on my own behalf to change the social and cultural capital inside the university, through exerting enough power to insist on acceptance of my requirements to tweak some systems and processes, for example, by being provided with information about six-month reviews in plain text document format by Disability Services, to enable me to provide the information for the service coordinator to complete on my behalf, since the online form was not accessible for much of my enrolment. The form ultimately became accessible online, through lobbying from me and the Disability Services coordinator. Thus, my own experience illustrates that if greater inclusion in employment is to be achieved by disabled people, both structural and attitudinal changes are required; disabled people must be empowered to use their agency to demonstrate how more inclusive working environments can be crafted to incorporate their inclusion.

Getting into Place – Situating the Researcher

As a disabled researcher doing research with disabled people, I am already in place. I chose to do the majority of the work associated with the information gathering and thesis writing from my home. Transport is an issue when you are unable to drive, and the nearest Massey campus is over 28 kilometres away, so working from home made life somewhat easier than it might have been during this time. Indeed, the habit of working from home was fortuitous, once COVID-19 closed the country down in 2020. However, the phone and face-to-face research interviews had all been concluded prior to this.

Working with Technology

The bulk of the issues which arose for me during the course of my research mostly resulted from the need to access and read information electronically, using a standard computer equipped with software that reads aloud what is on the screen. Such software is commonly referred to as a screen-reader. Use of a screen-reader to read and write was both a blessing and a curse. The blessing related to my ability to pay for and use the screen-reader. The curse pertained to the perception of others regarding what this means. Someone once told me that, while other people understand that I am blind, they often do not realise this means I cannot see. It is this relatively common lack of ability to make the connection between total blindness and lack of eyesight that caused me a good deal of frustration, and time wasting, during the thesis writing.

Indeed, I often felt disbelieved during the course of my studies when reporting access issues, by others who were unable to comprehend how a blind person can use a computer, but must use this differently to a sighted person, for instance, the implications of having to use keyboard keystrokes for all computer commands, rather than the more conventional computer mouse. Moreover, it is often not appreciated that while one adaptation may have worked for one person once, it may not work for another person, since impairments can have very different impacts, requiring different accommodations. The developmental speed of technology means that something that may have worked previously may not work in the present.

Confusion can also arise when assumptions are wrongly made. For example, at one stage my supervisors assumed I was making changes to the document versions in which they had placed their comments. However, I was instead making the changes to the original document, so I would not have to remove their comments and also make the suggested changes, which could become very confusing. For example, I thought my supervisors would be able to detect different heading levels through my use of Microsoft (MS) headings styles, which turned out to be a false assumption on my part.

While technology has come a long way since I first undertook academic studies in the 1980s, it continues to have some drawbacks not easily understood by those who do not use any impairment-related adaptations. For example, while my computer reads whatever is under the cursor, provided this is not an unlabelled image, it nevertheless takes 75 minutes to read 8000 words with the speech rate set at the factory default. I can access Kindle books via my phone, although not graphics, and sometimes not page numbers, depending on how the electronic files have been formatted.

Many documents are available only in Portable Document Format form, commonly known as PDF. If a PDF document is converted directly from an original MS Word document which incorporates headings styles, there are few problems. However, while many PDF documents start out as Word documents, they are often then scanned as image files, which a screen reader is unable to fully comprehend. I have regularly had to request assistance from the university's disability service, to convert often very large PDF texts to MS Word, and then highlight all the headings using MS heading styles, to enable me to navigate often large documents. Although the service is appreciated, the time taken between requiring a text and receiving an accessible version can negatively impact the writing process.

Formatting

Another impact on writing has been the requirement to have text drafts formatted ahead of most supervision sessions. This has meant that whenever I have been given a period of time to incorporate changes suggested by supervisors, the time has been cut short by the need to allow for the sighted formatter to make visual changes taking up to 7 days to complete depending on other commitments, along with allowing sufficient time for supervisors to review the content ahead of the next meeting. There has at times been a lag of an additional 22 days between my completing a draft, having it formatted, and meeting with supervisors to discuss this, which is substantial. Additional time to meet formatting requirements is not an issue for sighted students who do not need to have work formatted and can submit their drafts as soon as they have completed them. The lag time can create confusion, since while this enables work to be undertaken on other chapters, version control can become an issue as the writer flips back and forth between different documents which cannot simply be skimmed.

Additional issues relating to electronic documents include the following. Tables within texts can render them next to impossible to understand, for example, where there are too many columns, where the number of columns change several times within a document, and where columns are merged. Text boxes also often feature in academic documents, but are not accessible at all. While bold font is commonly used to denote headings in many large Word documents, and many websites, simply using bold font does not provide any navigation access to a screen reader user. While the application of MS headings styles enables the navigation of large Word documents and websites via a screen reader with relative ease, the need to use such styles is not readily understood by sighted people, even after repeated explanation. Alternative text is an accessibility feature of MS Word, which can easily be included in academic texts, providing a narrative description of charts and diagrams otherwise not accessible to a screen reader user.

However, such text (which is completely unobservable to the sighted user), is rarely included by publishers.

Advocating for Accessibility

Many of the computer systems relied on so heavily today in academic settings are either only partially usable/accessible or not usable/accessible at all. The constant struggle to advocate for web-based tools to be bought, and kept up to date, was one I soon lost energy for, given my workload. Instead, I often had to rely on the university's disability service for assistance. Electronic accessibility will not change for the better unless institutions take accessibility seriously enough to permanently assign someone in the information technology team to ensure systems are compliant with web and other standards.

Research Design and Methods

The processes and procedures used to gather and analyse the information from research are outlined in this section. The mechanics of organising and undertaking the research worked relatively well. Both the focus group discussion and individual interviews were straightforward. Conversation flowed freely during the focus group, with participants keen to provide their lived perspectives. None of the individual interviews were difficult. There were two minor technical issues during two of the interviews, one relating to a zoom call with a disabled participant which disconnected, and the other regarding a voice-recording application not working correctly during a face-to-face interview with an employer. Both issues were resolved by reverting to a phone interview in the first instance, and in the second instance, the use of another recording device taken to the interview as a backup.

Strategies used in the research design to ensure the greatest level of accessibility possible included provision of information about the research available and/or offered in the most appropriate formats in each phase. Accessible formats included large font, and Easy Read. E-mail was used extensively to garner participation, because e-mail is accessible to most people, including the researcher. The research design was concerned with establishing answers to the 'whys' and 'hows' of disability sector employment and with generating useful theories for practical future application, including for disabled people in settings other than the disability sector. Recruitment involved identifying those who would take part in research, and participants were included based on the qualifying criteria of association with the New Zealand disability sector, either as disabled people, advocates, or service providers.

The Reference Group

An informal reference group of three disabled individuals from within the disability sector (two working in the sector and one with recent experience of working in the sector) was established. Existing networks were used to invite stakeholders with relevant knowledge and experience to join the group. The purpose of the group was to provide disability-related advice and support throughout the research process. I believed a reference group was necessary in addition to the Massey supervisory team, due to the nature and focus of the research. The reference group ensured explicit inclusion of the views of disabled people as consultants to the study.

The group's establishment was an important strategy to resist the status quo of disability research being driven by the dominant discourses of mostly nondisabled academics, and ensured disabled people's voices were at the forefront of research design for this study. Moreover, the reference group provided balance to ensure my own views did not dominate, due to my various positions in, and membership of, the disability community. The group did not generate research findings; their role was to act as an advisory body (D'Aprano et al., 2023; Moore et al., 2016).

However, reference group members did assist with the development of discussion points for review during the focus group.

The researcher communicated regularly with the reference group during the establishment of the focus group via e-mail and telephone, to discuss progress and provide disability-related insights. They also assisted with disseminating calls for people to participate in the individual interviews, once they had reviewed and commented on the development of the semi-structured interview schedules (see Appendices N and O).

Communication with the reference group reduced once the individual interviews began, although some draft thesis material was circulated from time to time for their input. However, their comments were few, partly due to changes in circumstances for two of the reference group members.

The Focus Group

Calls for participation in the focus group were disseminated via e-mail with the assistance of the reference group. Members were required to identify as disabled people and were self-selected, since only six people volunteered. Focus group volunteers were contacted and provided with information about the purpose of the research, including ethical considerations, and referred to the information sheet (Appendix E) and consent form (Appendix K). Potential focus group participants were given time to consider what would be involved before committing to participation. The focus group was then convened to inform the production of semi-structured interview schedules for individual interviews with disabled people and employers.

The face-to-face focus group was held with six disabled participants, four women and two men, in May 2019. Their ages ranged from 30 to 60 years. Various impairments were reported including blindness, physical/nerve damage-related impairments, progressive physical impairments, mental distress, dyslexia, and chronic fatigue. Four participants reported having more than one impairment. The venue used to hold the session was accessible, comfortable, and non-threatening.

Three of the participants had jobs in the disability sector while the other three had either recently left disability sector employment or had been trying to gain or regain work in the sector for some time. The majority of focus group members were recruited from within the Manawatū and Wellington regions, although one person joined from the South Island. As the researcher, I took on the role of group moderator/facilitator, which promoted shared understanding, leading to in-depth participation of focus group members.

Before commencing, I spoke to each focus group member, ensuring they were comfortable. Refreshments were offered and advice given relating to what to do in case of an emergency. The location of accessible facilities which might be required by participants was also advised. The points listed in the information sheet relating to the study were highlighted. I advised that ethics approval had been obtained, explained this process, and outlined the purpose of the focus group in the context of the whole research project. Participant rights and responsibilities were discussed, and issues relating to external confidentiality were clarified, for instance, how information would be used in the study. It was generally recognised and acknowledged that, although highly desirable, discretion could not be guaranteed among focus group members. The group was assured that the electronic recorder could be paused or turned off at the request of any member.

I facilitated a warm-up exercise, which asked “who would you invite to dinner, living or dead?” Discussion of this topic got people talking amongst themselves and each person briefly reported back to the group. The topics set out in the focus group guide sheet (Appendix M) were then outlined and the focus group reviewed the following discussion points: (1) the meaning of work; (2) participant employment goals and dreams; (3) barriers to employment; (4) possible mitigations of employment barriers; and (5) actions government might take to increase employment of disabled people in the disability sector.

Broad themes developed from this discussion included: the implications of disability identity on family life and education; disclosure of functional limitations; physical, attitudinal, and other barriers to work generally, and within the disability sector; recruitment of disabled people for paid disability sector positions; reflecting on improvement or deterioration of employment opportunities over time; ways to promote greater levels of employment opportunities through existing contract arrangements between government departments and disability sector employers; and general employment advice to others. Advice from participants was gradually narrowed through further discussion to more specific disclosure of participant experiences relating to the themes derived. Each discussion point was reviewed separately and discussed by the whole group. Ample opportunity was given for participants to speak freely and reveal personal insights relating to the discussion points and other matters raised over the course of the session. Themes and ideas were developed inductively and electronically recorded. I independently facilitated, transcribed, and analysed this research phase.

The focus group ran smoothly for two hours, with plenty of enthusiastic discussion by everyone present – there were no silences. One group member noted they were enjoying the discussion so much that they could have spent far more time talking about the various points raised, and there was enthusiastic agreement with this statement by the other group members. However, as disabled people, participants had transport booked so the timeframe could not be extended. Those who took part in the focus group were advised that an anonymised summary of the discussions would be circulated to them for their information, shortly after the conclusion of the session. They were also advised that they could contact me after reading the focus group summary, to have information they had provided deleted if required. At the conclusion of the focus group session, each participant was given a thank you card and a grocery voucher. One participant who had travelled a considerable distance was also given a petrol voucher.

After the session, an anonymised summary of key discussion points was produced by me and provided to focus group members via e-mail. Although alternative formats of these summaries were offered, including hard-copy ink print, Easy Read, and Braille, no-one requested these. Themes from the focus group were analysed by me, and shared with the reference group, to inform the development of the semi-structured interview schedules.

Individual Interviews

Four months after the completion of the focus group and its analysis, the final phase of the research began. Recruitment for disabled people and employers working in the disability sector was carried out via social media (including LinkedIn) which netted one participant. The personal networks of reference group members yielded a further four participants, and e-mail calls for participation to various disability networks by the researcher resulted in 20 participants. The total of 25 participants who agreed to individual interviews was made up of 13 disabled people and 12 people representing government organisations or NGOs which specifically undertake work in the disability sector. An information sheet in various accessible formats, such as Easy Read and Braille, was developed and made available (see Appendices F, H, I and J), along with a consent form (Appendix L). Correspondence to government and NGO employers included an offer (Appendix A) to provide a presentation about the study to relevant staff. This offer was made twice but not taken up.

The purpose of holding research interviews was to discuss and compile accounts of individual perceptions, beliefs, and experiences of disabled people seeking work or promotion in the disability sector, and of those responsible for recruiting within this sector. All of the interviews took place between November 2019 and February 2020. Interviews were in the main undertaken face-to-face (13). Interviews were held in settings identified by, and convenient to, research participants. Other interview methods included telephone (9), zoom video link (2), and facetime audio (1). Interviews were recorded electronically, and participants were reminded of this prior to and at the beginning of each interview. The interviews lasted for between half an hour to, in one case, an hour and forty minutes. Although semi-structured interview schedules were available which reflected the research question, there was also ample opportunity given for research participants to speak freely, thus facilitating an unknowable trajectory of conversation, and providing a chance for the sharing of personal insights. The following groups of people participated in the individual interviews.

The first group consisted of 13 disabled people, who self-identified as having physical, sensory, or learning disabilities (intellectual impairments), or who experienced mental distress, and who either worked in the disability sector or who had attempted to gain employment in this sector during the preceding five years.

Just three Public Service organisations were represented in the second group, which was made up of representatives located in key positions within government departments, with work programmes specific to disabled people.

The final group comprised nine participants from NGOs, including seven charitable providers of disability support services, and two DPOs.

Disabled Research Participants

Disabled people who wished to take part in the study contacted me directly. They were assured that no personal identifying information provided for the study would be made available to service providers or government agencies. A total of 19 disabled people participated in the research: six focus group participants and 13 individual interviewees. Of the 13 individual interviewees, five identified as men and eight as women. The ages of disabled participants ranged from mid-20s to 66 years. All but one of these participants reported being the only disabled member of their respective nuclear families. The following impairments were reported by these individuals: autism, learning disability (intellectual impairment), blindness, vision impairment, dyslexia, various physical impairments, mental distress, and a range of neurological impairments – both congenital and resulting from accident but none from gradual process or illness. Eleven participants were recruited from within the Manawatū, Horowhenua, and Wellington regions, and two people took part from Auckland. The ethnicities of those disabled people who participated included New Zealand European (11) and Samoan (2). Ten people were employed in the disability sector at the time of their interviews, eight of these in government organisations or NGOs. Hours of work ranged from five hours per month through to full-time work (40 hours per week). One disabled person was fully employed outside the sector but was nevertheless seeking work in the disability sector. Two people were unemployed at the time of the individual interviews and were looking for work in the disability sector.

The semi-structured interview schedule for disabled people covered the following topics: (1) identification as a disabled person or a person with a disability; (2) educational attainment, including qualifications gained; (3) employment, including work history, employment barriers, experience of applying for paid disability sector positions, differences between working in regular or disability sector settings, improvement or deterioration in employment opportunities for disabled people over time, current work experiences, job accommodations, appropriateness of salary, successful employment strategies used, and employment goals and dreams; and (4) enhancing government policies to create future employment opportunities.

Participants from State and Non-governmental Organisations

Participants from three government departments and nine disability sector NGOs agreed to individual interviews. Of the NGOs represented, seven were providers of charitable disability support services, and two were DPOs. All of these participants volunteered to be interviewed. The ages of participants ranged from 30 to 66 years. Most resided in the Manawatū or Wellington areas, however, three participants were resident in the South Island. The majority of participants identified as New Zealand European, although one person identified as ethnic Chinese and another as New Zealand Māori. There was no intention to recruit nondisabled people, and two participants disclosed impairments. However, they did not view themselves as ‘disabled people’.

The semi-structured interview schedule for government and NGO employers covered the following topics: (1) purpose and activities of the organisation; (2) general management of recruitment; (3) employment of disabled people, including methods of recruiting, use of disability recruitment agencies, and preferences for employment flexibility identified by disabled people; (4) improvement or deterioration in employment opportunities over time; (5) reluctance to hire disabled people; (6) advice to other employers about hiring disabled people; (7) positive strategies relating to employing disabled people; and (8) enhancing government policies to create future employment opportunities.

I wished to ensure that disabled and nondisabled participants had agency over their own words and experiences. It was therefore considered appropriate that disabled people and others participating in this study from within the disability sector had the right to choose whether or not to review and comment on information gathered from them. Each participant was therefore provided with their interview transcript, for their review and feedback. Transcripts were offered to participants in a range of formats, including electronic file, standard ink print, or in Braille. Those participants who chose to review their transcripts requested an electronic file, sent via e-mail. No-one who requested and received a copy of their transcript expressed any dissatisfaction or suggested any changes to the transcript. Although a copy of the relevant digital audio file of each interview was available to anyone on request, no participants requested this.

Ethics Considerations and Approval

Research ethics are concerned with the communication between researchers and study participants. The use of open-ended questions and follow-up questions provides research participants with opportunity for self-reflection, as opposed to requiring choices, for example, from standardised questionnaires (Mack et al., 2005). Moreover, the open-ended nature of questions enables participants to provide responses which are detailed and culturally pertinent to them (Mack et al., 2005). The process for gaining ethics approval for the current study consisted of completion of an ethics application form, which included sections on the project details, participants, collection of information, recording, benefits and risks, consent, privacy and confidentiality issues, Treaty of Waitangi, cultural considerations, and sharing research findings.

The documents produced included: (1) flyers for disabled people (focus group, Appendix C), disabled people (individual interviews, Appendix D) and government and NGO interviews (Appendix B); (2) a guide sheet for the focus group (Appendix M); (3) information sheets for disabled people (focus group, Appendix E, and Easy Read format, Appendix G), disabled people (individual interviews, Appendix F, and Easy Read format, Appendix H), government disability sector employers (individual interviews, Appendix I) and non-governmental disability sector employers (individual interviews, Appendix J); (4) consent forms for the focus group (Appendix K) and both sets of individual interviews (Appendix L); (5) interview schedules for disabled people (Appendix N) and employers (Appendix O); and (6) a letter to government and NGO employers (Appendix A).

All ethical considerations required by the Massey University Human Ethics Committee were adhered to in this study. The project was reviewed and approved by the Massey University Human Ethics Committee: Southern A, Approval SOA 19/08.

Those who participated in the focus group and individual interviews did so voluntarily. Informed consent was obtained from all research participants via the provision of information about the research, which noted points relating to the rights of research participants to decline involvement, ask questions about any aspect of research, refuse to answer particular questions, and withdraw from research. Written and verbal consent to participation was obtained from research participants.

The privacy of participants was respected and ensured when electronically recording interviews. The device used for this provided spoken prompts when recording, pausing, or stopping recording, so participants were in no doubt that their wishes were being respected, for instance when requesting that remarks be made ‘off the record’. All individuals participating in the research have had their identities anonymised and pseudonyms used where material has been quoted, to protect participant privacy. The information gathered from the focus group and interviews has been reported in such a way as to anonymise the information, without reference to the particular impairments of the disabled individuals who took part.

The researcher ensured no harm occurred to participants as far as possible, including preservation of confidentiality. The information derived from this research was stored on two computer hard-drives (in a lockable filing cabinet) and in the cloud in a password-protected Dropbox folder, throughout the research process. All recordings and other information associated with the study will be destroyed after five years following the completion and acceptance of the thesis.

It behoves all researchers to declare any interests they may have in relation to the sector in which research is being conducted. Researchers must also ensure they are not in, or perceived to be in, any sort of position of power relative to research participants. However, some inevitable risks relating to research were identified in the present study. These include the possibility of researcher bias and need for extra care and attention to confidentiality, given the researcher's identity as a disabled person, involvement with the Workbridge Board of Management, and as a provider of disability-related training. The researcher recognised the importance and difficulties associated with accurate self-knowledge (Karpen, 2018), and therefore developed practical mechanisms to mitigate personal bias throughout the research process, including keeping a journal of reflections and deliberate and purposeful consideration of positioning within the disability community, particularly while reading and transcribing interview material. Regular communication with the study reference group, and with the Massey supervisory team, assisted to ensure the utmost integrity of the research was maintained and risks mitigated.

Social and cultural sensitivities have been safeguarded throughout the research process, including the unique requirement within disability research of ensuring the voice of disabled people is heard. Written materials produced during research, such as the information sheets, interview schedules, interview transcripts, and a summary of findings were offered to research participants in a range of formats, including electronic files, in standard ink print hard-copy, Easy Read and in Braille.

Credibility, Trustworthiness, and Dependability

Whilst qualitative research is pertinent and applicable to studies involving disabled people, there has been some criticism of the method (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Priest & Traynor, 2006; Ryan-Nicholls & Will, 2009). It is critical therefore to delineate clear evidence pathways relating to decision-making processes, the themes included, and linkages developed to the applicable literature, in order to demonstrate credibility (Patton, 2015). Thus, strategic identification of clear and concise evidence pathways demonstrates research credibility (Fereday & Muir-Cochrane, 2006). Moreover, reflexivity is fundamental to ensure detailed scrutiny of the information, to determine any intended or unintended researcher bias which may impact the research findings (Astalin, 2013; Jootun et al., 2009).

The information gathered during the focus group and individual interviews was generated inductively and analysed in relation to themes. Integration of the information from focus groups and individual interviews makes a number of significant contributions to research, for example, providing a model to guide initial and successive accounts of the topic being studied, including individual and contextual experiences to enrich, converge, and enhance data credibility (Lambert & Loiselle, 2008). Focus groups and individual interviews provided depth to the study (Braun & Clarke, 2006). These methods, together with the input of a stakeholder reference group, enhanced the credibility and trustworthiness of the study, increased the relevance of the results, and assisted with data triangulation. Trustworthiness relates to whether a research procedure measures what it purports to measure (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Trustworthiness is illustrated by the explanation of the researcher’s decision-making process, which provides transparency relating to findings. Triangulation was possible using the researcher’s experiences as a disabled person and a professional working in the disability sector, the literature reviewed and incorporated into this thesis, and the consistency of information derived from the focus group and interviews. Such methods assist to ensure in-depth information for analysis and synthesis (Lambert & Loiselle, 2008). Credibility and trustworthiness are evidenced in this study through the researcher's faithful recounting of, and respect for, the diverse narratives of research participants. Trustworthiness was also achieved by input from the Massey supervision team, through participant review of interview schedules, peer review, constant comparison and review during analysis, and by continuous consultation with the relevant literatures.

Issues of Power in Research

While it is important to be aware of issues of power and control within interview situations (Glas, 2021), such issues are not entirely straightforward, and power imbalances can arise (Henwood, 2008). It has been argued that a power imbalance exists even between peers, for example, between female researchers and female research participants, with power tending to automatically be bestowed on researchers simply due to their relative position (Jen et al., 2020). However, both parties in these circumstances may be at risk due to power inequalities (Vahasantanen, 2013). Such disparities may not always be negative, since balance often shifts situationally, between and during the use of different interview methods, and may produce richer data than using one method alone (Cotterill, 1992; Garthwaite, 2008; Vahasantanen, 2013). Nevertheless, researchers must engage in active reflexivity, and be aware of positionality across all aspects of organising, conducting, and writing up research findings (Garthwaite, 2008; Glas, 2021; Henwood, 2008; Sim & Waterfield, 2019).

It is inevitable that the study has been influenced by the researcher's own involvement in disability sector employment. However, transparency was maintained with participants regarding the researcher's lived experience, and roles within the disability community. No observable power differential existed, and no professional or other relationships existed with anyone associated with the research during the time it was conducted. However, many of those involved were known to the researcher, through previous personal and/or professional interactions. The disability community is a small sector in a small country; it would not be possible to conduct the study without at least knowing of certain individuals. Rather than being a research weakness however, this is a strength of the study, since a high level of comfort was reported by research participants who felt at ease with someone they knew to be a fellow disabled person.

Analysis of Information

The thematic analysis approach to interpretation of the information derived from the study is now highlighted. The social model of disability and Bourdieu's concepts were brought together to analyse the information.

While it has been argued that thematic analysis is one of a range of tools which is best accessed alongside other methodologies, such as grounded theory for instance (Holloway & Todres, 2003), others believe it is trustworthy enough to analyse qualitative information alone (King, 2004; Nowell et al., 2017). The six-step approach to thematic analysis, delineated by Braun and Clarke (2006), was used as the framework to analyse data in the present study. These steps are: (1) familiarisation with the data; (2) generation of initial data-derived codes; (3) searching for themes; (4) reviewing the themes; (5) defining and naming themes; and (6) producing the report.

Confirmability provides assurance that the research findings are directly linked to the research data and are not merely the researcher's opinion (Caulfield, 2019). Confirmability was achieved through the use of a framework consisting of data familiarisation, code generation, and detecting, reviewing, and naming themes (Nowell et al., 2017). The framework provided the basis for a logical and sequential analysis of the data. The study was both deductive and inductive, producing specific themes relating to disabled people working, or wishing to work, in the New Zealand disability sector. The focus group and interviews were used to draw out the views of research participants. All the remaining steps were undertaken by creating and using electronic computer files with screen-reading software, since no visualisation of information, drawing maps for example, was possible. Moreover, data analysis software available was not screen-reader accessible so could not be used.

The discussion which took place during the focus group was transcribed verbatim from the electronic recording. It was then divided into manageable chunks according to topic and coded. An example of a discussion point and coding follows:

> I've got my own jobs, I've had no special favours (other than having been initially on the Mainstream Programme if you call that a favour), but other than that I've done it all myself.

An example of the relevant codes extracted from the material quoted were self-determination and supported employment. Each code highlights the expressed thought of the participant.

All of the information that appeared to be relevant or interesting was coded, and new codes relating to different ideas added. In this way, a condensed overview of recurring themes was derived (Caulfield, 2019). The information from all 25 interviews was transcribed and verbatim answers to the semi-structured interview questions noted in separate electronic files, one per participant. The answers to each of the interview questions were then grouped together into separate documents, one for each of the interview questions. The files were named according to the relevant interview question, which was regarded as a high-level data feature. Initial coding began using interview-derived data (Braun & Clarke, 2013), using short phrases according to responses. Noting and coding was inductive and semantic (according to the content), and deductive and constructionist (according to existing concepts identified in the literature). Interesting information relevant to the research question was gathered into categories, and those that related to each code were collated together (Mortensen, 2020). Sections that included multiple codes were placed into the applicable code categories, and some text relating to each code was retained for context. An example of a discussion point raised in an individual interview from this is:

> I identify as someone with depression but that isn't something I disclose when I apply for a job.

Codes felt to have been relevant from this example include disability identity, disclosure, and impairment. Again, the codes highlight the thoughts and feelings expressed by the participant. All the codes were examined for patterns and reviewed for frequency and relevance. Vague or infrequent codes were discarded from the process (Nowell et al., 2017). Themes and subthemes were developed from groupings of codes or from codes themselves. For example, the role of self-determination in seeking employment was a common feature. A description of each theme included a note about what each represented, and why it was considered important and interesting. The story of each theme was elaborated, along with the relevance to the research, to preserve its contextual setting. Information was condensed, clustered, and sorted to link common themes together. Table 1 provides examples of the different themes derived from disabled participants, along with those from NGOs and government departments.

Table 1

Examples of Themes derived from Disabled Participants, NGO participants, and participants from Government departments

Disabled participants	NGO participants	Government department participants
Qualifications challenges and supports	Experience of hiring disabled people	Recruitment management
Experience of applying for work in the sector	Employment in the disability sector	Contact with disability employment agencies
Job accommodations	Improving employment opportunities	Strengthening government policies to improve employment

The various themes were defined and refined. Theme definition was achieved by clarifying the exact meaning of each, and ensuring it was relevant to the data. For example, ‘Qualifications challenges and supports’ became ‘navigating education’ as part of chapter four. The entire data set was re-examined to check the assignment of codes, themes, and subthemes, to discover any that were not initially noted, and to check for relevance and coherence. The process was halted once it became apparent that no new information was evident. Recurring and related themes were reviewed with supervisors, and those which contributed to answering the research question were included in chapters four through six. For example, chapter four brought together themes relating to the impacts of family life, the development of identity, and managing education by disabled participants, before introducing barriers and enablers to employment analysed in chapters five and six. The social model and its focus on structural and attitudinal barriers, along with Bourdieu’s concepts of habitus, capital, field, and agency, were included to provide the analytical framework.

Conclusion

A qualitative research paradigm and social constructionist epistemology underpin this research into employment opportunities, barriers, and enablers, relevant to disabled people working, or wishing to work, in the New Zealand disability sector. While qualitative research methods assisted to illustrate the importance of the lived experiences of disabled people, it is recognised that such methods do not necessarily replicate patterns across the whole population of disabled individuals in New Zealand. As the researcher is a member of the disability community, an insider perspective informed the study. Research was exploratory and inductive, employing the social model of disability, and Bourdieu’s theory of practice and power. The methods used generated descriptions of processes, mechanisms, and settings. Procedures served to highlight the perspectives of research participants and their experiences. The approach taken has assumed more than one correct version of reality or knowledge. Analysis was iterative, plausible, coherent, and grounded in the research information, with theory and concepts proposed once information was collected.

The following three substantive chapters examine: (1) the impact of family life on disabled children and youth, the formation of identity, and navigation through the education system, in preparation for the world of work; (2) a range of barriers associated with gaining and retaining employment, both in regular workplaces and within the disability sector; and (3) a critical analysis of enablers which may potentially mitigate employment barriers in all workplace settings.

The following three chapters contain findings from research.

Chapter Four: Navigating Family, Identity, and Education

Introduction

The first influences on early life are familial, and strongly impact the ability of disabled children to navigate areas of life outside the family. This findings chapter begins by identifying how disabled people are impacted by familial and educational systems, prior to reviewing barriers to seeking and gaining paid employment, examined in the next chapter. While this research did not specifically focus on family inclusion and upbringing as part of the development of the interview questions, both the positive and negative aspects of family life were nevertheless raised and discussed by participants. Some of these experiences are included here, since they provide context to later sections on identity-building, educational achievement, and the eventual acquisition of employment, discussed in chapter five. Moreover, participant perspectives provide insight into the forming and shaping of the habitus, which continues to mediate, and be mediated by, other experiences throughout life.

Both the positive and negative experiences of disabled study participants within the family are briefly considered, since these experiences affected the trajectory of their respective journeys through the formation of identity. Areas such as disability disclosure, hierarchies, language, and pride are then considered, before turning to challenges and enablers in the field of education. All areas covered are informed by the social model of disability (the social model), which while eloquently highlighting structural barriers to participation by disabled people, is nevertheless insufficient to account for the whole phenomenon of disability (Shakespeare & Watson, 2001; Wheeler, 2004). It is therefore proposed that a deeper understanding of living a disabled life may be produced through the analytical lens of Pierre Bourdieu's social stratifications (Bourdieu, 1977), beginning with the habitus (Bourdieu, 1990), which influences the ways in which disabled people can deploy individual agency to reduce and/or remove barriers to education and employment.

Family Life and Identity Shaping

Family Life

> Because of everyday experiences, you often don’t believe in your own abilities. That can come from point of diagnosis, when your family were told, how you were brought up. I think the thing is believing in yourself and your own capabilities. If you don’t then no one else is going to. (“Liz”, disabled person [DP])

Objective one of this study was to identify the impact of family, identity, and education on the employment trajectory of disabled people. Some of the participants spoke of how childhood experiences of disability had shaped their identities and choices as adults. Moreover, several aspects of family life were raised by disabled participants in both the focus group and individual interviews. Their perspectives are included here, to provide context to later sections on identity-building and education. The section begins by highlighting the experiences of disabled research participants who were born with their respective impairments. Events which shaped the life of participants who acquired impairment after childhood are considered later. The positive impact on disabled family members derived from provision of appropriate supports are explored (Fitzgerald & Kirk, 2009; Gibson & Teachman, 2012). Less favourable aspects, such as exclusion and stigma (Garland-Thomson, 2014; Gill & Schlund-Vials, 2014), along with resistance to symbolic domination through the misuse of symbolic power (Bourdieu, 1996b; Mu, 2021; Schubert, 2014), are also acknowledged.

Both positive and adverse family experiences impacted the subjectivities of adult research participants through the formation of their early habitus, that is, dispositions accumulated via social history (Bourdieu, 1990). Bourdieu’s concepts provide a useful framework within which to understand how the habitus can be influenced and reconstructed throughout life. Propositions of habitus, field, and capital (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992), also contribute pertinent perspectives which are applied to examine the early lives of disabled research participants, which shape their identities and their navigation of the educational field. The field is any setting within which individuals or agents are situated and through which they manoeuvre (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992). Fields such as family and education constitute relatively autonomous, social spaces where agents compete for social, cultural, and economic capital (Bourdieu, 1986; Wheeler, 2016). Capitals are accumulated and exchanged later within fields such as education and employment, to achieve success (Chennat, 2019). While impairment and disability were not specifically included by Bourdieu in his theory of social practice, his work recognises that different cultural groups exist in different societies (Bourdieu, 1984). The social model of disability, which asserts that people are disabled by structural and attitudinal barriers to inclusion and participation (Oliver, 1986) is contrasted with the ability of disabled people to influence their lives through assertion of their agency (Bourdieu, 1977).

Families can play a significant part in contributing towards either the successful integration or marginalisation of disabled members (Garland-Thomson, 2016). Family support may be provided without question, or withheld, with respect to inclusion, self-determination, and equal status with siblings. Experiences may differ substantially from nondisabled children, depending on a range of factors, including the ways in which impairment is perceived and understood, and what economic resources are available within the family. For example, the habitation of positions in affluent or deprived social spaces appears to result in a differential ability to exercise agency (Allen, 2004; Gill & Schlund-Vials, 2014).

Many disabled children are born into strong and supportive families, which enables individuals to form and develop a robust habitus, empowering them to access a range of fields (Fitzgerald & Kirk, 2009; Gibson & Teachman, 2012). Research participants with access to high levels of familial support expressed similar views about the significance of family assistance and the provision of impairment-related support. For example, the mother of “Susan” (DP) was extremely important to Susan’s early job search once she had left school.

> In those days, most jobs were advertised through the paper. That was difficult for me to read so mum would read out the jobs listed and I’d write down any that sounded good.

Similarly, “Hannah” (DP) spoke of the ongoing support she receives from her parents. Hannah said “I get a whole lot of family support which is unpaid but my parents are aging, so they can't provide this for ever.”

The experiences discussed by Susan and Hannah illustrate the positive outcomes of parental support. The assistance available to them ensured they knew how to exercise choice and exert control of their lives, through their individual agency. The development of self-determination enhances the ability to build resilience and surmount the inevitable challenges presented by ordinary life experiences, such as Hannah’s concerns about her aging parents, and structural and attitudinal barriers (Wheeler, 2004). The development of strong disability-related resilience can also assist with the management of experiences associated with impairment, such as Susan’s deteriorating vision. The integration into the habitus of self-determination and the ability to use agency, means that disabled people can gain the confidence and motivation to independently navigate a range of barriers, or seek support when this is required, in fields such as education and employment (Supple & Agbenyega, 2015). Moreover, such autonomy can enable them to envisage the ‘space of possibilities’ (Bourdieu, 1996b, p. 235), through their own efforts (Saunders et al., 2015; Sundar et al., 2018).

What might appear to be adverse familial responses to impairment do not necessarily stem from deliberate negative carelessness or indifference (Solomon, 2012). By sheltering a disabled family member, parents may simply believe they are protecting that person from a hostile and problematic world. For example, “Pippa” (DP) reported her parents were ambivalent about discussing disability with her after her accident. However, this reluctance proved to be ultimately beneficial:

> If my family had pushed me too hard to accept my disabled thing, I probably wouldn't have, but they went opposite. Like 'you're not disabled', while really believing I was.

The contested nature of the term 'disabled' has been widely discussed for many years (Campbell & Oliver, 1996; Garland-Thomson, 2016; Oliver, 1990b; Tremain, 2017). Internal and external stigma may be experienced by many, influenced by largely negative societal views about disability, which impacts the construction of the self as 'disabled' (Crothall, 2004; Fitzgerald & Kirk, 2009; Zapata, 2020). From a social model perspective, exclusion of the word 'disabled' from discussions with Pippa about her acquired impairments could be regarded as denying her the choice to identify with an oppressed and excluded minority group. However, it might be argued that, in not discussing this with Pippa, her parents provided her with the space to exert her individual agency and begin to incorporate her new situation into her habitus (Allen, 2004; Bourdieu, 1986). Far from merely accepting and adapting to her impairments, as espoused by the medicalised perspective of the individual model of disability, proponents of the cultural model of disability might consider this approach to have enabled Pippa to become aware of how her subjective identity has been created and continues to be shaped (Waldschmidt, 2017, 2018).

Some of the disabled participants in this study reported that parents and siblings can refute their knowledge, skills, and capabilities. The views of participants who spoke of similar experiences are summarised here by "Allice" (DP), who observed "they don't listen to my advice, but just look it up on the net, believe what it says and not what I have discovered through my research and experience."

As observed by Allice, a disabled family member may struggle to acquire field-specific family capital, and therefore not believe they are equal with siblings, able to exert the same influence within the family as others. Apparent denial of Allice's embodied knowledge, lived experience, and autonomy may echo a broader lack of credibility given to the voices of disabled people (Crothall, 2004; Oerther & Oerther, 2018), exacerbated by wider societal misconceptions about inability. Moreover, some degree of ableism may be present in the relationship Allice has with her family member, since Allice further noted "The person I live with is the boss; it's the price I pay for the home and life I have." While the family member she resides with may believe themselves to be the best person to make important decisions which directly impact Allice, such decisions could be influenced by negative systemic ableism, the perspective that nondisabled people are necessarily superior to disabled people (Brittain et al., 2020; Friedman, 2019; Jammaers et al., 2019). Thus, dominant ideologies and persistent structural inequalities, often exacerbated by negative media stereotypes (Ford & MacNeill, 2017), may be perpetuated and internalised by family members (Friedman, 2019). Moreover, disabled people are themselves not immune to the internalisation of such ideologies and inequities (Darling, 2013). Negative dispositions can result in lack of confidence and self-esteem, directly impacting the ongoing shaping of the disabled family member's habitus, the development of self-determination, and the ability to utilise individual agency to resolve difficulties for themselves. If the construction of knowledge through the habitus is negatively impacted, disabled children and youth may not develop the ability to access the support and assistance required to enhance their lives.

The way in which disability is experienced by all family members depends on a number of factors, including family norms and values, and the various forms of capital available (Bourdieu, 1986). Moreover, access to social, cultural, and economic capital can positively or negatively influence how a disabled child is positioned within their family (Mirfin-Veitch et al., 2022). Positioning impacts identity construction through the further shaping and development of the habitus (Allen, 2004). Thus, this chapter now moves to examine the formation and growth of identity impacting disabled research participants.

Shaping Identity

> It’s a descriptor; disability, impairment are both acceptable to me – but if someone calls me crippled or spastic, they have to be prepared for me to call them what I like. (“Neil”, DP)

The inclusion of disability identity in the evolving habitus requires disabled youth to manage issues such as the expectations of others, disclosure as a means to gain support (Von Schrader et al., 2014), impacts on self-perception (Darling, 2013), and the hurt and anger which may be experienced through discrimination or ableism (Carey, 2022; Carroll et al., 2018; Gill & Schlund-Vials, 2014). The symbolic meaning of these processes is continually incorporated into the evolving, or what Bourdieu (1990) termed secondary habitus, through environmental and discursive practices, including experimentation with various roles during identity building (Galvin, 2005; Goffman, 1963; Mauer, 2018; Moser, 2005; Watson, 2002), and recognition of personal positions in particular categories (Davies & Harré, 1990; Roberts, 2009).

The impact on identity of acquiring impairment in adulthood tends to differ from that of someone born with impairment, or someone who acquires impairment early in life. The following experience outlined by Liz highlights some of the adjustments required where someone becomes disabled as an adult.

> I played a lot of sport at a very high level, but giving this up wasn’t the problem. It was the networks, and you were no longer part of the social scene.

In this discussion of initially grieving for a past life as a nondisabled person, Liz points out that it was not so much the functional loss itself that caused her the greatest anxiety. Rather, it seems to have been the impact on her symbolic capital, including loss of status. Liz was also unable to continue the accumulation of social and cultural capital through a previous and valued position within the sporting field, including the connections directly linked to her habitus and her old identity. Liz has had to purposefully reconstruct her habitus away from her nondisabled identity, embracing one which instead includes impairment and disability.

The production of western selfhood can be contradictory. Western thought encourages individuality and freedom, yet also fundamentally traps the individual in a paradox, on one hand striving for the goals of distinctiveness and free choice, while at the same time classifying and ordering individuals into groupings. Once in a defined group, the individuality and freedom initially sought becomes weakened and may even be lost. However, membership of a defined group such as 'the disabled' provides a strong identifier to challenge discrimination and oppression (Carey, 2022; Gill & Schlund-Vials, 2014). For example, while the medical model asserts that disabled people must adjust and adapt to its norms, many disabled people are equally vocal in demanding that the narrow confines of what is considered normality be expanded, removing the barriers to participation, and becoming far more accepting of difference (Hughes, 2000; Wheeler, 2004, 2016). Nevertheless, adherence to the identity within the grouping of ‘disabled people’ can also make such people appear to others as homogeneous, masking their individuality and right to agency. The impacts on study participants relating to disclosure of disability, choices about the descriptive language used, and the ways in which disability identity was viewed, are now explored.

Disability Disclosure, Language, and Pride

Whether and when to disclose impairment, disability language, and whether this is a source of embarrassment or pride, are all decisions faced by disabled people, either consciously or unconsciously (Goldberg et al., 2005; Jans et al., 2012; Von Schrader et al., 2014). Such decisions are important processes for identity-building and management (Orcan, 2019; Richard & Hennekam, 2021). Factors which influenced the shaping of identity reported by study participants and also noted in the literature include: ability to manage functional limitations (Bendick, 2018; Bogart et al., 2018; Schnitzler, 2021; Supple & Agbenyega, 2015); consideration of disability disclosure (Fadyl et al., 2022; Mauer, 2018); disability pride

(Blackmore & Hodgkins, 2012; Bogart, 2017; Bogart et al., 2018; Galvin, 2005; Mauer, 2018); and the ability to acquire and utilise all forms of capital (Bourdieu, 1980; Delva et al., 2021; Wheeler, 2016).

The decision to disclose impairment is of critical importance in the formation and development of positive disability identity, and decisions about whether or not to pass as nondisabled, conceal functional limitations, or disclose impairment can occur multiple times throughout a day and be different each time (Evans, 2017). Such decisions depend on those with whom the disabled person is interacting, and on each situation encountered.

Several participants in the present study with unseen impairments reported deliberately choosing when and whether to disclose, some only doing so where they believed it to be necessary or expedient, depending on the situation. For example, “Peggy” (DP) recalls a time when she was able to choose whether or not to ‘pass as nondisabled’.

> It’s a bit like having partial sight, where you can pass as sighted as long as you don’t find a set of stairs with the same carpet as on the floor, which you don’t see because there’s no contrast. It’s a fine line but if I can pass as sighted am I going to disclose anything to anyone? Hell no!

In choosing the way in which others view her over her personal safety, Peggy alludes to a possible negative consequence of not revealing her vision impairment – that of risking a fall down a flight of stairs, which could result in injury, and even additional impairment(s). Further, Peggy’s observations about not disclosing the extent of her impairment illustrates the internalisation of the stigma which can be associated with functional limitations, and the societal pressure felt by many disabled people to minimise or even hide impairment (Crothall, 2004). Indeed, concealment of impairment, where this is possible, is commonly reported in the literature (Bendick, 2018; Fitzgerald & Kirk, 2009; Jans et al., 2012; Schnitzler, 2021).

Another perspective on the decision-making process relating to disclosure is provided by "Tony" (DP), who discussed the types of situations in which he decides whether and what to divulge.

> If I'm filling out a form that says 'do you have any disability?' I'm very self-selecting; I'll say I've got hearing issues but not a brain injury, Because people think 'crikey, can he do his job?' I'm not embarrassed about it or not telling the truth, it's just what it is.

People with unseen impairments have greater choice about disclosure than do those with more obvious impairments. Moreover, complex and sometimes ambiguous classifications within impairment types can enable those disabled people to exercise some choice with respect to the ways in which they view and project their disability status in various contexts. Thus, disability disclosure depends on who disabled people are interacting with (Olney & Brockelman, 2003). Indeed, those with less obvious impairments may be able to choose when, how, or if they disclose impairment-related information at all (Holland et al., 1998; Wheeler, 2004). For instance, people with dyslexia need only disclose this when seeking assistance with reading and writing.

Tony's impairment management raises the issue of hierarchies of impairment (Hughes et al., 2012), the way in which some impairments are regarded over others (Pullen et al., 2020), and the perceived suitability of someone with neurological impairments to work. Tony clearly believes his hearing impairment is easier for others to understand and accept, so chooses to disclose this alone. Thus, Tony highlights a choice made by many disabled people – to manage external visibility of impairment in different ways, for a variety of mostly pragmatic reasons (Fadyl et al., 2022). For example, some individuals can, at their discretion, choose to appear more or less significantly disabled, depending on the circumstances confronting them at any particular time. Examples include applying for disability-related benefits, whether these be income support or gaining advanced access to vaccinations. It may seem perfectly logical and rational for the individual to maximise their disabled status in such cases, whereas disability-related identity may be minimised when applying for employment, if the individual believes this will negatively impact their candidacy (Wheeler, 2004).

The area of hierarchies of impairment is an interesting consideration in a discussion of disability identity and preparation for employment. Bourdieu (2001, p. 268) defines hierarchies as “the distinction between noble and ignoble subjects”. Indeed, disabled people have traditionally been viewed as part of a devalued category, along a hierarchical spectrum (Clifton, 2020; Deal, 2002, 2007; Harpur et al., 2017), in which it is at best difficult, and at worst impossible, to acquire symbolic capital (Danieli & Wheeler, 2006). The view that some impairments are preferred over others in certain situations was further highlighted by Tony when he observed “It’s more acceptable to be physically disabled in some ways than to have neurological impairments.” This supports Tony’s earlier comment, about being prepared to disclose his sensory impairment, but not his neurological impairments.

Decisions about the language of disability are integral to the development of disability identity (Perry et al., 2020). For instance, those participants whose impairments were not visible or who felt these were ‘partial’ (for example partial hearing, as opposed to deafness), tended to use first-person language and generally identify as ‘a person with a disability’. However, some people use preferred identity language, such as Deaf, as opposed to 'person who is deaf'. Since the majority of participants in this study were born with their respective impairment(s), which had either remained static or had deteriorated over time, they generally chose to use the term ‘disabled person’ when referring to themselves, and were also more likely to disclose the types and extent of their impairments. “Lillian” (DP) was very clear that she identifies as a disabled person.

> But having said that, I don’t think disabled people and other people are different. We all grow into our own selves and I just see it as a variation. You can divide people up in different ways and I just see this as one division.

Lillian’s expressed belief about disability existing as one category would appear to support the notion that impairment is a common occurrence along the spectrum of human experience (Roberts, 2009; Watson, 2002). However, disability may also be viewed as a historical construct, which includes the social relationships that can produce discrimination (Erevelles, 2014; Gill & Schlund-Vials, 2014). Moreover, impairment and disability both structure and are structured by culture (Waldschmidt, 2017).

Some of the participants in this study who strongly identified as disabled people were unconcerned about the language other people use to describe them. This neutral position was summed up by “Eddy” (DP), who nevertheless clearly positioned himself as a disabled person.

> I think people get a little hung up on the wording … we, the people who are labelled as disabled, have impairments, but it’s society as a whole that disables us.

As someone with a learning disability, “Brian” (DP) stated he preferred person first language, saying “everyone has a disability, you know we’re not disabled … labels disable us.” In support of Brian’s perspective, Logeswaran et al. (2019) examined whether people with learning disability know, understand, and accept their ascribed label of ‘intellectual disability’. They found that most people with learning disability were aware of and rejected their status and the associated terminology, and recognised that others viewed them negatively because of this. Some spoke of feeling ashamed, angry, and powerless.

The range of views expressed by participants illustrates the incorporation of self-determination into their habitus and identities. Participant choices were reinforced by their statements about the language of disability and impairment. Thus, the self-determination of participants is exercised when they feel it appropriate to the particular situation. Additionally, these participants were able to resist dominant ideologies to forge their own identities (Evans, 2017; Samuel, 2013). It was notable that while Eddy expressed the view that it is society that disables people, Brian felt the label itself was disabling.

Several participants observed they are, or have been, ‘on a journey’ from one end of the disability language continuum to the other. Disability language was noted by “Kirsty” (DP) as being “quite a political thing” advising she had started her impairment journey at one end of the spectrum but had moved to the other.

> For a long time, I was a person with a disability and I also used to refer to other people with a disability. As I've come to terms more with my disability, I actually see myself as a disabled person … as I've come to accept my disability and my community, I feel quite I guess, encouraged, almost proud.

Disability pride was a theme also identified by other participants. For example, Allice spoke of her mental distress as being inextricably linked to her identity – “it’s a good part of me.” Most of these participants were definite about how they saw their disability status, how this was incorporated into their respective identities, and whether this was important to them. It became apparent that much of what some disabled participants disclosed was underpinned by the complex and changing ways in which they positioned themselves in relation to impairment (Galvin, 2005; Garland-Thomson, 2014, 2016). For example, Pippa and Allice spoke of their pride in who they are as disabled people, positioning themselves positively in relation to disability. Positioning focuses on the ways in which discursive practices constitute the person doing the positioning and the person being positioned, through which they can negotiate new positions for themselves in the course of conversations or stories (Davies & Harré, 1990). Further, Davies and Harré discuss the definition of roles through the discursive practice of speech, defining how individuals are subjectively viewed. Added to this notion is how they view themselves. Furthermore, a number of contradictions and discontinuities exist in the production of self, through multiple and contradictory discursive practices, as engaged in through conversation (Davies & Harré, 1990).

So far, this section has focused on individual identity, including disclosure, disability hierarchies, and language. It is acknowledged here that a considerable emphasis has been placed on a structural analysis of disability. The structural emphasis has driven a disability movement agenda, based on political change, since the early 1970s (Oliver, 1990a). The movement claims that disability is a more persuasive political force if regarded as a collective, group-based struggle. In other words, a collective group identity of disabled people is politically more powerful than individuals attempting to influence change (Wheeler, 2004). The notion of group identity as a descriptor is relatively new to the disability community who have, following the United Nations International Year of Disabled Persons in 1981, used identity as a culture-building tool for empowerment (Johnston, 2004). Further, the concept of disability pride discussed earlier views the lived experience of disabled people as valuable, particularly in situations which directly impact them, such as the disability sector and related disability discourses (Bogart et al., 2018). Many disabled people align themselves with group identity and disability pride campaigns as a means to disclose impairment, without necessarily revealing personal information (Garland-Thomson, 2016). As highlighted by Kirsty and Allice, those with greater levels of functional limitations may also align themselves under the disability pride banner, as a way to build and preserve self-esteem (Bogart, 2017; Galvin, 2005). Disability pride can be viewed in terms of rejection-identification, reducing stigma where those within a stigmatised group identify with each other, rather than seeking acceptance by a dominant group (Bogart et al., 2018; Garland-Thomson, 2016). This is certainly the case for many Deaf in New Zealand.

Identity building when disabled includes decisions about disclosure, along with the disability-related language and narratives adopted. The result is plural, flexible, and evolving, with individuals trying out a range of elastic identities over time (Flynn, 2021; Galvin, 2005; Olney & Brockelman, 2003). Disabled people can choose to operate within and between multiple coexisting and related roles, which may be difficult to distinguish (Flynn, 2021; Leigh & O’Brien, 2019; Roberts, 2009; Sellick, 2014). A pluralist view of identity is useful with respect to disabled people, where disability is itself part of a multifaceted identity, shaped by historical and social relational factors (Watson, 2002, 2012). The issues relating to individual and group identity which have been highlighted here form the backdrop to many people's lives, influencing the development of their habitus (Bourdieu, 1990), and the ability to acquire all forms of capital, including the cultural capital obtained through access to education (Bourdieu, 1986). Mainstream education (alongside nondisabled students) is considered in the next section, from the perspective of disabled study participants. This includes the continuing impact on the developing habitus, the acquisition of social and cultural capital, and the exertion of agency to achieve desired outcomes.

Educational Challenges and Enablers

> A large part of social suffering stems from the poverty of people's relationship to the educational system, which not only shapes social destinies but also the image they have of their destiny (Bourdieu, 1998a).

Education influences the shaping of the habitus (Bourdieu, 1990), which is structured by previous events and structures future actions. For example, experiences in one field, such as the family, may be referenced and replicated in another fields, such as education or employment (Soro, 2018). Both the obstacles and enablers which exist in the educational field were raised and discussed by disabled research participants. Barriers included: poor attendance rates due to hospitalisation; having to submit to the preferences of others; not understanding how to present written work; financial barriers; lack of access to services and facilities; and ignorance of possible adaptations and reasonable accommodations by teaching staff. Enablers included: the use of mainstream and adapted technology; gaining reasonable accommodations; and receiving appropriate advice and support.

Challenges

At the time the majority of disabled study participants were at school, educational mainstreaming was a relatively new concept, since many public and private segregated schools were in operation. Therefore, few guidelines existed relating to the adaptation of the mainstream curriculum to meet the needs of disabled students, who may have experienced significant gaps in their education. Two study participants who attended mainstream schools highlighted the significant impacts on their education due to absences related to their respective impairments. “Ken” and “Mike” (DPs) experienced profound educational deficits through gaps in education. Ken stated “The first 10 years of my life I was in hospital more than I was out of it. So that affected my schooling.” Mike spoke of the impact of frequent periods in hospital, observing:

> When we leave school our level of education is much lower than our peers and we never make that up. I grew, but my muscles didn’t work so I spent 2.5 years out of 5 years of high-school either having operations or recovering.

Nevertheless, Ken and Mike were generally philosophical about their respective experiences, viewing the consequences of these as quite natural. “You just learn to cope” (Ken). However, there can be little doubt that the extended periods of time away from education experienced by Ken and Mike significantly impacted these participants. Neither of them gained any academic qualifications. Ken works in a part-time position which pays the minimum wage, and Mike has struggled to gain and retain any employment since leaving school. Both reported having developed coping strategies as a result of their experiences. However, it should be noted that the construction of coping strategies requires additional work, and this work has emotional implications, including exhaustion (Roberts, 2009). Disabled participants in this study spoke of the tension between continually managing other people’s attitudes and expectations, and the impact of functional limitations. “Beth” (DP) noted “I immediately want to be as easy going as I can which is a problem. You can’t be complaining can you! But if you don’t complain you don’t get anything.”

The educational field consists of the various social agents participating within it, such as teachers and students, and also includes their habitus (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992). Early mainstream educational success involves conforming to a raft of expected and accepted cultural behaviours, including some which are non-academic, such as appearance (Wheeler, 2016). Both nondisabled and disabled students behave in accordance with their habitus, including upbringing (Chennat, 2019). Many nondisabled students follow the example of teachers and may be largely able to meet their expectations over time; they consequently tend to be viewed favourably. However, for many disabled children, meeting the expectations of teachers may not be possible or may only be partially attainable, due to unfavourable familial influences, functional limitations, and structural barriers, such as textbooks not being available in Braille, or steps preventing wheelchair access (Watson, 2009). Disabled students are often unable to conform to field-specific norms (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992), and may therefore be seen as challenging or difficult. Inability to adjust can result in stress between the structures of the field of education, and the behaviour of disabled children (Hart, 2019). Teacher expectations may be low, due to often incorrect perceptions about impairment and capability, along with ignorance of adaptations (Emerson & Hatton, 2007; Watson, 2012). For example, when disabled high school students begin consultation with teachers, career counsellors, and other professionals relating to future employment options, the latter may not know about or understand the programmes, adaptive techniques, or assistive technologies required and requested, so may, albeit inadvertently, set low expectations for such students (Workbridge, 2020). Perceptions such as this might be regarded as a form of structural discrimination (Gill & Schlund-Vials, 2014), in that they become part of a widespread belief system which reinforces itself, by constant perpetuation. The longer such misconceptions are allowed to exist without critical assessment, the more valid the often-erroneous beliefs become. It should be noted that even where low expectations are unintentional, these can negatively affect ongoing educational achievements. In such cases, the practical support, advice, and encouragement necessary to assist disabled students to pursue their career goals may not be forthcoming, since these professionals simply do not know what is possible (Workbridge, 2020). The attitudinal obstacles, together with a range of structural inequalities and those stemming from various impairment-related myths, for instance assuming that students with learning disabilities are completely unable to learn (Amado et al., 2013), can make the experience of disability far more stressful than the impacts of functional limitations alone.

Lack of preparation at secondary school, relating to the requirements in the field of tertiary education, was a recurring theme for some study participants. The difficulties experienced by many were summed up by Lillian, who describes herself as:

> dyslexic in a way which is almost global . . . I didn't understand that 44 was more than 36 . . . no one ever explained to me how to write an essay. I somehow got my BSc without knowing that information. It was a complete mystery to me. When I was doing my Post Graduate Diploma, Massey required you to buy a book of business writing, . . . which was my ah ha moment.

Educational progress was difficult for Lillian, even though she had developed some strategies to enable her to gain qualifications. She had not gleaned enough information about how to manage written work from either her family or school. This lasted until well into her tertiary education. Lillian's inability to pick up on the norms of the educational field with respect to her written work may have prevented her from obtaining higher grades and may therefore have impacted opportunities to gain higher level qualifications leading to greater levels of economic capital earlier in life.

Likewise, “Sefina” (DP) had difficulty with comprehension and essay writing at university, because she simply did not know what was expected of her. She eventually achieved a post-graduate degree, with a lot of support:

> I struggled in college with writing essays and my comprehension but university was the only pathway my parents had for me. I'm a Samoan woman and we really have respect for what our parents say. But I made it to graduation, I got there in the end.

Unquestioning acceptance of what is considered to be 'normal' within the family was evident in discussion with Sefina. Indeed, the concepts of home and family life, including showing utmost respect for parental views and wishes, are identified by Jenkin et al. (2017) as being of critical importance to disabled Pacifica children. However, Pacific peoples may view impairment and disability negatively, and disabled Pacific peoples are commonly discriminated against and marginalised due to this negativity, along with some cultural beliefs specifically relating to impairment and disability (Jenkin et al., 2017; Ministry of Health, 2008; Sharma et al., 2019; Tahaafe, 2003; Yenas, 2019). Sefina's parents expected her to at least attempt the same educational milestones as her nondisabled siblings and wider fanau, which is in itself positive. However, attempting to conform to these standards may have also been experienced by Sefina as symbolic domination through practices which are wielded by one person or persons over another (Bourdieu, 1996b). The stress of trying to conform to parental standards may have been experienced by Sefina as highly distressing, where she found it difficult or impossible to meet expectations due to her functional limitations. Constant pressure to conform to familial norms can result in the establishment of barriers to family participation and the perpetuation of prejudice towards the disabled member, who may be oppressed where conforming is impossible due to the functional limitations of impairment and lack of access to any mitigation of these limitations (Supple & Agbenyega, 2015). Nevertheless, in recognising but not accepting discrimination and stigma, Sefina's habitus may have begun to work against the accepted cultural grain to challenge the status quo. The experience reported by Sefina relating to parental insistence on completing education to tertiary level, coupled with her lack of understanding of written requirements during her early years, illustrates that she may have to some extent successfully resisted the way in which her identity was being constructed by family members.

This is particularly evident given her present employment status. Indeed, disabled people are constantly resisting both subtle and blatant discrimination and social exclusion to forge their own pathways (Deal, 2007; Gill & Schlund-Vials, 2014).

Neil found lack of financial support to be the ultimate barrier to higher education. He was unable to complete tertiary study, due to lack of funding.

> I started a Bachelor of Arts and Social Sciences. I ended up not graduating because … there was this reversal in funding for the Tertiary Incentive Allowance. I accrued a large debt … which really took a toll on me and so I left. It was so frustrating!

During the time tertiary study was available to him, Neil began to realise his intellectual potential, after struggling for many years with the stereotypic way in which his motor skills tended to be perceived by others. He found that what he learned opened many doors for him with respect to the acquisition of cultural and social capital (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992). However, the financial stress on Neil resulted in tension between the objective structures of the fields of education and the state, and Neil's subjective thoughts, which led to his extreme anxiety and ultimate departure from education. The insurmountable financial barrier caused by accruing debt, along with the associated mental distress, negatively influenced Neil's ongoing ability to form sufficient cultural and social capital to improve his economic capital, even when he eventually obtained work. For example, Neil wished to be considered for a more responsible job, with longer hours. However, the position he sought was unattainable, largely due to a lack of social and cultural capital acquired in an administrative position. Thus Neil lacked the symbolic capital to demonstrate the capabilities required to gain promotion, limiting his access to new and valued forms of capital, which would have improved his lifestyle, and his ability to save for retirement. This left him in a precarious position when a restructuring was announced at work. Neil's role was disestablished, and he became unemployed.

Despite being ultimately successful in their respective tertiary endeavours, Kirsty, Pippa, and Hannah reported difficulties accessing the assistance they required. They were obliged to negotiate a number of obstacles along their respective tertiary educational pathways.

Kirsty has an undergraduate degree, a post-graduate degree, and a national diploma. She reports her experience of tertiary Disability Support Services was largely negative, saying:

> I did use Disability Services on campus. I found them useless personally. They were more willing to expend money to pay a support person to work for me, than try to figure out a way that I could actually do it myself.

Although Kirsty was assertive when asking for reasonable accommodations to ensure her access, she reports she did not receive the support she required. It may be that assumptions made by Disability Support Services staff, possibly based on previous experience with similarly impaired individuals, got in the way of accommodating bespoke requirements. Indeed, disabled students often report such issues with tertiary level services and supports, relating to lack of understanding about the individual impacts of impairment (Dolmage, 2017; Francis et al., 2018). Disabled students have reported difficulties with disability support services not following up enquiries and making incorrect assumptions about functional limitations (Roberts, 2009). Moreover, the concept of 'reasonable adjustments’ can highlight the needs of just one individual, while failing to change a given practice (Merchant et al., 2020). Conversely, rigidly sticking to a set of universal guidelines for all or most students can lead to failure to recognise individual needs, and students may be classified as having the same disability, while in fact having different and often contrasting responses to the same reasonable accommodation (Roberts, 2009).

Although Pippa has been ultimately successful with respect to employment, she did not gain any university qualifications. She shared the following issues she encountered at university.

> I'd heard really great things about how people have been supported at University . . . maybe I just had a particularly bad advisor . . . but I got in touch with him six months

> before I started the course. We had quite a few discussions about what I'd need, but when it came down to it, it was all very late and not thought through. I was feeling really good about myself and then that whole experience just made me feel rubbish.

Pippa felt she had conveyed her requirements to her course advisor but found these had not been actioned upon commencing her studies. This lack of action resulted in her experiencing a crisis of confidence and withdrawing from tertiary study. The tertiary education system has been referred to as essentially disabling, due to the often-unmet support needs of disabled students (Dolmage, 2017; Merchant et al., 2020). While there are a number of privacy, communication, and consistency issues among disability support services and teaching staff at tertiary institutions, it appears to be the responsibility of the student to try to get the various structures and systems to work together. This is particularly difficult for new students who are unaware of what they do not know about the system.

Hannah has several post-graduate qualifications, including a PhD. However, she reported difficulty accessing the built environment, in the following case-study.

> There was an issue with the kitchen, where I was near a different departments kitchen, and I was using it. They told me I wasn't allowed to. I told them 'the other kitchen isn't accessible and I have to go through a very heavy two way door, I have trouble getting through it and I have spilt hot tea on myself'. There was a big argument over that. So I dug my heels in . . . I went to the head of my department and I got an apology. But then they told me 'you're not allowed to use the milk in that department because it comes out of a different budget. So they eventually agreed that every week, the admin from my department would put a bottle of milk into the other department's fridge. They also tried to use the hot water as a health and safety issue to stop me from being able to use the kitchen, so they bought a kettle. I'd just got out of hospital and they accepted me into a disability PHD and I said 'you are not going to prevent me from using the only accessible kitchen here'. It made me so angry and resentful.

Hannah's experiences of being unable to access the kitchen can be considered in terms of power. Administrators fall back on structural power rooted in the formal rules and regulations of the university, whereas Hannah is attempting to exert her agency in terms of a disabled person seeking equality of access to the kitchen area and its facilities. As a PhD student, Hannah possesses cultural and social capital within the tertiary education field. This cultural capital includes what Bourdieu (1986) considered to be objectified, material, cultural elements and institutional elements or qualifications. Having gained several academic qualifications, Hannah knows and understands the culture of tertiary institutions. She holds social capital through her knowledge of the powerful social actors within the organisation. Yet she had little agency over the norms operating in the field, relating to her access to facilities in this case. The barriers to Hannah’s use of the kitchen attached to her department may have impacted her ability to develop new social capital with others undertaking similar studies. She was also hindered from forming such capital with staff members and others, who could eventually become colleagues, co-researchers, and advocates. Furthermore, Hannah was beset by bureaucracy (Gill & Schlund-Vials, 2014), relating to the need for a relatively minor, reasonable accommodation, using the accessible kitchen in another department.

The issue reported by Hannah provides an illustration of how structure and agency can clash within the realm of structural and resistant power. Clearly staff feel secure falling back on established rules and protocols generally designed for a nondisabled student population. However, Hannah illustrates how individual agency can be exerted as a resistant power to challenge the bureaucratic rule-based organisation (Dolmage, 2017; Merchant et al., 2020). It is helpful to consider both sides in this minor skirmish. By falling back on existing rules and regulations, staff have a defence against any potential claims of unfairness or discrimination, by simply stating they were following organisational rules. A staff member will not be sanctioned by their organisation for ensuring the rules are followed, even if those rules discriminate (Gill & Schlund-Vials, 2014). In such a case, the fault lies with the organisation, not the individual staff member. Thus, it is difficult to claim that staff held negative or discriminatory attitudes towards Hannah. If rules do not permit exemptions, then any discrimination is rooted in the organisational structure and not necessarily the attitudes of the individual person applying the rules. Hence, when accusing an individual organisational member of negative attitudes, there would appear to be almost always a strong defence if that person is simply following a rule. The point here is not to argue that discrimination is acceptable in any way, it is simply a critical reflection which enables the exploration of the complexities involved in attempting to understand, at a theoretical level, how discrimination exists (Gill & Schlund-Vials, 2014), and that barrier removal is not a simple issue of demanding change. Any change would need to be logical, rational, and fit within existing structures of power and organisational behaviours, if it were to be implemented successfully and achieved relatively quickly. Thus, if Hannah’s position is considered against this analysis, it is possible to gain a clearer insight into the source of barriers encountered. It is frequently very difficult for an organisation to change a rule or rules, based on the needs of one individual. Rules are generally developed to provide guidelines for the majority. Therefore, it is left to the strength and endurance of the individual disabled person to argue for reasonable accommodations which may mean relaxing particular rules (Supple & Agbenyega, 2015). Clearly this reinforces a personal individualistic model of disability (Oliver, 1990b).

Although the social model of disability discusses structural power, in the form of barriers which disable people (Oliver, 1990b), it does not include the notion of agency (Bourdieu, 1977), the disabled person's ability to remove some barriers for themselves. Hannah's own agency in the kitchen example effectively provided sufficient power for her to resist and eventually overcome the structural barriers in her way. A brief examination of this situation from the perspective of the social model of disability illustrates that merely separating impairment from socially constructed disability (Paterson & Hughes, 1999) is somewhat arbitrary in Hannah’s case. While it might be argued that moving the focus from barriers and disabling attitudes to include impairment issues may presage a return to a medical model epistemology, Hannah’s mobility impairments are central to the examples she has provided. These impairments are considered to be abnormal and appear to have inspired negative thinking in others, impacting Hannah’s human rights and access needs, combined with the physical barriers which also prevented her from having these rights and needs met. While it is acknowledged that there may be implications for the university should an accident occur in the kitchen example, the administrative staff attempted to use the structural power of the organisation to protect themselves against any potential claims of unsafe practices. However, Hannah's habitus, partly shaped by previous experience within and outside the tertiary system, together with a highly developed level of self-determination, including mastery, autonomy, and purpose, gave her the tools to challenge the oppressive hegemonic authority evident in this situation. By demanding the right to use the 'only accessible kitchen' available, Hannah resisted and overcame this hegemony.

As illustrated, while the ability to communicate accommodation and support needs are key determinants of success for disabled students, conveying such needs does not necessarily guarantee positive outcomes (Donato, 2008). Nevertheless, their ability to ask for assistance and reasonable accommodations when required is critical to educational achievement (Supple & Agbenyega, 2015), and asking for help requires some acceptance of functional and other limitations (Crothall, 2004). Many participants in the present study who were tertiary graduates managed to overcome a number of structural barriers to achieve their goals. The ways in which they deployed their self-determination to achieve these goals are outlined next.

Enablers

Preparation and groundwork are vital prior to and when a disabled student is enrolling in tertiary study, since while more disabled students are attending university, fewer are graduating compared to nondisabled students, often due to the persistent and pervasive barriers they encounter (Francis et al., 2018). However, the positive experiences reported by those participants who requested and received accommodations highlight their ability to form and build on symbolic capital, based on the formation of early habitus. Although these participants utilised their agency to ask for and even insist on reasonable accommodations, these successes tended to rely tenuously on the goodwill of single individuals in each case. However, this support was critical to their ability to acquire social, cultural, and later economic capital.

Susan, Hannah, and Sefina all described positive events they had experienced regarding acquisition of reasonable accommodations at university. Susan has two tertiary level certificates:

> I actually had really good support. Admittedly I didn't need as much as I probably would now because I had some vision in those days. But the material was clear, easy to read and I was able to do all the work on the computer and e-mail it through to them. If I needed something a bit different or had an issue I just contacted my tutor and we worked it out.

Hannah also spoke of accommodations being granted to her by her university, after surgery:

> I was in hospital for five weeks. So I started late. It was pretty difficult post-surgery. But the head of department let me carry a long assignment over the summer. I was able to hand it in just before term started the following year. So that made a huge difference.

Hannah advised that her PhD supervisor was very helpful, saying:

> She was amazing. I had some problems and she was just like, 'what do you need'. I said, I need a car park. She went 'okay', and just organized it and I got one of the staff car parks.

Sefina spoke of the helpful support she received:

> My writing didn't flow as much as it should have. I needed a lot of support in restructuring the essays I put in. I had university peer support from someone who was great.

Susan, Hannah, and Sefina were all able to make the support systems available at their respective universities work for them (O'Brien & Sullivan, 2005). They referenced their habitus to ask for, acquire, and utilise additional social networks to gain support and access to valued resources. They were also able to utilise what Bourdieu refers to as sociability – the ability and disposition to sustain and use these networks to advocate for the reasonable accommodations they required (Bourdieu, 1986). This sociability and ability to advocate led to their access needs being met and all three were able to complete their respective qualifications. Gaining these qualifications enhanced their symbolic capital and enabled them to build cultural and social capital (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992), which led to their ability to obtain employment. Once employed, they each had the opportunity to further increase their symbolic and social capital, which led to the acquisition of further economic capital, along with transferable skills and, theoretically at least, greater mobility within the job market.

It is notable that the very positive experiences reported by Susan, Hannah, and Sefina all relied on the support and goodwill of individual staff members. While their ability to secure this support was of critical importance and cannot be underestimated, the assistance provided related to the willingness of individuals to assist, rather than being provided by the educational institution as a matter of course, through structures and systems in place to meet the accommodations required by disabled students. Moreover, purposeful consultation and planning is necessary prior to enrolment, in order to design adaptations that will work for that student, as Pippa's experience discussed earlier in this chapter illustrates.

People with higher levels of education are more likely to be in work than those with poor educational achievement (Cara, 2015; Jans et al., 2012; Manaf et al., 2019). However, disabled students tend to have poorer employment outcomes than others, even when they have similar qualifications to nondisabled students (Ameri et al., 2015; Carroll et al., 2018; Hart, 2019; Roberts, 2009; Workbridge / Allen & Clarke, 2016), resulting in extensive gaps between periods of work (Ameri et al., 2015; Crothall, 2004; Workbridge, 2020). Bourdieu’s concepts of habitus and field are useful tools to enable a greater understanding of the complexity associated with the influence of factors relating to poor employment prospects even when well qualified, which may lead to awareness and responsiveness to inform future policy and practice, ultimately leading to more positive and consultative educational processes and greater social justice. Disabled students possess a wealth of experiences which are valuable and worth taking the time to understand (Carroll et al., 2018). Listening to these voices is essential for the development of inclusive educational policies and practices to improve access and accountability, and to celebrate the things that are working (Supple & Agbenyega, 2015). Direct involvement by disabled students themselves is essential to develop and drive these inclusive policies and practices. While proponents of the social model of disability may argue that simply removing barriers will result in equity for disabled students, it is also critical to include the effects of functional limitations. The lived experience of a number of disabled students who have a range of impairments would provide an authentic voice to guide the development of more universally designed educational policies and practices.

Conclusion

Family inclusion and support are critical to disabled children, shaping their habitus (Bourdieu, 1990), and the ability to acquire and utilise all forms of capital (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992), profoundly impacting the trajectory of their lives. Access to a wide range of opportunities is important to establish the confidence, self-esteem, and self-determination necessary for disabled children to navigate a range of barriers to social and educational participation (Supple & Agbenyega, 2015). Where these supports and opportunities are available, disabled children have the potential to develop the motivation, confidence, and problem-solving skills necessary to utilise individual agency and enable the acquisition of all forms of capital. Social and cultural capital can then be deployed to achieve desired aspirations for education and later employment.

The inclusion of impairment in the ongoing shaping of the habitus has significant implications for the formation of disability identity, which is evident in individual preferences, views, and expressions of behaviour (Darling, 2013). Identity-building includes addressing issues such as disability disclosure (Von Schrader et al., 2014), the language used by disabled people, and the different ways in which they respond to the challenges and opportunities encountered prior to seeking employment (Carroll et al., 2018; Darling, 2013). The greatest impact on those who acquire impairment(s) later in life may be the loss of accumulated symbolic and cultural capital once former social networks become unavailable. While some participants struggled with the formation and development of their disability-related identity, they nevertheless determined whether and when to disclose their impairments to others, were clear about the ways in which they referred to themselves, and some spoke of disability pride as being important to them (Blackmore & Hodgkins, 2012; Bogart, 2017; Bogart et al., 2018; Mauer, 2018).

It is important that disabled students possess sufficient agency to insist on the accommodations they may require for tertiary study. Collaboration between students and educational institutions prior to enrolment would ensure greater chances of success. Overall, despite a range of barriers faced by several research participants, it was possible for many of them to resist oppression and utilise their individual agency to assert their rights and navigate the obstacles to participation encountered in the fields of family and education.

The next chapter discusses workplace and other barriers to paid employment, and the obstacles to accessing employment in, and ultimately managing, the New Zealand disability sector.

Chapter Five: Barriers to Paid Employment

Introduction

Having highlighted the impact of early life experiences on disabled people, the focus now shifts to identify a number of obstacles that may be encountered when attempting to obtain paid employment. Information is included from both disabled people and disability sector employers, whose views were included to capture their diverse perspectives. The chapter opens with an examination of employment barriers generally experienced by disabled people, which are relevant to a range of workplace settings. Challenges broadly relate to difficulty accessing employment, including the bureaucratic pitfalls which beset many disabled jobseekers requiring additional supports. The theme of adverse employer attitudes is recurrent throughout the chapter, since this persists in all sectors (MSD, 2016). Barriers to employment, tenure and promotion, and disability leadership within the New Zealand disability sector are then considered. Themes and analysis relating to employment barriers, together with those examined in chapter six, form the basis of the recommendations made in chapter seven.

The social model of disability, together with Bourdieu’s (1977) theory of practice, support the analysis of the themes, highlighting both structural barriers and, importantly, the ways in which disabled people can exercise agency to mitigate some of the challenges encountered.

Employment Barriers in All Workplace Settings

This section highlights disabled participant struggles with gaining employment generally, including challenges associated with the range and complexity of funding arrangements designed to meet disability-related support needs, which might be useful to enhance employment opportunities. Such issues set the scene for later examination of those barriers that exist for disabled people who wish to enter and/or gain leadership roles within the New Zealand disability sector. Participant narratives are analysed referencing theory and literature to contextualise discussion.

Lack of Opportunity to Enter the Paid Workforce

The greatest obstacle to inclusion and participation for disabled people, and the one most difficult to prove and remove, is that of the negative attitudes of many nondisabled people, leading to discrimination (Ameri et al., 2015; Fadyl et al., 2022; Gill & Schlund-Vials, 2014; MSD, 2016; ODI, 2023b; United Nations, 2006a). Many employers hold unhelpful attitudes towards the capabilities possessed by disabled people, and such attitudes have been reported as representing major barriers to employment (Baker et al., 2018; Fadyl et al., 2022; Von Schrader et al., 2014).

Negative employer attitudes and workplace systems were identified by research participants as being major obstacles to disabled people gaining employment. For example, "Jodie" (DP) observed "Other people's lack of imagination handicaps us. They can't understand how we do certain tasks or that there is more than one way to do something." Indeed the present study, along with research highlighted in the literature, has shown that some employers may cite their own adverse and often incorrect assumptions about disabled people to justify their unwillingness to hire them (Baker et al., 2018; Fadyl et al., 2022; Gustafsson et al., 2013; Von Schrader et al., 2014). "Jill" (NGO employer) felt that employment opportunities have not improved over time:

> In a country that can be so forward thinking about other things, I don't think attitudes have changed markedly towards employing disabled people in the last 20 years.

Jill's views were echoed by a number of employers interviewed for this research, along with the majority of disabled participants. An illustration of Jill's observation was provided by "Pat"

(Public Service [PS] employer) who shared the doubts she experienced when interviewing a disabled person, and how her subjective views about capability influenced her judgement about what might be possible through the use of technology:

> I needed a person to be writing a lot of the time on the computer and hard copy as well. I was personally challenged because I didn't know whether a person with limited sight could do that job and how I could support them.

Pat let disbelief and discomfort cloud the recruitment process. Her assumptions about what might or might not be possible may perhaps be moderated by her habitus, early life environment and experiences, and whether or not any disabled people have been included in her social or professional networks. Conversely, as an NGO employer in the disability sector, Jill may have acquired a good deal of disability-related cultural and social capital, through working with disabled people as both consumers and colleagues. She may also be more likely than Pat to hear of or be personally involved in situations relating to disability discrimination, confirming her view that little has changed for disabled New Zealanders. Alternatively, Pat's Public Service role may not have brought her into contact with disabled people directly, even though her work relates to, and impacts, disabled people. Moreover, Pat's acknowledgement that she felt personally challenged due to her incomprehension about possible mitigations to barriers may echo both her lack of knowledge and her understanding of lived disability experience, and signal some trepidation about discussing possible accommodations directly with the disabled jobseeker. Since one of the most prevalent and persistent discriminatory beliefs of many employers is that impairment necessarily equals incapability (Baker et al., 2018; Fadyl et al., 2022), Pat might have gained considerable insight by simply exploring options with the disabled candidate, discussing these with her colleagues, and reviewing the Public Service EEO policies and guidelines.

However, while some employers profess a desire to specifically include disabled people in their EEO and/or diversity policies and recruitment strategies (Manaf et al., 2019), many nevertheless often find reasons not to offer employment to them (Woodley & Metzger, 2012). Indeed, Pat’s further comment appeared to reflect this sentiment when she advised “I want more disabled people in the organisation but don’t know how to connect with them.” “Caroline” (PS employer) likewise commented “employers are keen to employ disabled people but need more assurance than just being told to trust that they can do the job.”

The narratives from Pat and Caroline indicate that, while they believe employing disabled people has merit in theory, they are unsure what including them in the workplace may mean in practice. Their views might be influenced by the neoliberal economic agenda which drives many western public services (Wigan, 2012), unhelpful media portrayals of disabled people (Orcan, 2019), and/or lack of disability responsiveness knowledge and education (MacNeill, 2020). Pat professes to be unaware of how to connect with disabled people seeking employment, yet there are a high number of vocational support services which specifically work to locate employment for disabled New Zealanders (Workbridge, 2020). Conversely, Caroline seeks assurance that should employment opportunities be granted to disabled people, their suitability should be guaranteed. However, it is acknowledged that such assurances are not generally expected of nondisabled potential employees. From a disabled person’s perspective, “George” (DP) pointed out that:

> If someone's wearing glasses, you don't question whether or not they can do the job. I mean, I don’t think there is a single disabled person who applies for a job they can’t do.

Another common reason given for not employing disabled people was also highlighted by Caroline who said “I didn’t want to recruit them into a role that was fundamentally unsuitable; where they would be set up to fail because I didn’t know how to support them.” This observation may be interpreted as implying that Caroline suspects disabled applicants tend to apply for roles they are unqualified to undertake, as previously observed by George, then appears to justify this position to divert attention away from a possible desire not to hire disabled applicants at all.

While many disabled people struggle to accumulate the cultural and social capital required to gain employment (Bourdieu, 1986), several disabled participants in this study with tertiary degrees nevertheless struggle to have their knowledge, skills, and experience recognised by employers. For example, in identifying and examining the question of capability, some of these participants pointed out that the absence of academic qualifications often simply reflects lack of educational opportunities (Manaf et al., 2019). Disabled participants in the present study who were tertiary graduates spoke of the tension between lack of workplace opportunities and the frustration of trying to get into employment. Jodie and Kirsty pointed out that trying to access work can become a vicious circle, even when well qualified for employment. “If I’m struggling and I’ve got a degree . . . , what hope is there for somebody who doesn’t have that” (Jodie). “How are you supposed to get experience if you can’t get the work?” (Kirsty).

Jodie’s remark reflects that since she has amassed some cultural and social capital through undertaking her tertiary studies, she expects to be able to access paid work, and is frustrated by not being able to do so. Moreover, she also perceives how much more difficult it is for disabled people with no tertiary qualifications to gain employment. Although the commonly held belief that higher education leads to greater employment choices remains prevalent, academically qualified disabled people nevertheless continue to struggle to get on to the career ladder (Emerson et al., 2020). Along with difficulties commonly experienced by nondisabled people, particularly youth seeking work, Kirsty and Jodie may also be hampered by wider societal influences based on ableist assumptions and stereotypic myths, often perpetuated through traditional and social media (Ford & MacNeill, 2017; Orcan, 2019). Such assumptions can enforce and reinforce stigmatised views about disabled people as though they are all the same (Bogart & Dunn, 2019), with no additional intersecting identities (Hickey & Wilson, 2017). Thus, employers such as Pat may be reluctant to hire disabled jobseekers, since such views may also be imbedded in their managerial habitus (Bourdieu, 1990). However, greater early life exposure to disabled professionals such as doctors and teachers could ultimately modify the values and behaviours of each employer habitus through active negotiation. Such negotiation may have occurred as noted earlier if Pat had been willing to explore accommodation options with the disabled jobseeker and her colleagues.

Consideration of the scenarios outlined using a social model lens, which views attitudinal barriers as the major causal factor in discrimination (Gill & Schlund-Vials, 2014; Wheeler, 2004, 2017), provides one way to analyse these negative employer attitudes to employing disabled people. As noted, where employers have little familiarity with disabled people, they may simply assume lack of capability, since such people are often portrayed as incompetent (Adams & Oldfield, 2012; Baker et al., 2018; Fadyl et al., 2022). Moreover, employers may have little knowledge of, or interest in, what may be possible through adaptations and workplace accommodations (Moon & Baker, 2012). Proponents of the social model may consider that greater access to formal disability awareness education is the major means for disabled people to combat attitudinal obstacles. However, while education is valuable since it assists employers to gain some important insights into the lived experience of disability, education alone does not appear to be enough to convince them to hire disabled people on an equal basis with nondisabled jobseekers. Neither does familiarity with disability ensure employment opportunities for such individuals. However, a Bourdieusian perspective on Kirsty's experience of lack of access to employment may also illustrate that little accumulated social and cultural capital could be preventing her from gaining sufficient symbolic capital, to form and utilise the networks and influences helpful to obtaining employment (Bourdieu, 1986). Bourdieu argued that capital is of critical value, since it consists of useful, essential, and transferable elements, such as knowledge and networks necessary for mobility within fields (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992). While it is recognised that both impairment and disability shape access by disabled people to the employment field and to all forms of capital therein (Moola, 2015; Supple & Agbenyega, 2015), the elimination of negative employer attitudes alone, even were this possible, is unlikely to substantially increase access to employment opportunities by many disabled people. Therefore, the development of cultural and social capital, along with willingness to use individual agency, are of even greater importance for those people with impairments that cannot be ameliorated by, for example, changes to the built environment (Crothall, 2004). Nevertheless, were Jodie and Kirsty able to access opportunities to present the formal and other qualifications they might respectively bring to employment, including how impairment is managed, discussion with employers could enable additional attributes, such as computer or social media skills, to be highlighted with respect to job suitability. The present study illustrates that such opportunities may need to be intentionally created for disabled people and employers to meet, in order to reduce the fear of the unknown, and foster establishment of common ground leading to greater acceptance (Adams & Oldfield, 2012; Fadyl et al., 2022). The development of wider social networks to build social capital may lead to offers of work, once it is known that disabled people wish to work and have the ability to do so.

Lack of employment opportunities, along with the need to continually combat often unhelpful attitudes, present major challenges to disabled people attempting to establish a job history. A number of disabled jobseekers also require various additional supports, such as adaptive technologies and/or building modifications, in order to compete with others in the field of employment. However, while a number of funding packages are available to meet disability-related support needs, bureaucratic obstacles exist with respect to a range of often complex eligibility criteria. Moreover, incorrect assumptions about the range and scope of adaptations and supports available to disabled people also persist. Therefore, such issues are now briefly highlighted.

Bureaucratic Pitfalls and False Assumptions

In this final section on barriers to employment in all sectors, several additional issues were identified by disabled participants, and also discussed by employers. Difficulties related to the bureaucratic obstacles to work associated with government provision of financial and other supports, often fuelled by the false assumptions of policy makers and others within the sector.

The number and range of policies and processes relating to funding to pay for adaptations and accommodations to enable employment by disabled people, were identified as being difficult to navigate. For example, participants reported that the abatement levels which apply to disabled people receiving income support through MSD can have a major impact on whether they decide to seek part-time or full-time work, or no employment at all. “Robert” (NGO employer) commented that “the benefit abatement system is pretty cruel. You get to the point where you are earning $150 a week and you are way worse off than when you weren’t earning at all.” From a disabled person’s perspective, Hannah (DP) observed:

> It was very scary to accept short-term or part-time work. The only way that you could really afford to do it is either get a full-time job or say that you couldn’t work at all.

Eddy (DP) said:

> I know that a lot of people with disabilities have that fear that if they get a part-time job, how much is that going to affect their Work and Income payment, and that puts them off altogether applying for a job.

Ken (DP) noted an additional disincentive to benefit abatement:

> You can get an earnings exemption. But if you’re working and receiving government assistance, you pay secondary tax on any money you earn.

Lillian (DP) offered a different perspective:

> It’s a . . .vicious circle if you take the hit that part-time gives you regarding income, then you also take the hit regarding your future career opportunities . . . for me, it’s worth pursuing full-time work for as long as I’m able, just because you are not then seen as a low investment employee.

Disabled participants also spoke of income support provisions inducing false assumptions in the minds of some employers, demotivating them from employing disabled people, as observed by Jodie who said “Because of the benefit system here and in other western countries, employers think ‘why should I hire you when the government is paying for everything anyway’.”

Similarly, Beth pointed out that “The public . . . assume disability agencies are somehow giving you all this stuff, when that’s not true.”

The views and experiences identified by these participants highlight the perverse consequences associated with several of the systems designed to provide support to them, which can act as barriers to their employment. Disabled people who may prefer to seek part-time work for a variety of reasons are disincentivised from doing so, due to benefit abatement and the requirement to pay secondary tax (Van Dalen, 2018). Moreover, as observed by Lillian, part-time work tends to be synonymous with low pay and low status. Further, as pointed out by Beth, some people wrongly believe that disabled people do not wish to work, because all their requirements are met through the benefit system, along with various disability-related charities (Workbridge, 2020).

Along with the confusion about income support and assistance provided by charities, many disabled participants who took part in this research have also faced significant hardship, at least partially caused by a confusing spectrum of funding models and eligibility criteria. Such models and criteria tend to prioritise those disabled by accident who may have greater access to funding for modifications and accommodations, not necessarily available to those congenitally disabled (Hickey & Wilson, 2017). Additionally, income support benefits available to some people with congenital or progressive impairments are means-tested, while funding for people who become disabled through accident and injury is not (Hickey & Wilson, 2017). Bureaucracy within and between government agencies, including different funding models, eligibility criteria, and funding levels, can act as further disincentives to disabled people seeking work (Adams & Oldfield, 2012; Workbridge, 2020). For example, access to disability-related funding administered by the Needs Assessment and Service Coordination system has a raft of different eligibility criteria associated with various funding streams (L. Sullivan, personal communication, December 14, 2022). Moreover, personalised budgets for those few disabled people already receiving support under the umbrella of EGL trials, such as Mana Whaikaha in the Manawatū, is not set at an annual fixed amount, and neither is it means-tested or dependent on other criteria such as onset of impairment (R. Cameron, Service Manager, Tari Whaikaha, personal communication, August 3, 2022). Thus, while funding for adaptations and accommodations is relatively easily accessible by people disabled through accident, or those few in receipt of personalised budgets, the MSD income support system is often accessed only after lengthy eligibility testing which can take considerable time and is by no means guaranteed.

A brief comparison between the ACC and income support systems further demonstrates the inequities which exist. Historically, disabled people injured through war were considered to be more worthy and therefore more deserving of help than those born with impairment(s) (Munneke, 2022; Oliver, 2013). As discussed, the New Zealand ACC system creates similar inequities, with far greater levels of support available to those in receipt of ACC than to those subsisting on welfare benefits, even where both groups of disabled people have similar support needs (Stephens, 2004). Applying the lens of Bourdieu’s theory of practice (1977) enables a wider perspective to be taken on the inequalities resulting from ACC provision to disabled people injured by accident. Many such people have already gained at least some of the cultural and social capital (Bourdieu, 1986) necessary to move within and between various fields (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992). Whereas people with congenital impairment(s) may struggle to access the field of education, as discussed in chapter four, creating considerable barriers to employment.

Further, disabled research participants generally agreed that ACC greatly advantages people formerly in full-time work who are disabled through accident, due to weekly compensation being calculated based on a person's previous salary (ACC, 2022), while those congenitally impaired may only be eligible for comparatively meagre standardised income support payments from Work and Income New Zealand. Peggy commented "if you are on ACC the message is you are a normal person who has had an accident, so we will support and invest in you." George noted "people who have had an accident have far better access to funding through ACC to get them back into work and I wish we could even have just half of what they have."

Hierarchies of impairment are important to acknowledge in a discussion of funding supports available to disabled people, which may impact employment opportunities. Bourdieu (2001, p. 268) defined hierarchies as "the distinction between noble and ignoble subjects". Symbolically inscribed social categories signify a hierarchy, whereby some physical and other capital is valued and some is devalued within specific fields (Bourdieu, 1980). Where capital is devalued, deviant group members can be stigmatised. Thus, people congenitally disabled may be treated differently to those disabled through accident, based on stigmatised views about the way in which impairment was acquired.

Along with existing inequities between the ACC and MSD funding support systems, a further aspect of hierarchies within and between impairment and impairment types frequently reported in the literature is that founded on perceived severity of impairment (Deal, 2002; Humphrey, 2000; Wheeler, 2004). Indeed, disabled people have traditionally been viewed as part of a devalued category along a hierarchical spectrum, in which it is at best difficult, and at worst impossible, to acquire symbolic or economic capital (Danieli & Wheeler, 2006). It is possible that such perceptions have played a role in shaping the views of policy makers working in the area of compensatory funding.

Differences in disability funding provision may also be driven by neoliberal political agendas, which promote minimum state intervention in the lives of citizens, while shifting responsibility to individuals (Martel, 2016). Indeed, neoliberal policies focusing on economic rather than human rights indicators appear to have produced inequities and disempowerment amongst various groupings of disabled people, subordinating their needs to that of the market, where they risk becoming commodities (Leece, 2004). It could therefore be argued that it is ableist to promote economic dependency on a marketplace that tends to exclude the majority of disabled people from participation (Goodley & Lawthom, 2019).

Additional supports that may be available to many disabled people are often mired in administrative procedural complexity. Peggy spoke about the issues impacting employment which can be caused by delays to the approval of disability-related funding to support accommodations. “Employers don’t want to wait around for months while funding gets approved – or not”. An example of how this can impact the employment prospects of disabled people relates to created employment. A supported employment programme, such as Mainstream, discussed as an enabler in the next chapter, is time limited. Any delays in establishing accommodations or other supports can negatively impact the likelihood of the employment continuing when the programme and associated subsidies conclude (Munneke, 2006).

Participants agreed that the Mainstream Employment Programme, and Support Funds, which enable access to employment by some disabled people, both administered by MSD, need to be as flexible as possible to work for disabled people, particularly in the area of timing.

> Until you get into the job, you can’t be specific about what you need, you don’t know what you don’t know. But nondisabled people tend to want quick fix answers, so they can order xyz and everything will be hunky-dory, but it doesn’t work like that. It’s all from a nondisabled person’s perspective. (Mike)

Mike makes the point that many disabled people beginning a new job may not know what adaptations and/or equipment they might require until they have been in the role for some time (Murfitt et al., 2018). Likewise, employers also require time to assess and possibly adjust tasks.

It is acknowledged that the funding packages examined here have been developed over time to support disabled people. Yet the range and complexity of criteria associated with such packages designed to improve their lives, often represents barriers to the achievement of ordinary life outcomes desired by disabled citizens. While EGL may provide a bridge for many into employment, a thorough review of disability-related funding provision may be timely. Such a review must be led by well-qualified disabled people who can provide their lived experiences relating to the ways in which the current funding landscape has become difficult to manage.

Many nondisabled people incorrectly regard the disability sector as existing to meet the financial needs of disabled people. While it might be assumed that the disability sector is at least heavily influenced and staffed by disabled people, study participants spoke of difficulty gaining, retaining, or being promoted therein. Their experiences, and those of sector employers, are conveyed in the next section.

Barriers to Disability Sector Work

While it may appear that active facilitation of disability disclosure, acceptance of functional limitations, and provision of a range of supports may be more likely within the disability sector than in other workplaces (Te Pou, 2013), entry to this sector seems to be restricted for disabled people (Davies & Butler, 2022). Such restrictions reduce access to the social and cultural capital required for them to gain promotion within the field of disability employment. The remainder of this chapter considers the obstacles which persist with respect to disabled people’s entry to, and promotion within, the New Zealand disability sector. The sector includes government organisations, and NGO charities, designing policies, directly providing services, and/or promoting advocacy for disabled people. The broad themes examined are the concept of merit, recruitment challenges, working in the disability sector, and disability leadership and management. Narratives from participants synthesise and articulate the themes.

A disabled jobseeker is often not considered to be ‘the best person for the job’ based largely on their impairment(s), in many employment situations. It is therefore useful to consider the notion of merit-based employment as a barrier, particularly since several disabled research participants reported strongly suspecting they had been discriminated against when applying for disability sector work, on the basis that potential employers were focused on their limitations and not their capabilities.

The Obstacle of Merit

The idea of employment on merit is prevalent within New Zealand workplaces, along with those in other western jurisdictions. Merit also appears to be a highly regarded and pervasive factor within disability sector recruitment policies and practices (Equal Employment Opportunities Trust, 2000; Public Service Act, 2020; SSC, 2002). Underpinning the principle of merit is individualism (Edie, 2010), which has become entrenched in the neoliberal fabric of western society. Individualism regards collectivism as antithetical to merit. The belief that everyone has an equal opportunity to succeed in the field of employment, assuming at least similar levels of qualification, is underpinned by the resurgent notion of meritocracy. The concept of meritocracy began in the time of the Tang Dynasty, during the golden age of China, when emperors employed officials on the basis of their scholastic abilities, rather than their links to the aristocracy, which had previously been the case (Blitstein, 2020; Liu, 2016). The merit system is founded on the idea that individuals can gain and progress in employment, through their own endeavours.

Merit underpins policies promoting liberal equal employment opportunities (Jewson & Mason, 1984), also frequently discussed in the literature as managing for diversity (Bonaccio et al., 2020; Hayhoe et al., 2015; Kwan, 2020; Maier et al., 2012; Phillips et al., 2019), which has long been thought to be a potentially attractive employment enabler for disabled people (Delva et al., 2021; Kulkarni & Rodrigues, 2014). Policies promoting EEO tend to be predicated on uniform ideals supposedly achievable by everyone (Marková, 2018), while diversity management extols the virtue of difference, with people representing many groups contributing a range of social and symbolic capital to workplaces, hoping to attract business from people represented by those groups (Jans et al., 2012). However, the twin notions of choosing ‘the best person for the job’ based largely on formal qualifications, and ensuring diversity in the workplace, may currently be working in opposition to one another with respect to disabled people, constituting a significant barrier to employment. Thus, while policies and programmes promoting EEO have been in existence for more than 30 years (Crothall, 2004), disabled people remain under-represented in private, public, and disability employment settings, where they struggle to be considered merit-worthy compared to other job candidates (Benshoff et al., 2014; Bonaccio et al., 2020; Moon & Baker, 2012; Phillips et al., 2019). Moreover, many employers who rigidly subscribe to the principle of hiring a standardised ‘best person for the job’ often overtly view disabled people as failures through their own inadequacies (Woodhams & Danieli, 2000). This medical model view of disability sees the cause of discrimination as impairment, which is viewed as a personal tragedy (Oliver & Barnes, 2010).

It appears that the disability sector may itself be heavily influenced by the presumed ability of EEO policies to level the employment field for disabled people, linked perhaps to neoliberal funding contract specifications, discussed later by employers. The belief that simply hiring ‘the best person for the job’ was also promoted by Liz (DP) who became functionally limited in middle age. “We should be employed on our own merits without employers needing to be subsidised for hiring us, otherwise the myth that we are substandard continues.” However, employment on merit has become the pretence that rationalises advantage of the few over the many (Markovits, 2019). For example, this elite group does not include anyone who is unable to achieve academically due to functional limitations such as significant neurological impairment or learning disability (Amado et al., 2013). Neither does it include disabled people who have been unable to obtain formal qualifications because of structural and/or attitudinal barriers within the education system (Hart, 2019; Watson, 2009).

Many of the charitable NGO employers who took part in this research conceded that their organisations tend to subscribe to the principle of choosing ‘the best person for the job’, which can nevertheless be highly subjective. Jill felt that one reason for this was unfamiliarity:

> People tend to employ people that are like them; others they connect with. So if they’ve never connected with a disabled person in their life then they’re not going to employ a disabled person.

“Helen” (NGO employer) observed that employers find it difficult to see past the notion of an ideal candidate, noting:

> the services have been set up to support disabled people and do things for them, rather than to employ them . . . they simply can't see how someone with a disability could be the best person for the job.

Robert pointed out the language of disability is itself unhelpful in the employment context, saying “Disability is largely synonymous with inability and therefore people assume that individuals can’t do stuff.” Further, Robert expresses the view that meritocratic employment driving EEO and other affirmative action policies may be contradictory to the real-life experiences of disabled people (Te Pou, 2013):

> The meritocracy argument itself stops many employers from employing disabled people . . . even in the disability sector . . . it was set up to exclude people, not to include them.

“Emma” (NGO employer) spoke of disability-employment within the sector from a systemic perspective noting “We need to look at what sits behind a lack of work history or skills, to the systemic factors causing this.” Emma highlights the structural issues which play a major role in preventing disabled people from accessing employment opportunities, which are not necessarily ameliorable by, for instance, high educational attainment, a key principle of merit-based systems (Wheeler, 2004).

Helen raised the issue of the disability sector environment continuing to be one where largely nondisabled people provide ‘for’ disabled people, rather than considering services which could be designed ‘by’ disabled people for their own use. Jill earlier made an important point about unfamiliarity with disabled people at an individual level (McDonnall et al., 2019), since employers tend to be risk-averse, and often fearful of difference. Robert discussed what he saw as an apparent irony of adopting policies which promote employment on merit based on standardised measures, while espousing workplace diversity (Woodhams & Danieli, 2000). Robert’s commentary, that rigid views about meritocracy can prevent disability sector employers from hiring disabled people, highlights an important point. An integrated and relational perspective of structure and agency exists regarding the employability of disabled people (Markovits, 2019). In exclusively seeking people considered to be merit-worthy, employers can overlook an academically well-qualified and capable disabled person, whom they may rule out as unworthy, in favour of employing a nondisabled person, who might not possess the same level of academic achievement but may nevertheless fit the subjective profile developed by the employer. Bourdieu’s theory of practice (Bourdieu, 1977, 1980) helps to illustrate that the norms operating in relation to qualifications considered suitable within many employing organisations, a number of which include few or no disabled staff members, make it extremely difficult for disabled people to gain entry (Bonaccio et al., 2020; Delva et al., 2021; Kwan, 2020).

An illustration of a tendency to disregard the contribution disabled people can make to disability sector work was provided by Emma, who challenged the hegemony operating in an interview panel considering a disabled jobseeker:

> People on the panel with me were literally advocating against hiring someone who is our client, because of mainstream criteria like a qualification and questioning previous employment. The barriers stacked against people with disabilities in finishing a qualification were not being considered. . . . It was deeply challenging having this conversation with colleagues who you would assume are coming from the same perspective as yourself.

Emma, Helen, Robert, and Jill recognise that the value of the social and symbolic capital disabled people can bring to the disability sector through their lived experience should be regarded as key cultural capital in the sector field, yet such capital continues to be framed from a deficit perspective (Jans et al., 2012).

While the ideals associated with gaining employment on merit (Markovits, 2019) and encouraging diversity (Harris et al., 2017) may appear to be antithetical to one another, as discussed earlier by Robert, they need not be mutually exclusive. Rather, it could be that the way in which disability sector employers interpret the ideals of merit and how to attract disabled workers are too narrow (Phillips et al., 2019). The aspiration of recruiting greater numbers of disabled people to the disability sector may be more easily achieved by including lived experience as an integral component of merit for the disability sector, explored further in the next chapter. However, a number of additional challenges remain for disabled people wishing to enter disability sector employment, and these are identified next.

Additional Challenges to Recruitment

A number of additional obstacles to entering disability sector work were raised by disabled and nondisabled participants during the course of this research. Included under the theme of access issues was an apparent preference by some employers to hire people with unseen impairments, the proscriptive nature of job tasks in job advertisements and position descriptions, and uncertainty about adaptations . Perceptions about the sector trading off the cultural capital of disability, together with the influence of neoliberal contracting arrangements on employment, are also examined.

Access to disability sector work proved difficult for several disabled people who reported having applied for positions in the disability sector over a number of years. “Tania” (DP), Susan, Eddy, Jodie, and Mike all spoke of the frustration of making numerous unsuccessful applications. For instance, Tania observed “In the past three and a half years, over 200 of my applications were for disability sector roles.” Susan advised “I’ve unsuccessfully applied for 48 positions with one large disability sector employer alone.” Eddy spoke of having applied for over 100 disability sector jobs in the previous six years:

> It's not what you know, it’s who you know. . . . I really put pressure on the networks and contacts I have to get me in the door, but it's a bloody slow process.

Jodie spent many years applying for disability sector positions after arriving in New Zealand, noting:

> I kept applying for jobs and kept being told, ‘it’s your immigration status’. They were worried I was going to be deported, even though I had a work visa, but they hire people from overseas all the time.

Mike simply observed “There have been so many times when I have gone ‘just give me the bloody chance, I may be in a wheelchair but I am qualified and I can do it’!”

Peggy discussed being advised after a job interview that she had come second, and that she should feel encouraged by this, but said “Even if this was true, it’s a crock since I didn’t get the job.” Neil advised of being interviewed for employment and later discovering his impairment had been a major barrier:

> I applied for a receptionist role . . . I was experienced and qualified, but I didn’t get the job and discovered through a friend that they didn’t want a disabled person on reception .

> . . I’m good enough to be seen in public working for free, but as soon as I apply for paid work the clear message is that I’m not worthy.

Liz reported feeling particularly discontented when she heard that a less qualified nondisabled person had been appointed to a position she had applied for, observing “How can I conclude anything other than that they just didn’t want a disabled person in the role?”

Many participants referred to what they viewed as the duplicity of those disability sector employers who are unwilling to hire disabled people, while trading off their association with them. For instance, Lillian noted that while the disability sector promotes internal inclusivity, few key positions are held by disabled people, saying “I think the disability sector mistakenly prides itself on how inclusive it is . . . and you have a hard time convincing them otherwise." Ken referred to what he believed to be deceitful practice within the sector:

> They are telling everyone else to be accessible, to be proactive in employing people with disabilities and yet they don’t follow through themselves.

Mike further observed “We only want you to make us look good.”

The experience earlier identified by Neil of not being considered for employment while being offered unpaid voluntary public-facing roles, illustrates how the disability sector may gain goodwill and even financial support, by trading off the cultural capital of their consumers. For example, engaging disabled people (such as guide dog users) as part of unpaid fundraising and public speaking events effectively trades on the identity of disability. The public are in general highly attracted to dogs, and a disability sector organisation receives significantly increased donations from fundraising, for example, if a blind person stands outside a supermarket collecting donations with a guide dog at their feet, compared to what could be raised by a paid sighted employee. This illustration demonstrates how disability sector organisations can profit significantly from the disabled identity, while often paying high salaries to sighted staff members who have no lived disability experience. Moreover, a potential employer meeting a disabled person under such circumstances may form the view that disabled people are to be pitied rather than employed. Indeed, employer negativity about employing disabled people may well result from approaches from disability sector representatives seeking charitable donations, which tends to place emphasis on a deficit model of disability, while obtaining additional economic capital for their employer (Wheeler, 2004). Thus, the disability sector may itself be partly responsible for some unfavourable attitudes exhibited by nondisabled employers (Branfield, 1998; Danieli & Wheeler, 2006).

The present study finds that reliance for their own employment on the cultural capital of living a disabled life, by largely nondisabled Public Service policy makers, charitably orientated support service providers, and staff of Disabled Persons Organisations, does not appear to necessarily equate to including that capital directly through the employment of disabled jobseekers. While some nondisabled staff may consider that familiarity with disabled people qualifies them to work in the disability sector, it is generally accepted that having acquaintances from other marginalised groups does not constitute expertise in their lived experience. This applies equally to the lived experience of disability. Furthermore, views about hierarchies of disability and the practice of merit-based employment in the disability sector, examined earlier, may contribute to recruitment based on beliefs promoting only those disabled people who appear ‘normal’, that is they have no discernible limitations. Sefina shared her view that obvious impairment may rule disabled people out of employment in their own sector, observing “There are people who think . . . it’s easier if they employ people who aren’t disabled, and certainly not disabled looking.” Moreover, the preference of some sector employers to only hire what George referred to as “low hanging fruit”, meaning people who identify as disabled yet may have few visible functional limitations, was also mentioned by other disabled participants, and it was generally felt that disability sector employers, as with other employers, appear to prefer to hire those disabled people with largely unseen impairments, as alluded to earlier by Sefina. One of the consequences of such practices could be that employers in this sector may, perhaps unwittingly, send the message that non-disclosure of unseen but often significant impairments is preferred. Allice pointed out that hiring people on this basis can backfire remarking “they can say they employ disabled people, thinking they won’t have to provide any accommodations, then of course they get annoyed when they find they do.”

Sefina’s earlier observation was also touched on by some disability sector employers when discussing barriers to employment generally. However, many, particularly those in Public Service roles, were perhaps unsurprisingly reluctant to accept that such barriers also apply to their own sector. For example, Caroline (PS employer) acknowledged this point when she remarked “sector employers are just as bad as any other employers at not hiring disabled people.” Several NGO employers appreciated that disability sector employment tends to discriminate in favour of nondisabled employees and were forthcoming about why this might be. Robert speculated that rigid views about job tasks may be preventing consideration of disabled people for employment, since “they have a very fixed picture of what they need within the organisation, and disabled people don’t fit that picture.”

“Tui” (NGO employer) raised the notion of what assumptions might be made by some employers about the job competencies needed:

> We make assumptions that certain things are required, that perhaps aren’t, and many disabled people don’t have those things, but they have other stuff which would be useful in the organisation.

In support of Tui’s perspective, “Barbara” (NGO employer) appreciated that although disabled jobseekers may not have all the attributes an employer believes necessary for a given role, they could nevertheless bring with them additional cultural and social capital through lived experience of disability, which could benefit the organisation. Barbara suggested:

> If that person has the skills and abilities, the attitude and the outlook that you're looking for, then just make the other stuff fit for them. Start the relationship with the person in an open and honest way and have the confidence in them to tell you what they need.

Barbara perceives that the value of the skills possessed by some disabled people, not necessarily included in position descriptions, may nevertheless be useful to disability sector organisations. Such skills are informed by the habitus of disabled people who can bring with them symbolic capital (Bourdieu, 1986; Huang, 2019), derived from their networks and experience of disability.

However, standardised practices exist regarding the production of job advertisements in position descriptions (Employment New Zealand, n.d.), and guidance relating to the specifications recommended for inclusion is increasingly available online (NSW Public Service Commission, 2020). Specifications typically determine the qualities required for a particular role, which are generally divided into three categories, for example, essential, preferable, or desirable skills and attributes (Tertiary Education Commission, 2013). Nevertheless, some tasks are commonly included in position descriptions which are not necessarily required in particular roles, or which may be achievable using alternative means. One example of a commonly required attainment in many job advertisements is that candidates hold a driver licence, for positions which do not require driving, such as call centre work. Even where travel is required as part of a role such as community social worker, a range of public transport options could well enable the travel required to be undertaken, thus achieving similar outcomes via alternative methods (Workbridge, 2020). Mimetic forces often ensure the replication of actions practised by other organisations, even when the outcomes of those mimicked actions may be unpredictable and can result in sometimes unintended consequences (Scott, 2008; Wheeler, 2017). Moreover, adhering to standardised and rigid role requirements can lead to employers missing out on attributes which could benefit their organisations (Kwan, 2020).

If the cultural capital of lived disability experience is not included in recruitment for disability sector positions as being essential or even desirable, then it might be concluded that it is not valued by the organisation (Davies & Butler, 2022; Te Pou, 2013). Thus, unless an organisation addresses any structural discrimination inherent in the omission of lived experience, the cultural capital of disability will remain absent from position descriptions and from prominence within the organisation or may at best be included as desirable but not essential. This analysis illustrates the subtle deployment of power, including who holds and exercises such power to determine what can be legitimately included in disability-sector organisational employment agendas (Davies & Butler, 2022).

Another way in which disabled people can be prevented from accessing the disability employment field, particularly the charitable NGO sector, was suggested by Jill who wondered if possibly misguided altruism may in part be driving a lack of employment opportunities:

> Many service providers don't see advocacy as part of their role and this may be why they don't tend to employ disabled people; they see themselves as doing things 'for' disabled people . . . and that is what their government contracts specify they are to do.

Contract specifications tied to government funding were also highlighted as contributing to reduced employment opportunities for disabled people by Tui, who noted "You get people that are just about the contracts . . . and the way funding is structured, it forces you into a corner."

Bearing in mind the commonly used recruitment practices undertaken within the whole of the disability sector highlighted earlier, together with an examination of government contracting arrangements with charitable NGOs, may assist to background some of the high-level barriers to employment faced by disabled people.

A common theme running through many western political administrations is that of the neoliberal agenda (Wigan, 2012). This agenda has seen a move from regular funding grants which formerly assisted charitable organisations to provide disability-related services, to the promotion of partnerships between government and disability sector NGOs via funding mechanisms which contract for proscribed outcomes (Wheeler, 2017). The basis for such partnerships is economic rationalism, which underpins the neoliberal agenda (Edwards, 2019), resulting in government led and controlled contracting of financial supports, considered to be the most efficient means to deliver many social services (Goodley & Lawthom, 2019; Joseph, 2019; Somerville, 2011). Under neoliberalism, charitable NGOs have little choice but to accept the same mechanisms which apply to the public services undertaking disability-related work, in order to survive (Wheeler, 2004). The charitable sector in New Zealand appears to be following the Public Service lead (New Zealand Disability Support Network, 2021) via mimetic isomorphism (Wheeler, 2017), which reflects the tendency of organisations to imitate others, resulting in such notions becoming hegemonic. Thus, disability sector NGOs are tending to operate in similar ways to public services, which also appears to be reflected in their recruitment policies and practices.

Robert earlier expressed the view that disabled people often do not fit the standardised, merit-based, appointee profile, while Jill is aware that disability support service providers view their work as altruistic, as also earlier observed by Helen, and not necessarily designed to further the self-determination of disabled jobseekers. Moreover, similar attitudes on the part of public servants may influence production of policies relating to funding provision examined earlier, and the specifications contained in contracts between government and NGOs. Such contracting arrangements tend to skew funding provision towards caretaking, rather than advocating, as indicated by Helen, Jill, and Tui.

Some apparent lack of willingness to employ disabled applicants may come from ignorance of what is possible through adaptation and/or technology (Workbridge, 2020). For example, “Linda” (NGO employer) admitted to having no idea of the capabilities of, or technologies available to, the people she worked with when she joined the disability sector, noting “I thought to myself, this is a writing-based job, staring at a screen all day, how could someone with low vision possibly do it?” It might be argued that Linda’s apparent lack of knowledge and experience of issues pertaining to the people she supports could have ruled her out of contention for employment in any other sector. Indeed, several of the views expressed by employers may illustrate why many disabled people believe they are excluded from positions within disability sector organisations. The players in this field, notably employers managing charitable NGOs, and public servants, reference their individual habitus (Bourdieu, 1990) when considering the structure of disability support provision, and what they believe constitutes appropriate support to disabled people. This may however differ from the support disabled people themselves require.

Some employers viewed reluctance to hire the people they support as stemming from a lack of basic disability awareness and responsiveness education during staff induction and throughout job tenure.

> I don’t think people here have a lot of work experience with people with disabilities . . . there’s no one cohesive attitude across the disability sector; we never receive that sort of training at an organisational level (Christine, PS employer).

Likewise, Linda suggested that “more responsiveness training would help to break down some of those barriers; some of the myths that people have in their heads around disability.” While disability responsiveness training is by no means a panacea for acceptance of disabled employees within the disability sector, such training would appear to be a critical part of staff induction and ongoing education within organisations that support disabled people. While responsiveness training is just one tool to enhance the employment experiences of disabled people at all levels, it is also critical that such training is developed and facilitated by disabled people themselves.

Some disabled people do manage to gain entry to work in the New Zealand disability sector. However, a range of obstacles to retention and promotion persist, and those raised by disabled and nondisabled research participants are identified and examined next.

Working in the Disability Sector

Several challenges were highlighted by those disabled research participants who had worked in disability sector positions, and those still working therein. Difficulties raised related to perceptions of tokenism, typecasting, conflicts of interest, anxiety about job retention, and lack of promotion.

Tokenism was reported as common in some disability sector employment settings. Disabled participants spoke of what some referred to as ‘token crips’, who are employed in disability sector roles, so those employers can appear to promote affirmative action programmes (Kwan, 2020; Robert, 2003). Then, because those disabled people either do not comprehend the situation and/or understand the environment, they tend to fail. For instance, Ken observed:

> I’ve heard of some disabled people being hired as tokens to do nothing but make the organisation look good, while others are hung out to dry for trying to do the job they thought they were there to do.

Disability typecasting was also mentioned by some participants as preventing them from fully realising their potential through promotion. They spoke of experiences of becoming so closely identified with particular disability sector roles that they had been unable to convince their employers to promote them into other, sometimes more senior positions, and perform different tasks within the organisation. A lack of support to achieve promotion was discussed by George who said “You get the impression from a lot of bosses that you shouldn't expect promotion, you should just be grateful to have a job at all.” Beth shared her experience of a disability sector employer assuming no capability to progress within the organisation, until a crisis necessitated expediency:

> I was working in one place doing phone work, as the employer had decided that was all someone in a wheelchair could do. Yet I had previously managed a professional role somewhere else. Then, there was a crisis, half the team went down with flu but I didn’t, so I was thrown a file and told I'd be doing work at a far more senior level while people were off sick. After six weeks, they said ‘we think you are quite good at this so we will extend your contract and you can carry on’.

Additionally, nondisabled staff may assume the existence of ‘conflicts of interest’ associated with disabled employees, who they believe are considering the interests of service users ahead of those of the organisation. For example, Peggy observed:

> I was told to speak at meetings only as a staff member, not as a disabled person. I’m going to be a disabled person far longer than I’ll ever be a staff member.

Another example of conflicting expectations was provided by Liz who explained she had previously gained a senior management role in an NGO but had the salary for this significantly reduced:

> The board said I had not brought enough funding to the organisation, even though I had organised a $200,000 awareness campaign through my networks. But they admitted later that they believed I was putting them at risk through my disability advocacy . . . so I left.

Peggy and Liz highlight the issue of what they believed to be the views of others relating to the social and cultural capital of living a disabled life, which they bring to disability sector employment. Under normal circumstances their identities as disabled people and employees may sit comfortably alongside each other. However, when Peggy and Liz were forced to choose between work and their respective status as disabled people, they selected disability status as paramount. Such identities may align more closely with their respective habitus (Bourdieu, 1990), while their work identities are transient and therefore more easily disposed of when they are forced to choose. Peggy in particular is demonstrating that she both possesses and is prepared to use her agency to resist the dominant power structures operating in the organisational hierarchy. Furthermore, Peggy’s ability to utilise this agency to question authority could result in her successfully negotiating her viewpoint that her status as a disabled person is inextricably linked to her persona. While it is understood that staff of disability sector and other organisations have multiple identities away from work, such as parent or cricket coach, employees of an organisation hold the shared identity of staff members. However, everyone selects the most relevant identity to reference in a given situation (Goffman, 1959) to inform that situation. A disabled identity may be dominant and useful for the organisation to consult from time to time, and some disabled people are explicitly urged to reference their disability knowledge and networks to carry out their roles. Therefore, it appears to be paradoxical for the management in Peggy and Liz's examples to expect them to only assume their disability status and identity expediently.

While some disabled research participants were appointed to roles within disability sector organisations explicitly based on the value of their social, cultural, and symbolic capital (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992), a number reported that nondisabled colleagues can appear to resent the disability-related experience and supports available to them. It was also noted that nondisabled staff can seem threatened by the utility of their lived experience and networks. Sefina asserted "Some people are actually jealous of someone who rocks up in a power chair each day."

Job retention was highlighted as an obstacle by participants who had only ever worked in short-term positions within the sector. Once again, much of the discussion related to what they saw as the impact of other people's incorrect assumptions about disabled people. Those who gained work in the sector reported mostly being offered roles which were short-term and part-time. The associated financial issues reported included work often being temporary, low status, and poorly paid. Mike commented that "low pay in the sector means it is difficult to save to buy a house or for the future." Lillian observed "I'm frightened to spend what I earn in case I end up out of work and need it later."

The precarity of disability sector work is illustrated by Neil's experience. Neil became typecast in a low-paid, part-time role, where he did not believe his desire for promotion was being heard. "I wanted more hours in a different role but no one was listening to me, they didn't think I could do it." A lack of cultural and symbolic capital meant he was undervalued in his position and he could not move to something more senior. Promotion would have meant greater access to new and more valuable forms of capital which could have improved his lifestyle. This left Neil in a precarious position once his supported employment placement ended and he lost his job. The notion of precarity, including various intersectional identities such as ethnicity and social class, illustrates how the risks and insecurities associated with impairment can deepen disadvantage (Grenier et al., 2017). Indeed, to be disabled is to live an often-precarious life (Hickey & Wilson, 2017), particularly since job insecurity is ever-present (Cunningham et al., 2017).

Access is not only restricted to the social and cultural capital required by disabled people to obtain employment, but also that which is critical to gain promotion into management positions within the disability sector field (Milner et al., 2015). Thus, those disabled people who manage to get hired did not necessarily have equal access to the same promotional opportunities as their peers. Indeed, it has been reported that disabled people often feel held back and not put forward for promotion because employers continue to underestimate their abilities and make negative assumptions about their capabilities (Adams & Oldfield, 2012; Baker et al., 2018; Von Schrader et al., 2014).

Some employers working in larger disability sector organisations observed that their workplaces are so generic in their people management approach that once disabled staff are recruited, the organisation loses track of them within the system. Lack of equity monitoring can therefore also mean failure to bring opportunities for training and promotion to the attention of disabled staff. Although Caroline (PS employer) assumed opportunities for promotion are equally available to all staff, she admitted “I couldn’t tell you how I know disabled staff get the same access to training and promotion as other people . . . I suppose they have the same opportunities as others.” Caroline’s assumption of a level playing field for all staff within her large, nationwide organisation illustrates that employers may not necessarily understand that many disabled people not only want to gain and retain employment, but also wish to be considered for promotion. Such assumptions may be based on a nondisabled world view, which tends to discriminate against disabled people, either unintentionally through lack of data as in Caroline's example, or intentionally by failing to disaggregate such data. This ableism may be conscious or unconscious (Carey, 2022; Gill & Schlund-Vials, 2014). Ableism, which includes prejudiced and discriminatory attitudes of nondisabled people based on the idea that they are necessarily superior to disabled people (Carey, 2022), directly impacts the self-determination of disabled people (Brittain et al., 2020). Whether deliberate or not, it appears that ableism in the sector constitutes a major barrier to disabled people gaining, retaining, and being promoted in disability sector employment. The underlying discrimination perpetrated through this ableism encapsulates a stratum of difference in this field, largely determined by wider social influences, based on the disabled/nondisabled binary (Carey, 2022; Jammaers et al., 2019). Thus, the generally accepted has become clearly defined in the disability-employment field, that what constitutes 'normal' can only be found in bodies which are not impaired. Hence employers are looking by default for the normal, since anything other than that state could be unpredictable, unreliable, or otherwise raise questions over potential productivity levels (Wheeler, 2012).

A number of disabled people wish to gain entry to paid work within the New Zealand disability sector (Te Pou, 2013), and many more could also be considered for leadership and management positions within the sector (Davies & Butler, 2022). The prospects for employment at senior level positions inside the New Zealand disability sector are now examined.

Disability Leadership and Management

The experiences conveyed by disabled study participants wishing to lead and manage their own field of employment indicates that a number of challenges persist to this objective. The symbolic and cultural capital of disability, together with the possession of other formal qualifications for employment, do not appear to be sufficient for many to obtain advancement at any level of this sector. Moreover, the calibre of some nondisabled employees working in management positions within charitably orientated disability service provision, was questioned by a number of disabled research participants:

> ‘Lame ducks’ is what I think of when I think of some of these nondisabled people working in the disability sector. They can’t make it anywhere else and think the sector will shelter them. (Eddy)

Disabled people increasingly expect to manage their own advocacy, whether voluntarily or within paid positions. However, two of the disabled study participants who raised the topic of employment within Disabled Person’s Organisations reported that disabled people are not well represented in leadership and management positions. For example, Beth observed an absence of disabled leadership within this part of the sector, saying "There are no jobs for us in DPOs, because the majority who are nondisabled have hung on to their roles forever.” While DPOs must include a minimum of 51% disabled people on their boards and membership (People with disability Australia, 2022), many are nevertheless led and managed by nondisabled people, as noted by Beth. Susan contributed another commonly stated perspective about disabled people who are selected to represent the disability community in disability-focused work, in public services and charitable NGOs, being selected by nondisabled people:

> When disabled people are shoulder-tapped to represent our voice, it’s usually based on who nondisabled government officials, service providers, or DPOs feel comfortable with, and that’s why it’s the same disabled people speaking all the time.

DPOs are themselves part of the disability sector, and many are constrained by funding and contracting arrangements with government (Blackmore & Hodgkins, 2012), which have been noted as also applying to providers of disability support services. As advocacy focused groups, the cultural capital of DPOs comes directly from the knowledge, skills, and experiences of key stakeholders – disabled people. Such capital comprises understanding and adoption of the social model, experience of living a disabled life, and the notion of disability identity, particularly with respect to disability pride (Bogart, 2017; Bogart et al., 2018). However as previously observed, while the whole disability sector is dependent on the cultural capital derived from the lived disability experience of stakeholders, such capital may not currently be considered sufficiently valuable enough to drive the disability field of power relating to who controls the sector. Bourdieu's theory of action (Bourdieu, 1977; Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992) accounts for the applicable capital resources available in the disability sector as a field of practice. For example, capital transactions are relevant both to internal and external undertakings, within and between DPOs, and between DPOs and government through the provision of contract funding, ostensibly to purchase social change and influence policy development (Blackmore & Hodgkins, 2012). The habitus of DPOs is evident in their internal workings, including their organisational look and feel, whether DPOs represent themselves as professional, what they do and how they do it, their operational mission and vision, and whether these include elements such as advocacy, service delivery, and employment of disabled people. Capital can be cumulative or absent (Bourdieu, 1988). As is the case for other charitable providers of disability support services, some DPOs have accumulated considerable economic capital which, although necessary to keep these organisations in operation, can nevertheless become the end rather than the means for their existence (Blackmore & Hodgkins, 2012). This economic capital appears to have become more valuable than the key cultural capital of disability, which gives the DPOs their credibility. However, some restoration of the status of DPOs might be possible through at least co-management of these organisations by their stakeholders.

The issue of government policy provision relating to the promotion of disability issues was raised by a number of disabled participants, and some spoke about nondisabled people dominating management of this part of the disability sector, noting this would not be tolerated in other sectors. George summed up the thoughts of many by observing:

> If a pakeha person was appointed to be the head of the Māori department there would be a shit-storm (sic) of protest and if the male guy got appointed head of Women’s Affairs, the same thing. But there are all these nondisabled people running the disability sector and that’s somehow OK?

Indeed, the voices of disabled people are often completely absent from major reforms and reviews at government level, even those that relate directly to, and profess to include, disabled people (Disabled Leadership Now, 2022). For example, in an article entitled 'Disability sector calls for separate ministry, support unshackled from health system’, Radio New Zealand's digital journalist, Russell Palmer (2020), reported that:

> The government should abandon some recommendations in the major health and disability review that ‘failed’ people with disabilities, and set up a separate ministry, people across the disability sector say.

The major failure discussed here was that, despite professing to be a reassessment of the New Zealand health and disability system, no disabled people were consulted for the review. This illustrates the way in which the disability discourse continues to be dominated by nondisabled people (Branfield, 1998; Kitchin, 2000). Furthermore, potentially life-changing initiatives which could greatly benefit disabled people often fall through the cracks because of arbitrary departmental boundaries, and the lack of disabled people in senior roles equals little commitment to cross-departmental initiatives (Workbridge, 2020).

The majority of participants in the current study proposed that a Ministry of Disability be established, to provide policy advice across government agencies, ensuring a disability lens is applied to all aspects of life. Allice further suggested that this be “staffed by disabled people and just a few nondisabled people who actually get it.” Since this research was undertaken, the establishment of a disability ministry has taken place. Although many disabled New Zealanders expressed their deep scepticism about how this establishment was managed, due to leadership roles being denied to senior disabled advocates (Disabled Leadership Now, 2022), others remain hopeful that the Ministry will lead to disabled people eventually leading and managing the disability sector, for the benefit of all disabled people.

While it would make no sense to argue that all disabled people should be disability sector leaders, many roles exist and others could be created to ensure that representation of this diverse population is inextricably woven into the fabric of disability support systems. The disability sector could itself model the inclusion of a cross-section of disabled people throughout the various organisational levels by embracing key principles of Enabling Good Lives: the promotion of self-determination, and the building and maintenance of relationships. Embracing these principles would in turn enhance the mana (or deference) attributed to disabled people, which is itself a first principle of EGL. Purposefully employing far more disabled people, particularly in leadership roles, would go a long way to ensure adoption of these principles, and begin to redress the gross inequity caused by people with no lived experience of disability leading and managing a sector that exists to serve disabled people.

Conclusion

A number of general barriers to employment have been identified and explored in this chapter. Obstacles include adverse employer attitudes coupled with lack of workplace opportunities, and difficulties associated with managing various funding criteria designed to provide disability supports. Barriers highlighted to employment within the New Zealand disability sector include the concept of merit, various challenges to recruitment and retention, and, notably, lack of access to disability leadership and management.

Several findings suggest that a number of positive measures may be taken to begin to improve employment options in all settings. Research indicates that the intentional creation of networking opportunities, where employers and disabled jobseekers can meet to forge connections, could greatly assist them to understand one another’s perspectives (McDonnall &

Antonelli, 2019). Moreover, access to regular disability responsiveness training for employers could assist to break down some employment barriers explored in this chapter. Rather than including questions about disability in job application processes, impairment and any required supports could be canvassed during induction, unless earlier raised by disabled applicants at job interviews.

Whether deliberate or not, ableism in the disability sector may constitute a major barrier to disabled people gaining and retaining work, and being promoted. The value of the knowledge and experiences of people who live a disabled life, which are not necessarily included in position descriptions, could be of significant utility to disability sector organisations. Thus, the concept of merit might be broadened to include lived experience of disability. Were it to be common knowledge throughout the disability sector, including in government and NGO work programmes, that lived experience is valued as an essential organisational characteristic, through specific inclusion in business planning and applicable role descriptions, greater appreciation of the unique perspectives disabled people can bring to sector organisations might be more likely to be at least considered. While employing greater numbers of disabled people in leadership roles at an individual organisation level may do little to change macro-economic forces, such change could lead the way to a far more disability driven sector.

The next chapter examines a range of enablers which may begin to redress the current inequities experienced, including promotion of lived experience as a key competency for the disability sector. Greater recognition of such competency may facilitate disabled people’s leadership and management of their sector.

Chapter Six: Potential Employment Enablers

Introduction

This chapter examines themes highlighted by disabled and nondisabled research participants as potential enablers of employment for disabled people in the New Zealand disability sector. Some of the employment facilitators identified may also assist disabled people wishing to work in the commercial and other sectors. Employment enablers explored include: unpaid volunteering as a possible pathway to paid work; the utility of reasonable accommodations; supported employment as a step into work; incorporating lived disability experience as key cultural capital within the disability sector; deploying individual agency to manage employment barriers; Enabling Good Lives; and some additional proactive enablers highlighted by disabled research participants. The contradictory consequences of some of the enablers identified are also acknowledged, such as the risk of volunteering and time-limited supported employment programmes designed to provide employment skills, instead leading to exploitation. These themes, together with those earlier identified in chapter five, lead to the recommendations made in chapter seven.

The removal of structural barriers to accessing mitigations are considered, from the perspective of the social model of disability (Oliver, 1990b), for example to obtain reasonable accommodations at work (Hawker, 2017). However, the critical importance of disabled people advocating for such accommodations themselves, and gaining the confidence and competence necessary to acquire various forms of capital, are important findings considered in relation to Bourdieu’s theory of social stratification (Bourdieu, 1984). Bourdieu's concepts continue to provide a critical lens through which to consider the ways disabled people can support their own positive employment outcomes. The enablers outlined in this chapter may contribute to the mitigation of employment barriers for disabled people in all sectors and, critically, assist to facilitate their access to employment within the disability sector at all levels.

Volunteering as both a means to incorporate the cultural capital of lived disability experience within the disability sector, and as a step towards paid employment for disabled people, is considered in the next section.

Unpaid Volunteering as a Pathway to Paid Employment

Disabled volunteers assist charitable NGOs within the disability sector to improve service quality and accessibility, while creating a possible path to their employment (Yanay-Ventura, 2019). Research participant observations about voluntary work experiences are explored in this section, along with the applicable literature. Voluntary work can be a means to build confidence, gain employment experience, and secure entry to paid work. The positive benefits of voluntary work cited in the literature include: access to education and inclusiveness (Marková, 2018); increased levels of self-esteem (Kulik, 2018); affirmation of disability identity (Yanay-Ventura, 2019); the chance to assist others (Balandin et al., 2006; Walker & Bryant, 2013); and the development of practical experience, self-determination, and confidence (Lindsay, 2016). Opportunities to volunteer in the disability sector can increase the cultural and symbolic capital of the sector, along with the cultural and social capital of disabled people (Bourdieu, 1980; Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992), promoting the development of marketable skills (Yanay-Ventura, 2019). Some adverse consequences of voluntary work touched on in the previous chapter, including the uncertainty relating to whether the role will lead to paid work, are also recognised (Abbas, 2012; Crothall, 2004).

The sentiments expressed by disabled research participants relating to the merits of voluntary work as a pathway to paid employment were mixed. Kirsty and Susan were positively disposed towards voluntary work leading to paid employment. Kirsty observed “I think that internships and volunteer work are so important to build up skills." Susan advised "doing voluntary work fills in the time . . . I'm productively using that time while I'm looking." As illustrated here, Kirsty and Susan both viewed voluntary work as providing a chance to learn new skills and utilise time while also seeking employment. The positivity expressed by these participants may well reflect their respective habitus (Bourdieu, 1990), including middle-class family backgrounds (Allen, 2004; Emerson & Hatton, 2007), and the consequent social capital available to them through the establishment of personal networks, while they undertake voluntary work (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992). Thus, the dispositions of these participants demonstrate their respective understanding of the importance of making social connections and gaining additional social capital through participation in voluntary roles (Jans et al., 2012), which could lead to paid employment.

While Kirsty and Susan expressed the belief that volunteering is a positive use of time, enabling the acquisition of social capital, knowledge, and skill development, Brian, Eddy, and Ken felt it was too easy for disabled people to be exploited.

> People should examine their attitudes if they think it is okay for others to live on a benefit their whole lives, get paid less than the minimum wage, or only ever get unpaid work experience. (Brian)
>
> Disabled people are over-used as volunteers . . . a lot of organisations that take us on expect free labour, and that this should continue forever, until something goes wrong. (Eddy)

Ken observed:

> I know people who have been doing it for 10 years . . . without ever being offered paid work . . . even a supermarket voucher each week would be a useful sign of appreciation.

Ken's point about providing a token of appreciation is one which disability sector employers with voluntary staff could well consider. Nevertheless, several disabled participants conceded that unpaid voluntary work for a brief period might be a useful way to gain experience and training for those wanting to transition to paid employment. However, while none of those who spoke about this were able to quantify what constitutes a reasonable timeframe, they were clear that voluntary positions must be strictly time limited, to maximise learning and avoid the trap of exploitation.

Some of the NGO employers viewed volunteering where possible as a satisfactory alternative to paid work since it is often difficult for people with significant functional limitations in particular to gain paid employment (Shandra, 2020). This point was made by Tui, noting “we can sometimes get the volunteer work but we just can't get meaningful paid employment for the people we support.” The view that those disabled people with significant functional limitations lack capability to undertake paid employment, continues to persist (Baker et al., 2018; Fadyl et al., 2022). While employers in the disability sector are aware of the barriers encountered by people with significant impairments, they may not necessarily be willing to offer voluntary roles to such disabled individuals (Barnes & Mercer, 2005; Yanay-Ventura, 2019). Thus, while volunteering may be a pathway to career development for some disabled people (Lindsay, 2016), such opportunities are not always available to those people who are willing to participate in the hope of gaining employment, particularly if they have high support needs and/or require other accommodations (Chappell, 1996).

Tui’s comment regarding the difficulties associated with obtaining employment raises the question of whether more opportunities to volunteer might be provided for disabled people across the disability sector, perhaps through internships, agreed and managed through planned approaches which specifically lead to paid employment. The inclusion of disabled volunteers would benefit other consumers, through enabling valuable opportunities for them to provide mentoring, as noted by Jodie when she said “Mentors are really important. Someone who believes in you, even if they just say it once, it can have a really magical influence.” Disabled volunteers could also provide an internal reference group for paid staff (MacNeill, 2020), especially people managing disability-related support services. However, care must be taken not to limit such opportunities to only those people with little need for workplace adjustments (Crothall, 2004; Yanay-Ventura, 2019). While disability sector organisations that include voluntary and paid staff who have few functional limitations can legitimately claim they include disabled people in their workforce, they can make it difficult for people requiring greater accommodations to participate (Bennett, et al., 2016; Harlan & Robert, 1998; Lindsay, 2016). Such organisations can state they already include a high percentage of disabled people on staff, but do not have additional funds to include any more (Wheeler, 2017). If the disability sector only employs people in paid and voluntary positions who identify as disabled yet have few functional limitations, this could be construed as somewhat tokenistic, contributing to the perpetuation of ableist negative assumptions about the employment of disabled people being too costly.

Many disability sector organisations, such as charitable providers of disability support services and DPOs, subscribe to the social model concept of self-definition of disability, and this has led to greater numbers of people becoming eligible to use NGO services (Wheeler, 2004). Such organisations may request additional contract funding from government to manage greater numbers of clients (Wheeler, 2004). However, when disabled populations increase due to self-definition, they will inevitably include many people who have fewer functional limitations that make little or no difference to their employment prospects (Jensen et al., 2005), but may reduce the range of services provided, and the number of paid and unpaid positions available to others requiring accommodations (Wheeler, 2004). The latter discussion is reflected by George who observed:

> We seem to nowadays have an awful lot more disabled people in New Zealand, since Statistics NZ are counting us. Disability organisations are saying it's marvellous because 'now we can see the picture statistically the way it is.' But has it actually improved anything for us – I don't think so, there are just more people getting on the bandwagon now.

Structural inequalities, barriers, and discrimination can impact the distribution of resources to consumers (Jensen et al., 2005). People with the greatest degree of impairment may require more support to achieve a good life, such as assistance with transport, home maintenance, and accessing electronic services such as sighted assistance only available via paid monthly subscription (Kitching, 2014; Workbridge, 2020), than people with few limitations requiring minimal support (Jensen et al., 2005). Thus, the inclusion of additional consumers with few functional limitations through reduced eligibility for services may ensure greater funding from government and charitable donations (Wheeler, 2004), but may also lead to disability sector organisations 'cherry-picking' people for voluntary and paid roles based on fewer functional limitations, since they may require no structural or financial changes (Dolmage, 2017; Pullen et al., 2020). For example, a range of non-systemic and cost-free adjustments are often attainable for people with few functional limitations, and it is possible to ameliorate some barriers, such as access to fine print or inaccessible public transport, in cost-neutral ways, by increasing font size and enabling people to undertake some tasks from home (Workbridge, 2020). It is therefore comparatively easy for people with fewer restrictions to gain voluntary or paid positions in the disability or other sectors, since employers may not have to consider any financial outlay for modifications or equipment (Bonaccio et al., 2020). However, text to speech screen-reading technology for blind people, sign language interpreters to facilitate communication between people with unimpaired hearing and Deaf, and building modifications to accommodate people with mobility impairments may be considered hardly worthwhile given the cost and the temporary nature of voluntary work (Crothall, 2004; Murfitt et al., 2018; Workbridge, 2020).

The present eligibility criteria relating to Support Funds provided by the Ministry of Social Development (MSD) can only be met by disabled people in paid employment (Workbridge, 2020). If the criteria were broadened to include volunteering, this funding could enable disabled people with high support needs to purchase the adaptive equipment or supports required to perform voluntary roles. The advent of personalised budgets through EGL, further discussed later in this chapter, may also serve to ameliorate this obstacle to some extent, provided volunteering is included in the final eligibility criteria established.

Unpaid voluntary work is far from neutral or value free, as evidenced by the experiences of disabled participants previously identified. Indeed, voluntary work can perpetuate marginalisation and discrimination, which is often experienced by disabled people (Abbas, 2012; National Disability Rights Network, 2011; Pring, 2020; Reaume, 2004). Jill recognised the value-laden nature of voluntary work when she spoke of the conflicting values between what she sees as her job to place disabled people into employment, with those of a parent who understood the value to her daughter of volunteering:

> I supported a woman for a very long time, in a job at a supermarket, it was work experience and she had been there for six years. Her mother said to me ‘please don’t go and rock the boat about getting paid, because she loves it and I don’t want her to be asked to leave because you are asking for her to be paid.’ But it was just exploitation.

Some parents of adult disabled children believe, based on their habitus (Bourdieu 1990), that finding something for their child to do is the best and most likely occupational outcome for them. The mother in this case may simply be echoing wider hegemonic ideologies which uncritically accept such views as common sense (Wheeler, 2004). Hence the appeal by this mother not to rock the boat. However, Jill’s claim that this is exploitation may come from her entirely different and opposite habitus, which has informed her own career choice to assist disabled people into paid employment. Thus, Jill may not value placing disabled people into roles where she believes they just fill in time.

Allice summed up the general view among disabled participants that while voluntary work has its place, payment equals value:

> I do a lot in the voluntary sector which makes a difference to the lives of people I work with. But I feel more legitimised by being paid for my skills and it's also nice to be able to contribute financially to the household.

Allice’s comments in chapter four, about believing she is not taken seriously by her family with respect to her knowledge and skills, highlights the importance to her of being able to take pride in her achievements, and assert her individual agency. Allice observes here that while she recognises her voluntary role is valuable, paid work provides legitimation of her symbolic and cultural capital within her family and enables her to contribute economically to the household.

When discussing options relating to the relative merits of including unpaid volunteers at her Public Service workplace, Christine asked:

> Why not contract them first up and then just employ them if you’re happy? . . . There are lots of disabled people who could work their way up the ladder just like you or I could. They just need the chance to actually do that.

This raises the question of why reportedly highly valued disabled volunteers (Yanay-Ventura, 2019) are not simply employed on an equal basis with nondisabled people, who are not generally expected to volunteer prior to their employment. Indeed, it might be argued that were all people expected to prove their suitability for a given role by working free for a period before being offered paid work, this is likely to be labelled as exploitation.

Since reasonable accommodations represent a major enabler of employment opportunities for many disabled people at all levels of the disability and other employment sectors, these are now examined.

Reasonable Accommodations

Accommodations that assist disabled people to manage the functional limitations associated with impairment(s) at work play a major role in employment acquisition and sustainability (Job Accommodation Network, 2023), whether in regular or disability sector settings. Examples of such accommodations are the provision of buildings and facilities which can be navigated by people using a range of mobility devices, the installation of speech to text software on computers used by people with limited or no hand movement, and sign language interpreters for meetings attended by Deaf (Workbridge, 2020). The literature has generally supported the positive benefits of reasonable accommodations in the workplace over many years (Delva et al., 2021; Harlan & Robert, 1998; Hernandez & McDonald, 2010; Nelissen et al., 2016). However, accommodations are sometimes unfairly considered by managers and co-workers as constituting ‘special treatment’ (Long et al., 2019; McLaughlin et al., 2004; Te Pou, 2013). This is particularly so if co-workers have to make some adjustments to their own work schedule to accommodate the disabled person (Berghs, et al., 2019).

The experiences of disabled participants in the present study relating to requests for reasonable accommodations tend to reflect reports in the literature. Responses to such requests ranged from these being accepted as good practice, informed by the social model of disability and extended to everyone in the workplace, to an illustration of misuse of power, represented by structural discrimination (Gill & Schlund-Vials, 2014). For example, Tony pointed out that accommodations are available to everyone in his Public Service workplace, observing “I don’t need to go to my manager and . . . explain the details, because the flexibility I need is now mainstreamed.” At the other end of the spectrum, Brian shared advice he had been given relating to requesting reasonable accommodations in an NGO advising “I have been told in the past that if you keep asking for accommodations, you won’t be here long.” Thus, participant experiences ranged from flexibility in Tony’s case where his needs were met as a matter of course, to Brian fearing he would appear too demanding if he asked for additional supports.

An analysis of different participant experiences related to accessing workplace accommodations points to an enlightened social model appreciation of necessity in one case, versus a more simplistic social model illustration of negative attitudes in the other situation. Examination of these examples through the lens of Bourdieu (1977, 1990) can deepen the analysis to consider whether these experiences can be understood within the cultural capitals found in different workplace fields. It is, for instance, widely accepted that certain types of cultures exist within different fields of employment, including attitudes towards race, gender, and disability. The examples provided by Tony and Brian illustrate the differences between a Public Service employer working in the disability sector, and a disability-sector NGO. Whereas the New Zealand Public Service has adopted a broad approach to accommodations where people in a range of situations may be supported, NGOs have limited resources so may approach accommodations more conservatively. However, employer willingness to discuss accommodations which may be required, while not merely assuming what might be requested, could make a big difference to disabled people wishing to access the employment field. In not wishing to confront the area of job accommodations, employers may be denying themselves valuable employees, while disabled jobseekers are denied opportunities to gain and build on economic, social, and cultural capital.

Many disabled people do not wish to stand out or risk being perceived as causing additional problems, so may themselves find ways around the need for adjustments, even at the risk of being less productive than they might be with the accommodations they require (Adams & Oldfield, 2012). However, while the ability to think laterally to circumvent barriers is an often-underestimated skill many disabled people develop (Saunders et al., 2015; Sundar et al., 2018), continuous deployment of such skills may simply lead employers and co-workers to believe that accommodations are optional because they are not being requested. People who do insist on such accommodations may then be viewed as ‘precious’ or labelled as complainers who disturb organisational culture (Berghs et al., 2019). This places considerable pressure on these disabled workers, who may experience degrading representations from colleagues.

Some of the employers interviewed stated that reasonable accommodations are available to everyone in their workplace. “We are flexible for all staff” (Emma, NGO employer). “Our workplace provides the usual, like time for picking kids up and doctor’s appointments” (Helen, NGO employer). It was however notable that while several similar examples were provided, these tended to be general, and not specifically related to accommodations deliberately designed to remove barriers associated with functional limitations. While Article 2 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (United Nations, 2006b) promotes the inclusion of accommodations for disabled workers who require these, for example automatic doors for wheelchair users, employers are entitled to refuse to provide accommodations under this article, where they believe these are not reasonable and could damage business profitability. Thus, while affirmative action policies and practices within the disability sector may be flexible enough to enable all workers to attend doctor’s appointments and organise childcare for instance, taking the next step to include the impairment-related needs of staff, such as working from home, might go beyond what an organisation is prepared to tolerate, if it is believed that this may affect its viability (Telwatte et al., 2017). A notable exception was provided by Jill, a manager in a large NGO who advised:

> We have to have the right equipment for everybody, and we will top up people’s support hours if necessary. We also pay for the travel and other costs of their support people.

This organisation explicitly subscribes to the social model of disability in its promotional material and operationalises the model by seeking to remove the barriers associated with functional limitations, providing the support necessary to ameliorate these. Jill describes a disability-sector organisation in which the cultural capital of lived disability experience is considered to be key to its requirements. Its philosophy includes EGL principles such as leadership by disabled people (EGL, n.d.), and it considers service users to possess knowledge and experiences useful to other consumers (Balandin et al., 2006; Walker & Bryant, 2013). Therefore, accommodations are routinely regarded by this service provider as necessary in order to secure the cultural capital associated with living a disabled life. There is no one-size-fits-all approach to reasonable accommodations. However, willingness to explore the possible need for accommodations with disabled individuals based on self-identified need could greatly increase the likelihood of their integration and ultimate success at work (Delva et al., 2021; Nelissen et al., 2016).

The ability to work from home for at least part of each working week is an accommodation frequently promoted by many disabled people, and one which the recent global pandemic provided. Interestingly, prior to the pandemic, Helen had remarked:

> I would be interested to see if someone with a disability working here asked to work from home, whether that would be allowed, because I'm pretty sure it wouldn't.

However, it is now noteworthy how many employers in a range of sectors with significant office-based functions accept working from home as the norm (Schur et al., 2020). Thus, the pandemic forced a shift in the cultures of many organisations, resulting in the alignment of one aspect of culture relating to employment from home, where many traditional employment barriers do not exist, and this significantly benefited some disabled people (Workbridge, 2020). The flexibility necessitated by the pandemic may provide an opportunity to reach for a shared understanding about what workplace accommodations are, and what is required by everyone to maximize potential. Indeed, a global consensus between all stakeholders about what is meant by workplace accommodations would be beneficial (Moon & Baker, 2012). It has also been postulated that the collection of information about how accommodations work and what they cost might be included in a framework for employers (Moon & Baker, 2012). However, while a shared understanding may be achievable based on inclusive definitions, a framework which includes an extensive accommodation typology and costings for these may simply be a utopian ideal, since the practicalities of keeping costs updated may prove to be overwhelming. Moreover, modifications which may assist some people with particular functional limitations do not work for others, and may even cause greater inaccessibility to them. For example, many individuals experience multiple impairments, such as vision and hearing loss. For someone in this situation, any bright visual and/or auditory clues which can be provided using electronic means may be critical for navigation. However, people with neurological impairments can find excessive noise or bright lights further impair their functioning (Workbridge, 2020). Thus, any framework would need to be a high-level guide only.

Supported employment has long been mooted as a positive means to increase numbers of disabled people in the workforce, particularly those people with functional limitations requiring additional supports (Agovino et al., 2019; Rosenthal et al., 2012). Indeed, supported placements could be a major employment enabler within the disability sector, for people with some cognitive and/or neurological impairments (Baker et al., 2018; Saunders et al., 2015; Shogren et al., 2020), providing a step onto the pathway to work, and increasing the capital of lived experience in disability sector workplaces. The concept of supported employment and its value to those disabled research participants who utilised this is considered next.

Supported Employment

Background

As discussed in the previous chapter, it may be argued that social inclusion can be achieved by meritocratic ideals such as EEO (Hayhoe et al., 2015). However, programmes promoting the employment of people from a range of EEO groups on merit (Araten-Bergman, 2016) often fail to provide sustainable employment opportunities for many disabled people (Phillips et al., 2019). As initially noted by Jewson and Mason (1984), it is impossible to achieve radical outcomes using liberal means. Moreover, normative forces tend to act in opposition to radical agendas (Wheeler, 2017). It is therefore somewhat surprising that proponents of liberal EEO have been disappointed over the years that such programmes have failed to incorporate radical solutions to gain more employment opportunities for people with significant functional limitations (Kirton et al., 2007). Furthermore, despite policies mandating diversity through legislation and promoted through various management programmes, disabled people continue to be poorly represented in all workplaces (Bonaccio et al., 2020). The provision of incentives and training to employers, through supported employment and other initiatives, is one way to combat initial employer reluctance to hire disabled people (Agovino et al., 2019). More than half of the disabled participants who took part in the present research utilised supported employment to facilitate their entry to the workforce.

Supported employment was developed in the United States, and initially intended as a means to ensure employment opportunities were purposefully provided to people most significantly disadvantaged by functional limitations, most notably people with learning disabilities. Promoters of the concept insist that the vocational focus should not be on training and work readiness but on the support and resources required to ensure full participation by disabled people in the regular workforce (Bennie, 1991, 1996b; Crothall, 2004; Munneke, 2006; Shogren et al., 2020). Supported employment quickly gained popularity as a way to assist people with a wide range of functional limitations and vocational requirements (Rosenthal et al., 2012). By utilising an ecological analysis, it was postulated that natural environmental and human supports might be brought together to increase the likelihood of effective work performance, leading to acceptance of disabled workers by colleagues and managers (Bennie, 1991, 1996a, 1996b). Thus, supported employment was regarded as a vehicle to bridge the gap between disabled people seeking work, and employers who might be reticent about hiring them (Baker et al., 2018). Supported employment within regular workplace settings continues to be considered by many as representing among the best opportunities for positive and successful employment outcomes for many disabled people requiring in-work support (Baker et al., 2018; Gustafsson et al., 2013; Rosenthal et al., 2012; Saunders et al., 2015; Shogren et al., 2020).

Mainstream Supported Employment Programme

The supported employment model was quickly adopted in New Zealand as a viable means to mitigate employment barriers for disabled people (Van Dalen, 2018). It was also viewed as a popular alternative to congregated and segregated sheltered employment (Bennie, 1996b; Munneke, 2006). The New Zealand Public Service incorporated the supported employment approach in its ‘Scheme for the Employment of the Disabled in the Public Service’, established in 1976, after considerable lobbying by parents of disabled children (Munneke, 2006). The scheme later became the Mainstream Supported Employment Programme (known as the Mainstream Programme).

Since over half of the disabled participants in this study utilised this programme to enable their entry to the New Zealand Public Service workforce, it is relevant to provide their thoughts on its utility as an employment enabler. Those research participants who took part in the programme have notable impairments to learning, mobility, neurological functioning, mental health, vision and/or hearing, which impacted their ability to obtain employment on merit. While some had achieved academically, most had not managed the educational system for various reasons, many of which were highlighted in chapter four. Nevertheless, the knowledge, skills, and experience gained while on their respective programme placements enabled them to seek work in the disability sector, their chosen area of work. Several employers who participated in this research also utilised the programme.

The Mainstream Programme supports employers to hire disabled people for a period of time and provides a salary subsidy and other supports. During its first 30 years of operation by the (then) State Services Commission, the programme’s purpose and objectives were closely aligned with principles espoused in the social model of disability, including the promotion of disability leadership and amelioration of structural and attitudinal barriers. Indeed, leadership by disabled people and an emphasis on barrier removal were at the heart of the programme's policy and provision. For example, each of the programme's three national managers, including the author of this thesis, were people with lived experience of disability through their significant functional limitations. Additionally, policy framing the programme recognised and removed the obstacle of merit by deliberately placing people with the greatest need for support through impairment into created Public Service positions where they could acquire workplace training and support from colleagues (Munneke, 2006; SSC, 2008). The additional support provided through the programme increased their social and cultural capital, while they carved out a role within which they could potentially continue at the end of the placement. Mainstream participants were paid the applicable rate for whatever job they were placed into. Additional assistance provided by Mainstream to support disabled people to build up the skills and confidence to remove some employment barriers included access to Public Service induction training, funding for education, accommodations such as adaptive equipment, and other individualised supports. The programme provided training for the supervisors of Mainstream participants and paid for additional funding for training relevant to their supervisory role (Munneke, 2006).

Mainstream included the six key tenets of supported employment (Bennie, 1991, 1996b; Munneke, 2006), which are outlined next, along with examples from disabled research participants relating to the programme's utility to them: (1) placement first, with no reference to job readiness, "The Mainstream placement was the major proper job that I ever had" (Eddy); (2) integrated work settings, "I felt treated as an equal, I was given opportunities and I thoroughly enjoyed working there" (Susan); (3) real work for real pay, "a role was custom designed for me. I made plenty of mistakes but the fact the placement was funded made a huge difference to me and I got paid to learn" (Neil); (4) provision of training on the job, "the fact employers were responsible for having to regularly prove training and development occurred, made them accountable" (Pippa); (5) the use of natural and ongoing supports, "I became friends with my supervisor and we still meet for coffee even though we have both moved on" (Sefina); and (6) promotion of career development, "being on Mainstream helped me to work out where I wanted to go next" (Hannah). The funding provided by Mainstream removed a major barrier to employment for these and other research participants, that of the need for employment on merit, since the majority had little prior workplace experience. Mainstream participants were provided with equal pay while they undertook training, which not only contributed economic capital (Allen, 2004; Emerson & Hatton, 2007), but significantly increased self-esteem. Utilising the natural supports available at work in the form of colleagues meant they could be integrated into the workplace relatively quickly. The opportunity to demonstrate their capability during the placements reduced workplace negativity towards Mainstream participants, enabling them to gain economic and social capital, and form networks (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992). Moreover, they were able to acquire additional cultural capital through learning a range of new skills which could be utilised in other employment settings.

It is acknowledged that some of the research participant views expressed about the programme were diametrically opposed to others. However, the majority of disabled people who had utilised the programme (prior to 2008 when it was transferred to the MSD) spoke highly of the opportunity. "Idealistically I'd like people to be seen as people regardless, but realistically programmes like this are still relevant" (Jodie). "Mainstream gave me a 'foot in the door' which I may not have otherwise had" (George). Although Jodie observed that disabled people should have the same opportunities for employment as others, she nevertheless understood that for many, the chances of gaining employment may be minimal without assistance. George recognised that access to the programme gave him the opportunity to prove his worth at work. Both participants appreciated the chance to utilise the support they required at the time, to gain and build up the cultural and social capital necessary to be regarded by employers and peers as valuable team members, and the economic capital necessary to improve their lives (Bourdieu, 1986). An alternative view was provided by Liz, who observed “it just reinforces stigmatised views of disabled people as unskilled and incapable.” Like Jodie, Tania's desire to work overcame any scruples she may have had about buying into disability stereotyping, noting “I couldn’t have cared less how I got into a job, so long as I got a job that paid me and enabled me to train for the next one.” While Neil expressed similar views to Jodie, believing disabled people should be treated the same as nondisabled people in employment, he also noted “I am not going to say ‘I benefitted by it but no-one else is allowed to’.”

It is noteworthy that Liz had built up considerable social and cultural capital by the time she became disabled. She had not encountered barriers to employment early in her career and had no need to participate in programmes promoting affirmative action. Liz was therefore not speaking from experience, rather she was postulating what many disabled people might consider a ‘perfect world scenario', based on an ideology which considers employment on merit to reflect worthiness, while believing subsidised work is necessarily menial. However, as previously discussed in chapter five, a common principle of employing ‘the best person for the job’ inherent in the concept of merit would rule many disabled people out of consideration for employment (Delva et al., 2021; Phillips et al., 2019), as earlier observed by Robert (NGO employer). Conversely, Tania was more concerned about the end than she was about the means. She could see how building up social networks (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992) and economic capital (Allen, 2004), would enable her to get to the next level in her chosen career. Neil, however, simply did not want to appear hypocritical, since he had benefited by his participation in the programme and could see that others may want to do likewise.

The habitus of disabled people may influence their responses to opportunities represented by bespoke disability employment programmes, believing they should be employed on the same basis as others, while agreeing to participate in such programmes to increase their cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1986), and taking the opportunity to increase social and economic capital (Allen, 2004; Bourdieu, 1986; Emerson & Hatton, 2007; Wheeler, 2016). Thus, many participants seized the chance to ‘get a foot in the door of employment’ as noted by George, and make the most of what this can provide, as observed by Tania. Of critical significance, however, was participant willingness to use their individual agency to utilise training and other opportunities provided by Mainstream, to remove some employment barriers for themselves. Many developed high levels of self-esteem and self-determination as their experience and confidence grew (Munneke, 2006). While on placement, participants gained considerable cultural, social, and economic capital (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992), which they later deployed to improve their lives and achieve more secure employment. Several went on to build up solid work histories, based on employment-related social networks (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992), and formal and informal training acquired in the workplace, which enabled them to take the next step in their respective careers (Crothall, 2004; Munneke, 2006; SSC, 2008). People who did not achieve tenure, or secure alternative employment once their placements had concluded, nevertheless appeared to benefit positively from the experience (Munneke, 2006) through the acquisition of economic and social capital.

Both disabled participants and employers recognised the potential for employer misuse of programmes such as Mainstream, due to the often-generous subsidies available. They shared their concerns that the financial benefits represented by this and similar programmes, such as MSD Support Funds, could be squandered. Emma (NGO employer) noted “I appreciate it is sometimes used . . . to tick a box . . . but my experience of when it’s used the way we’ve used it has been incredible.” Alternatively, Ken had first-hand experience of programme misuse, advising:

> I was on Mainstream once and the boss got rid of me when the subsidy ended. I was told he got someone else in the job and did the same thing again.

While Emma concedes that it is possible for employers to accept the programme funding but provide only a minimum of training and development to recipients, Ken described his experience of being treated as a commodity. Ken’s narrative highlights the sometimes-negative consequences of some employers participating in programmes which offer salary and other subsidies. Such employers may view disabled people supported by programmes like Mainstream as unworthy of investing in with respect to training during placement or offering ongoing employment once the placement ends. However, it is acknowledged that none of the research participants discussed the opportunity for misuse of these programmes by disabled people themselves.

Besides Emma, other nondisabled providers of disability support services who had taken part in the programme agreed that this had been positive for their service users. Robert (NGO employer) observed “I think it’s been incredibly successful and I really don’t know that the people we support would have been employed without Mainstream.” Employers also generally agreed that the programme met its objectives. Caroline (PS employer) said “Most of the people on placement went on to permanent work in the agency. Mainstream was always responsive and supportive.” These disability service providers were complimentary about the programme's utility to both employers and disabled people. Some disability sector employers benefited doubly, since the programme enabled them to hire some of the people they supported, while reducing the support required by those people who had become employed.

Since transferring to the MSD in July 2008, Mainstream has undergone a number of significant changes that more closely align with merit-based EEO practices, common within New Zealand Public Service human resource policies generally. For instance, MSD has relaxed eligibility criteria for both employers and disabled people utilising the programme, and promotes this as social inclusion. For example, the programme's web-based informational material discusses locating roles “that suits your skills and capabilities” (MSD, 2022). Acceptance and promotion of the business case approach to EEO, including notions of employing 'the best person for the job', means that organisations are likely to adopt those hiring practices which maximise their economic and/or social capital, and hire only disabled people who can be employed on merit. Robert (NGO employer) was critical of how the programme has changed:

> MSD is pretty clear that they only want people on Mainstream who are largely work ready. Well, that’s the absolute opposite of what supported employment was supposed to be about.

Robert expresses some frustration that the evolution of the programme has significantly altered the philosophy upon which it was initially based, away from employment for disabled people with high support needs and few employment qualifications or experience, towards inclusion of a wider range of disabled people on merit. However, using the merit principle as the basis for employment excludes disabled people who are unable to meet these benchmarks. In choosing to widen the criteria with respect to disabled people and employers considered to be eligible, MSD has moved away from supported employment and into the promotion of merit-based employment, enabling only work-ready disabled people into employment through the Mainstream Programme, but further disabling people who require additional supports. Such people may be condemned to survive on welfare, unless their impairment-related limitations can be ameliorated to some degree by the provision of reasonable accommodations granted by willing employers, or through personalised budgets, which may enable access to the supports required to undertake voluntary or paid work.

The Enabling Good Lives approach currently on the horizon could represent a significant potential enabler to achieving a good life, including employment, for those wishing to work. The freedom to utilise personalised budgets for voluntary and employment-related supports could make a considerable difference to disabled people, provided such supports are ultimately included in the final EGL eligibility criteria prior to its implementation. Thus, the Enabling Good Lives approach is now examined as representing a possible major employment enabler.

Enabling Good Lives

The rollout of funding through EGL is part of the New Zealand government’s programme of disability system transformation and is scheduled for nationwide coverage by 2026 (MSD, 2021). EGL includes supporting people to achieve employment as one of its key objectives. However, the question of whether funding will be available to meet the accommodation costs associated with training to use technology, participate in unpaid volunteering and/or paid employment is yet to be settled. While this funding model has been mooted in New Zealand since at least 1991 (personal professional recollection), it has only been seriously considered relatively recently.

Assistance through personalised budgets was discussed by Susan and Beth, who observed this type of support promotes self-determination and enhances autonomy. They viewed this funding model as constituting a potential and highly relevant employment enabler for them. Susan was enthusiastic about the prospect of accessing EGL funding:

> If I need to learn a new journey with my guide dog, I could potentially ask a qualified independent instructor to teach me the new route and pay her directly from my budget, and there are already other ways to access Braille if you have the funding, which are much quicker and cheaper than what is provided by the blindness agency. How much better will services like job placement be when there is more competition?

Susan readily perceives the potential impact on her ability to gain work, through improved mobility, access to information, and choice of vocational service provider, paid for from her personal budget. She looks forward to being able to exercise her self-determination and individual agency with respect to the choices she makes about purchasing impairment-related goods and services. Susan has clearly thought through many of the implications of being able to access a personalised budget. Those implications apply to services she already receives, but which she believes could be improved. Thus, barriers to mobility, reading materials, and employment, which are already partially ameliorated in her case, may be reduced further by decreasing waiting times. Susan also believes that competition means choice, which could improve the quality of those services she uses.

Beth already has access to a personal budget through one of the EGL pilot projects that have been operating throughout New Zealand for several years. The provision of a personalised budget currently enables Beth to access transport to and from work, and funds the support she requires in a professional role:

> It’s fantastic because your funding can be tailored to fit your individual needs . . . I would not have been able to do my job without support with the things I can’t do myself at work. My physical condition will continue to worsen, and I don’t want to go into residential care, so the funding will enable me and my husband to age at home with support.

Beth’s experience demonstrates the utility of being able to access funds to minimise some of the structural barriers to her work and home life. Her personalised budget enables Beth to work in a professional position that matches her skills and qualifications. Furthermore, it provides her with choices about, and control over, the management of her home life in the context of her worsening physical condition. The barriers removed by Beth’s eligibility to funding include transport and administrative support at work, also noted in the literature (Kitching, 2014), and home management including some personal care, which in turn makes it easier for her to be employed. Beth’s experience highlights the benefits to her and her family of accessing the economic capital necessary for support through personalised budgets. Her funding enables her to remove the barriers which formerly prevented her from gaining economic capital through employment.

Susan may be able to reduce barriers caused by delays and what she perceives to be questionable service quality, and increase her social and cultural capital, by choosing to purchase supports that will enable greater connection with her community, made possible by her improved orientation and mobility skills, and access to reading matter in Braille. Further, increased economic capital through eligibility for a personalised budget may ultimately enhance her ability to gain additional economic capital through employment, as demonstrated by Beth.

Along with access to a personalised budget, another tool in the EGL approach is the provision of a connector (EGL, 2022). Although the idea behind providing connectors to “walk alongside disabled people” (EGL, 2022) may ensure greater access to disability-related goods and services for some, the presence of another person might nevertheless act as an additional barrier between the disabled person and the community they are attempting to integrate into. Liz was vehement about her right to self-determination when she questioned the blanket need for a connector, saying “I don’t need a bloody connector to walk alongside me, how patronising!” Although connectors are not intended to act as advocates (L. Sullivan personal communication, December 14, 2022), they may nevertheless prevent some disabled people from exercising choice and control, either unintentionally, through others deferring to them instead of directly addressing the disabled person, or by deliberately misusing their power. Thus, the presence of a connector may interfere with the disabled person’s ability to exercise self-determination and hinder the development of individual agency. Furthermore, depending on the processes put in place to recruit people to work as connectors, the potential may exist for them to abuse the position, exert undue influence, and view this as an opportunity to commit abusive acts against the person they are paid to support.

While it is critical that disabled people are at the forefront of developing and managing the EGL rollout, it is recognised that some recipients may require access to training to manage the associated resources. Such training must be provided by disabled people for disabled people, in order for all such individuals to deploy their individual agency to manage ordinary life outcomes, and ultimately achieve a good, and even a great life.

This chapter now moves to consider the critical importance of both possessing and being able to utilise individual agency to mitigate employment barriers, as reported by disabled research participants.

Deployment of Individual Agency

A major enabler discussed throughout this thesis is development and utilisation of individual agency (Allen, 2004; Bourdieu, 1977; Gill & Schlund-Vials, 2014). Self-determination is critical to self-advocacy in such areas as the removal of structural employment barriers. Moreover, the significance of disabled people's own efforts to manage barriers associated with work is a relevant but under-reported component in any discussion of employment for such individuals (Saunders et al., 2015; Sundar et al., 2018). In order to further highlight the importance of possessing and being prepared to utilise agency, the following section illustrates the ways in which some of the disabled participants in the present study managed disability-related obstacles through self-determination, resulting in favourable employment outcomes.

Disclosure of personal information relating to impairment, whether acquired or congenital, is discussed throughout this thesis as a matter of individual preference. Such choices have been highlighted in the literature over many years (Adams & Oldfield, 2012; Albrecht, 1992; Fadyl et al., 2022; Jans et al., 2012; Van Dalen, 2018; Von Schrader et al., 2014).

Disabled participants with unseen or less visible impairments reported that they are strategic about whether and when they share personal information about impairment. Tony provided an example of how he manages the expectations of others by simplifying explanations, saying "I'll disclose my hearing loss, because that's easier to accept than if I say I've got long-term traumatic brain injury." Similarly, Eddy chooses whether to disclose impairment, depending on circumstances, commenting “If it's in the disability sector, then Yes, because. . . well I’d hope that people there would be more empathetic or more understanding.”

An employer’s perception of an individual managing impairment is critical to whether that person presents as a potential problem, or someone who uses their agency to problem-solve. For instance, once a disabled person is invited to a job interview, they can raise the topic of adaptations to functional limitations. Susan uses this strategy to ensure she has an opportunity to ‘address the elephant in the room’ which puts her in control of the conversation, enabling her to explain how tasks might be performed with adaptations:

> For me it’s better to address it and talk about it and that way it makes it easier for the interviewer to think ‘oh, well now I can ask these questions, I’ve been given that permission’.

The scenario outlined by Susan suggests that taking the initiative to discuss how job tasks might be managed can be a useful way to engage potential employers in conversation at interviews, especially if impairment is obvious. A willingness to take charge of the situation is particularly important when being considered for government sector positions, since Public Service employers are prohibited from directly questioning applicants about personal characteristics such as those relating to impairment. Thus, a well thought out positive disclosure statement, focusing on how job tasks can be managed, may be a useful strategy for disabled candidates to deploy, in order to demonstrate resourcefulness and employability (Jans et al., 2012).

A number of impairments acquired through accident in early adulthood significantly impacted employment prospects for Tania, since she had not started work between leaving school and the accident. However, she utilised resilience, and her individual agency developed through her habitus prior to acquiring her impairments, to insist on her right to seek paid work:

> My family were very against me getting a job because they just didn't think I could do it . . . I didn't have the ability to properly look online for jobs because I was still such a beginner in understanding how to use technology. My support workers agreed with my mum, . . . they realized that my working would reduce my support hours.

Removal of the technological and attitudinal barriers, together with the elimination of additional support felt to be unnecessary by Tania, may certainly have meant a smoother pathway to employment for her. While her family were perhaps understandably overprotective of her newly disabled state and may paradoxically have been instilling a form of taught dependency, she nevertheless had to draw on reserves of resilience established through the development of her early habitus (Bourdieu, 1990), to deflect their unfavourable attitudes about her future. Moreover, Tania may have felt her support workers demonstrated ablest self-interest in attempting to thwart her desire to work, when she observed “my working would reduce my hours . . . so it wasn't a beneficial thing for them to encourage me.” However, Tania ultimately managed to assert her individual agency by insisting she apply for and get work. “It took me to learn how to use my technology really well, before I could do anything . . . I did Mainstream and that's how I got here” (Tania). She successfully advocated for her right to work, even at the risk of failure. Tania’s determination to assert her capability to work, and problem-solve by teaching herself how to use technology early on gave her the confidence to seek and successfully gain employment through the Mainstream Programme (discussed earlier), as did her own accommodation of her newly impaired state, which included a willingness to disclose her functional limitations.

Several disabled participants spoke of how they themselves manage incorrect assumptions encountered from employers in commercial, government, and NGO settings, and related the strategies many have developed to manage such assumptions. For example, Pippa spoke of how she responds to the negative assumptions made by some employers regarding the disabled people she supports. She advised that she may at times compensate for these adverse attitudes by initially concealing her own impairment when advocating for others:

> I often meet employers in cafes to discuss hiring disabled people as part of my job, and I tend to arrive early, so they don’t see me arriving carrying my white cane. Employers are at times disparaging about what disabled people can do and then I will advise I am vision

> impaired. From an employer's perspective they think, 'holy shit (sic), I'm hiring somebody who's got an intellectual disability, and the person that's going to support them and train them in the induction process is a blind woman'. That is why the first impression of me not immediately appearing with my cane and coming across as super competent is so important.

A closer examination of Pippa's experience with would-be employers demonstrates how she attempts to use her disability status to positively influence employers to hire the people she supports. Pippa effectively manages her disability identity, while also portraying herself professionally as an employment broker for other disabled people. Many people become practiced at representing themselves in what they perceive as the most positive light. For example, with respect to employment, potential job candidates are routinely advised to act the part in interviews, in order to create a managed identity solely for the purpose of gaining a job (Foot & Hook, 2019). Indeed, it is difficult to imagine any social situation in which some degree of identity management does not take place (Garthwaite, 2008; Goffman, 1959), and disabled people also manage their identities in various contexts. However, a major issue for many is that it is not always possible to conceal impairment(s).

Pippa felt that she needed to address what she believed to be employer negativity by introducing an identity for herself which minimised the perceived effects of impairment. She only advises employers of her vision loss once she believes she has gained their confidence. A negative consequence of this minimisation may be that employers may believe Pippa also routinely plays down the impact of supporting a disabled person in the workplace. Moreover, Pippa might be accused of buying into the very stereotype she seeks to dispel when attempting to gain work for other disabled people. Her belief that she needs to make these compensatory adjustments could send the opposite message to that which she seeks to convey. While this strategy could cause some employers to positively question their own assumptions, Pippa's concealment of her impairment may equally be construed as insulting by other employers, who might feel humiliated and annoyed. In such cases she risks the loss of any social capital she could potentially build through her interaction with employers, thereby losing future employment opportunities for those she supports.

A social model perspective may criticise Pippa's management of situations such as that outlined, relating to meeting employers. Such a perspective might argue that, in failing to break the causal linkage between impairment and disability, Pippa is reinforcing a medicalised view of disability by focusing the employer’s attention away from the political basis of structural and environmental barriers, which remain the predominant cause of disability (Barnes & Oliver, 1993; Danieli & Wheeler, 2006; Oliver, 1990a). It should be recognised that in not advising employers that she is vision-impaired at the beginning of their meeting, Pippa may be missing an opportunity to initially model what is possible through forging professional and social capital (Bourdieu, 1986; Wheeler, 2016), thereby reducing the discomfort employers might demonstrate when confronted by impairment. However, it is quite possible to maximise one’s abilities without necessarily having to discard the identity of disabled person, including insisting on the removal of exclusionary barriers (Barnes & Oliver, 1993; Oliver & Barnes, 2010; Wheeler, 2004). Pippa illustrates the seamless way in which an impaired person can routinely move between identities without duplicity or internal contradiction (Goffman, 1963; Mauer, 2018; Moser, 2005), and her management of her disability status when working with employers. It is therefore possible for a disabled person to support social model principles, while simultaneously reducing the perceived impacts of their impairment on productivity when confronting employment-related discussions (Wheeler, 2004). Thus, a fluidity of identity, encompassing both concepts of impairment and disability, becomes a commonsense reaction when individual disabled people interact with what may be thought of as a hostile and discriminatory environment (Wheeler, 2012).

A Bordieuan perspective may view her response to this situation as Pippa simply exercising resistance to dominant disability-related discourses and documented ideologies

(Garland-Thomson, 2016). Such ideologies and discourses may include what Bourdieu (1996b) referred to as symbolic violence, where groups or individuals use the power derived from symbolic capital (Bourdieu, 1998b) to attempt to alter the behavior of others with less capital. A modern example of behaviour modification through the exertion of pressure might be through the common use of social media. Bourdieu employed the concept of symbolic violence in different ways, depending on particular research endeavors, to account generally for what he viewed as the tacit and unconscious acceptance of domination by the dominated (Bourdieu, 1996b; Dirk, 2020; Samuel, 2013; Schubert, 2014). Hence, Pippa might simply be using her social capital to strategise the best way to gain employment for the people she supports, since she is aware that negative attitudes towards the knowledge and abilities of people with a variety of impairments continue to erect major barriers to their employment. Moreover, Pippa comprehends the need to change identities and adapt to different situations when she believes it necessary (Goffman, 1963). Such flexibility also illustrates her agency and understanding that in differing fields, different identities can remove attitudinal barriers, for instance the social and psychological disadvantage created by stigmatisation (Garland-Thomson, 2014; Gill & Schlund-Vials, 2014).

Beth raised the connection between taking responsibility for her health, and the ability to manage impairment at work:

> If your general state of wellness goes down then, for someone like me, that creates potential risks for not being able to manage my impairment. I put a lot of priority on understanding what my issues are, accepting them for what they are and looking after myself; not exposing myself to risks where I could be compromised. The key is knowing what your needs are and being proactive.

Beth raises an interesting point about managing impairment issues in the workplace. A thorough knowledge of how to regulate any impacts associated with impairment is a proactive and critical strategy many disabled people adopt to manage workloads (Jans et al., 2012; Sevak et al., 2015).

While a social model perspective may prioritise the removal of any structural employment barriers faced by these participants (Oliver, 1986), a Bourdieusian perspective would view their willingness to take responsibility for adapting any impacts of impairment as their deployment of agency to manage work tasks (Wheeler, 2004, 2017).

As the utilisation of individual agency provided by disabled research participants in these examples illustrate, many disabled people manage a range of functional limitations and incorporate disability into their habitus, utilising their agency successfully to achieve personal goals. Such experience could be valuable as key cultural capital for the disability sector, and the next section summarises this concept, which is a constant theme throughout this thesis.

Lived Experience as a Key Competency for Disability Sector Employment

The inclusion of the lived experience of disabled people in disability sector work is a recurring theme throughout this thesis. Since the capital related to disability is analogous to the disability sector (Davies & Butler, 2022; Te Pou, 2013), it is not surprising that the majority of research participants expressed a strong belief that lived experience of disability should be highly valued within the sector (Jans et al., 2012). Emma saw the benefit of employing people with experience of functional limitations first-hand, observing “I think they had really good empathy when they were supporting people and they could relate really well. That was a definite advantage.” Likewise, Pippa saw the benefits of her lived experience to her work, saying “We both face struggle, we both face discrimination, but look at us here working together.” Brian also observed that more disabled people in the sector could increase the quality of services provided:

> I often wish that over the years there were more people doing the same thing as I have been doing; it would help make services live up to expectations and good standards.

The notion of improved services to the people supported by disability sector organisations, along with greater accountability within the sector due to increased numbers with lived experience employed therein, is an interesting point raised by Brian and further supported by Liz and Lillian. Liz noted “As a disabled person you are much more aware of the implications if you don’t do something or you don’t do it well”, while Lillian said “We are certainly going to be held to account if we get things wrong when working with our peers.”

Lived experience of disability would appear to be an asset to disability sector work, and such experience might be expected to infer merit on disabled jobseekers over nondisabled candidates (Davies & Butler, 2022; Te Pou, 2013; Todd, 2018). However, this does not appear to have been fully realised, and as noted in the previous chapter, few disabled participants in this study had achieved employment and/or promotion in the sector, despite having applied for numerous positions over several years. One reason may be that, as earlier identified by employers Robert and Tui, many employers routinely include certain qualifications and standard competencies in position descriptions, which are not necessarily critical to the roles being advertised, yet fail to mention competencies relating to lived disability experience. For example, in discussing her attempts to gain work in the disability sector, Hannah advised:

> I look at the list of job requirements and you have to be an excellent this and a brilliant that, highly qualified in this and super experienced in that . . . but nothing about lived experience.

Jill (NGO employer) agreed that disabled people can bring much to disability sector work that is not necessarily included in job descriptions, but are nevertheless overlooked, commenting “We tend to forget to consider what people do bring, and the barriers that are stacked against people with disabilities.” Although Hannah is well qualified academically, she continues to struggle to achieve the standards she believes are implied by such superlatives. Thus, even the more recognised institutionalised state of cultural capital (Bourdieu 1986), that is, the relevant completed qualifications which may guarantee economic capital for nondisabled people, are of little value to disabled people such as Hannah, if they are unable to persuade disability sector employers to hire them.

Conclusion

This chapter has discussed a range of enablers identified by research participants as constituting possible solutions to the paucity of paid employment for disabled people generally, and within the New Zealand disability sector in particular. The less positive consequences of some potential enablers have also been acknowledged. This study finds that acquisition of cultural and social capital (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992) through voluntary work could lead to paid employment for some disabled jobseekers (Yanay-Ventura, 2019), provided voluntary opportunities are strictly time-limited, and include planned pathways to paid work (Crothall, 2004).

Disabled people who had benefited from participation in supported employment via the Mainstream Programme prior to 2008 agreed they had gained valuable knowledge, skills, and the experience and confidence to seek ongoing work once their placements had concluded. Research findings therefore continue to indicate the criticality of creating opportunities for disabled jobseekers and employers to meet, which can result in greatly increased social, cultural, and economic capital (Bourdieu, 1984; McDonnall et al., 2023), gained by disabled research participants who had also participated in the Mainstream Programme. However, since the eligibility criteria of relative disadvantage appears to have shifted to encompass employment on merit, people with significant functional limitations for whom the Mainstream Programme was initially designed are now severely disadvantaged and many would not meet the programme criteria if they were to apply for participation today. It may therefore be preferable for the programme to be managed from within the disability community, rather than the Public Service.

Findings indicate that greater eligibility for Support Funds provided by MSD, and/or access to personalised budgets through the forthcoming rollout of EGL, would greatly improve the chances of many disabled people accessing voluntary or paid work.

In order to ensure greater participation by disabled people in the disability sector workforce, it is critical to include greater levels of lived disability experience as key cultural capital throughout all aspects of work undertaken in the name of disabled people (Davies & Butler, 2022; Te Pou, 2013; Todd, 2018), whether in the Public Service or in NGOs. Indeed, were the concept of merit to be more broadly considered to include lived experience within disability sector roles, employers may not overlook people who might bring substantial knowledge and experience to such workplaces.

The final chapter of this thesis draws together the themes discussed and makes a number of recommendations based on research findings informed by research participants.

Chapter Seven: Conclusion

Introduction

This research has sought to address barriers and enablers to employment for disabled people wishing to work in the New Zealand disability sector, and those already employed in the sector seeking promotion. Studies that reflect similar aims to those of this research include a very small New Zealand examination of obstacles and mitigations to employment by disabled people working in particular disability services (Te Pou, 2013), some broad discussion of disability leadership in Australasia (Todd, 2018), and a report calling for research into the place of disabled people in the Australian disability sector (Davies & Butler, 2022). However, little empirical knowledge exists regarding the experiences of disabled New Zealanders seeking employment or promotion in their own sector, and this research represents the first study identified to touch on leadership and management by disabled people in their sector.

Research has acknowledged impairment as critical to the experience of disability, linking embodiment to identity (Sherry, 2016). A number of environmental, structural, and attitudinal barriers are recognised, along with the importance of developing resilience, and utilising individual agency to mitigate identified obstacles. Existing literatures are referenced throughout the thesis, including perspectives which are also relevant to employment barriers in all sectors (Forster, 2022), along with enablers (Crudden & Steverson, 2022). The gaps in the literature addressed in this thesis pertain to how disabled people might access technological and other training to manage personal budgets (Murfitt et al., 2018), the lack of opportunities for employers and disabled people to connect (Fadyl et al., 2022), managing job retention (Crudden & McKnight, 2022), and disability sector employment for disabled people (Davies & Butler, 2022).

The theoretical context is framed by social constructionism (Gergen, 2015; Walker, 2015), the social model of disability (Oliver, 1990b, 2013), and Pierre Bourdieu's theory of practice (Bourdieu, 1977, 1980, 1986), which enabled an examination of disability employment from macro to micro perspectives. The qualitative research framework, social constructionist epistemology, and thematic analysis of resulting information underpinning this research, together with the theoretical framework provided by the social model of disability, and Bourdieu's concepts, provides a glimpse into the lived experiences of disabled people seeking work or promotion generally and within the disability sector. It also captures the perspectives of disability sector employers.

The three substantive chapters covered the navigation of family, identity, and education; outlined major barriers to paid employment; and highlighted the potential employment enablers raised by research participants. The role of individual agency is emphasised throughout the thesis as a barrier navigation tool, enabling the self-determination of participants to be harnessed to mitigate some of the challenges they faced.

It is acknowledged that the researcher's own background and lived experience as a disabled woman, along with experiences of both consuming and providing disability-related employment and other services, have impacted the focus of the thesis and shaping of the research question. Thus, it is inevitable that the study has been influenced by my own understanding and lived experience of disability, and disability sector employment.

This concluding thesis chapter draws together the many threads of the research. It begins with an overview of the study, highlighting areas for further research, and acknowledges the limitations of the study, reviews the research question and objectives, and outlines the key findings. The chapter highlights the original contribution to the area of employment barriers and enablers to employment for disabled people with respect to the New Zealand disability sector, and provides recommendations relevant to the practical application of results.

Overview

Employment is of critical importance to all sectors of society (Fadyl et al., 2022; Modini et al., 2016; Netto et al., 2016). Apart from the obvious financial benefits accrued from having a job, employment promotes self-determination, choice, and control over one’s life (Albrecht, 1992; Fadyl et al., 2022). Moreover, paid work provides motivation, a structure to the day, and a sense of achievement (Modini et al., 2016), opportunities for social interaction, and money to improve socio-economic status (Bealing et al., 2017).

Disabled people are a large minority who nevertheless often live in poverty and have difficulty accessing supports. While work can be an effective pathway out of poverty, the realities of a variety of barriers to employment experienced by disabled people mean that getting and keeping a job is not always attainable (Van Dalen, 2018, 2019). Negative stereotyping and incorrect media portrayals of disabled people, by mainstream and social media, influence the views of nondisabled people, including employers (Orcan, 2019; Woodley & Metzger, 2012; Workbridge, 2020;Young, 2014). Yet the contribution disabled people might make in the workplace could be valuable if fully realised (Bealing et al., 2017; Workbridge, 2020; Workbridge / Allen & Clarke, 2016). Research highlights several benefits to employing disabled people, which can positively impact them and those with whom they work. Advantages include: the knowledge and experience disabled people can bring to workplaces, through increased diversity (Te Pou, 2013), along with their cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1980); opportunities to positively influence workmates (Balandin et al., 2006; Walker & Bryant, 2013); and savings to the taxpayer through reduced income support payments (Bealing et al., 2017; Workbridge / Allen & Clarke, 2016).

The literature on employment for disabled people largely focuses on barriers and some enablers to mainstream employment, however, those relevant to disabled people working in the disability sector have received less attention. Several of the same obstacles to work in mainstream employment settings also exist in the disability sector, that is, work areas established to meet the support needs of disabled people, in government and NGOs (Manaf et al., 2019). However, despite a range of sometimes difficult barriers faced by several disabled research participants, it was possible for many of them to resist oppression and utilise their individual agency to assert their rights and navigate the obstacles to participation encountered in all employment settings.

Findings relating to family inclusion, identity, education, and general employment barriers, along with those specific to the disability sector, have resulted from this research. Examples include: positive bias towards nondisabled people; dismissive attitudes which disregard the skills and qualifications of disabled people, who are often rejected as incapable (Davies & Butler, 2022; Te Pou, 2013); and reluctance to provide accommodations or adjustments to enable successful completion of tasks via alternate methods (Workbridge, 2020). Moreover, disabled people may be disincentivised to seek work in all employment sectors due to accessibility issues (MSD, 2016) and significant or total loss of income support, along with requirements to pay secondary tax. Additional challenges relating to individual situations and contexts may also exist.

There are several advantages to employing disabled people in their sector, which can positively impact them, and others. Benefits include the knowledge and skills disabled people can bring to disability sector workplaces, through reflecting the communities served by such workplaces (Davies & Butler, 2022), including their cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1980), accrued through lived disability experience and the positive impact of modelling what is possible to other disabled people (Balandin et al., 2006; Workbridge, 2020). A number of resources can support employment pathways, such as volunteering (Yanay-Ventura, 2019), supported employment (Agovino et al., 2019), and increased funding for workplace accommodations (Delva et al., 2021), possibly through greater eligibility to support funds, and the EGL initiative, once this is available nationwide.

Framing discussion within a social model perspective, alongside Bourdieu's theory of practice, provides a structure for the analysis and discussion of barrier mitigation. It appears that disability sector employment continues to discriminate in favour of nondisabled employees. However, many disabled people can and do resist the power held by others, and exert their individual agency to advantage in certain situations.

Filling the Research Gap

This thesis fills a gap in the literature specifically relating to employment barriers and enablers experienced by disabled people in relation to the New Zealand disability sector, which has so far received very little attention (Te Pou, 2013). The Te Pou research represented the only study available which specifically examined the experiences of disabled New Zealanders working in a particular section of the disability sector.

The review of literature relating to barriers and enablers to work for disabled people illustrated that major gaps exist regarding experiences of disabled people seeking employment and promotion in their own sector (Te Pou, 2013). However, other studies that reflect similar aims to those of this research are acknowledged. These studies include some broad discussion of disability leadership in Australasia (Todd, 2018), and a report calling for research into the place of disabled people in the Australian disability sector (Davies & Butler, 2022).

Significance of Research

The aims of this research were to profile the disability sector as an employment field requiring attention, highlight suggestions from disabled and nondisabled participants about ways in which barriers might be addressed, and suggest employment enablers that may potentially promote leadership and management of the field by disabled people.

Although the social model of disability has been in existence since the late 1980s, and is generally accepted by governments, NGOs, and disabled people as a liberating force for emancipation, it appears to have had little effect on rates of employment for disabled jobseekers. The social model approaches disabled people as a homogeneous group, all confronted by the same socially constructed barriers and negative attitudes (Oliver, 1990b) and such perceptions may partly explain why disabled people are often stereotyped. Thus, rather than looking at the individual abilities and creativities many disabled people can bring to a range of workplaces, the employment of disabled people may be regarded by employers as a problem beyond their ability to resolve. The social model does not recognise impairment as a disabling factor. However, by acknowledging impairment together with other forms of embodied difference, this research highlights the point that oppression on the basis of disability is not experienced equally by disabled people (Hickey & Wilson, 2017). Moreover, the criticality of having, and knowing how to deploy, individual agency (Bourdieu, 1980) is emphasised as a means to manage many of the barriers to employment encountered by disabled people. Thus, this research contributes to theory by highlighting the importance of the inclusion of the everyday experiences of impairment and disability as key competencies for employment in the disability sector, illustrates the importance of both mitigating and removing structural barriers, and focuses attention on the criticality of self-determination, to enable disabled people to make choices about the trajectory of their lives, and their sector.

While this research also contributes to that of many others relating to barriers and enablers to mainstream employment (Ameri et al., 2015; Fadyl et al., 2022; ODI, 2023b), the theoretical framework provided by the social model and Bourdieu’s concepts blends the analysis of barriers and enablers to provide a unique insight into the value of consumer leadership and management of a sector established to serve disabled people. The present research fills some gaps in the New Zealand literature relating to employment barriers and enablers associated with employment for disabled people generally and recommends strategies to support access to the disability sector in particular. This thesis proposes that social model thinking be extended to acknowledge embodiment of impairment as a disabler, and include individual agency as an enabler, to produce a greater understanding of the lived experience of disabled people. Rather than pathologising disability, adjustments can be achieved by situating disabled people as proactive agents of change for themselves.

Suggestions for Further Research

This research has highlighted the significant role of the disability sector as a provider of employment for its consumers. While the study provides some insights into the ambitions of many relating to employment within their own sector, it is limited in its capacity to comprehensively account for the full range of experiences of disabled people when seeking work or promotion. The present study was limited by the age range of participants, and did not explore the experiences of self-employed disabled people. The small sample size means that the research is not generalisable, and neither does it enable a detailed analysis of intersectionality. Furthermore, it is recognised that participant narratives are influenced by their own assumptions and motivations, which reflect those stories they are willing to share.

Despite several attempts to recruit a wide diversity of participants, the study did not include narratives from Māori to provide cultural and contextual depth, and few government sector organisations took part.

During recruitment of disabled participants in particular, the researcher was mindful of the number and scope of research projects underway with disabled people, and the fatigue this can engender in many disabled people frequently approached for views they may suspect make no material difference to improving their lives.

A number of suggestions for further research have been identified by the present study, which include: (1) investigating ways to include the voices of disabled students at primary, secondary, and tertiary educational levels; (2) identifying ways to ensure a high degree of digital literacy is obtained and maintained by disabled people, to enhance positive educational and employment outcomes; (3) exploring the impacts of type and degree of impairment on successful employment outcomes, including the timing of disclosure for those with unseen limitations; (4) identifying ways in which both systemic and individual obstacles might be addressed, to enable disabled people to achieve equality with other citizens with respect to employment; (5) consideration of the ways in which neurodiversity can impact functional, occupational barriers to employment; (6) documenting the impacts of the EGL initiative, including the training requirements for disabled people to manage personalised budgets, the impact on their employment opportunities, and how much funding is absorbed by third-party providers; (7) investigating ways in which the current inequities existing in benefit abatement and across different funding support models for disabled people might be mitigated; (8) exploring the experiences of self-employed disabled people; (9) revealing the ways in which intersectionality can impact the employment of disabled people; (10) documenting the damage caused to the mental health of disabled people over a lifetime, by the often relentless and negative attitudes and portrayals of disability by the media and the impact on the ways in which disabled people are viewed by many in society.

Research in areas such as these may enhance the lives of disabled people and facilitate their greater participation in all settings, including employment.

Having established the background to the study, this chapter will next consider the research question, the associated objectives, and whether these have been met.

Findings Derived from the Research Question and Objectives

The question addressed by the study was: what are the barriers, opportunities and factors for employment success experienced by disabled people working, or wishing to work, in the New Zealand disability sector? The aims of the study were achieved by working with a small but focused group consisting of disabled jobseekers and employees and largely nondisabled people working in government and NGO disability-related policy, advocacy, and/or service provision roles. The information generated included descriptions of employment of disabled people in the disability sector, enabling development of theory and analysis of issues identified. The objectives set at the beginning of this research, together with the relevant findings and recommendations, are highlighted next.

Objective One – Identify the Impact of Family, Identity, and Education on the Employment Trajectory of Disabled People

The inclusion and support of disabled children within their families positively influences their ability to build confidence and become motivated to manage their own lives (Gibson & Teachman, 2012). A positive early start can also assist disabled children to build resilience, and develop the competence required to insist upon solutions to those barriers which can be mitigated or removed, and the lateral thinking skills to construct alternative solutions to those obstacles which may be insurmountable. The present study finds that it is necessary for disabled children and youth to experience both success and failure, in order to build their resilience, gain confidence, and exercise self-determination to achieve personal goals.

The further construction of knowledge through the primary habitus (Bourdieu, 1990), based on positive and negative familial influences, critically impacts the development of identity, including the self-esteem and determination required to obtain the support necessary to achieve future goals. Disability is a social construct (Supple & Agbenyega, 2015), impairment is nevertheless a corporeal experience (Paterson & Hughes, 1999). While many disabled people are skilled at representing themselves in whatever ways they believe are likely to yield the most positive outcomes which meet the requirements of a given situation (Foot & Hook, 2019), the ways in which disabled research participants positioned themselves regarding disability language and identity were diverse. Choices about whether or not to disclose personal information, including that relating to impairment, signified demonstrable development of autonomy. Such choices were reported by those with unseen impairments as frequently being made within one day, depending on a range of circumstances and whether or not disclosure was expedient to the particular situation (Evans, 2017). The narratives of some participants with progressive impairment and those with unseen impairments suggested that they may have internalised some adverse attitudes, for instance, those prevalent in the mainstream and social media (Ford & MacNeill, 2017; Young, 2014), leading to pressure to 'pass as normal'. However, participants with discernible limitations tended to adopt a 'disability pride’ approach to disability identity, which left them free to identify as disabled, without necessarily having to go into detail with others. A social model perspective might criticise this identity management as failure to break the causal linkage between impairment and disability, reinforcing a medicalised view of disability, by shifting the focus away from the political basis of structural and environmental barriers, which remain the predominant cause of disability (Barnes & Oliver, 1993; Danieli &

Wheeler, 2006; Oliver, 1990a). However, it is quite possible for disabled people to support social model principles, while simultaneously reducing the perceived impacts of their impairment on employment (Wheeler, 2004).

The ability to transform knowledge and skills into capital begins with education. However, limited educational opportunities can result in reduced access to social and economic participation through employment, since disabled youth in New Zealand are twice as likely to be unemployed as their peers (Carroll et al., 2018). Moreover, physical and attitudinal barriers can adversely complicate and negatively impact the lives of disabled youth (Malhotra & Rowe, 2014). The major barriers negotiated by study participants in the educational field tended to be attitudinal. Some of the less favourable experiences reported indicate that regular disability responsiveness training, developed and facilitated by disabled people, would benefit teaching staff and ultimately disabled students at all educational levels. While the support of individuals who provided accommodations within the tertiary system was essential to those disabled participants who required reasonable accommodations, it was notable that such support was tenuous since it was heavily dependent on the assistance of just one person in each case. Nevertheless, disabled research participants who challenged the hegemony operating within the educational field to assert their individual rights ultimately achieved the accommodations they required.

This study finds that listening to and including the voices of disabled students in planning prior to enrolment and throughout the educational journey, is critical for the development of inclusive educational policies and practices to improve access and accountability (Carroll et al., 2018; Supple & Agbenyega, 2015). Direct involvement by disabled students themselves is essential to develop and drive these inclusive policies and practices. The lived experience of students with impairments who experience additional forms of intersecting disadvantage can provide legitimate voices to guide the development of universally designed educational policies and practices, while also addressing individual needs.

Family life, identity, and education have considerable impact on the shaping of the lives of disabled people. The building of resilience and self-determination are critical to meet the inevitable barriers to gaining, retaining, and being promoted at work. By employing both the social model of disability (Oliver, 1990b, 2013) and Bourdieu's theory of practice (Bourdieu, 1977, 1980, 1986), the present study highlights the significance for disabled people of being able to recognise and manage structural and attitudinal barriers, and deploy their individual agency to advocate for themselves, in areas such as education and employment throughout life. Such people may be more likely to succeed than those who view disability-related barriers as unconquerable.

Objective Two – Outline and Discuss the Barriers to Employment Experienced by Disabled New Zealanders, Generally and those Pertinent to the Disability Sector

It is difficult for many disabled people to gain and retain work, due to a number of structural and attitudinal barriers (Fadyl et al., 2022). Obstacles such as benefit abatement levels and secondary tax, can demotivate those disabled people wishing to work. Moreover, inequity exists between disability-related funding models which may provide preferential support to some disabled people over others. Disparities reported by disabled research participants included differences between people in receipt of income support through MSD, those receiving compensation from ACC, and people involved in EGL trials.

The majority of employer-related barriers in all sectors reported by disabled participants were directly linked to adverse employer attitudes (Bonaccio et al., 2020; Kaye et al., 2011). It appears that many employers may be basing their hiring decisions on incorrect assumptions of incapability, rather than reviewing the abilities of disabled jobseekers along with other candidates. However, several disabled and nondisabled research participants in this study pointed out that any lack of capability is often attributable to access issues relating to a range of educational and other barriers (Manaf et al., 2019).

Given the prevalence of negative employer attitudes across all employment settings (Ameri et al., 2015; Baker et al., 2018), access to regular disability responsiveness training, developed and facilitated by disabled people, could assist to address the reluctance experienced by some employers. Moreover, the purposeful creation of opportunities for employers and disabled jobseekers to meet may enable them to build social capital through making connections leading to greater understanding of one another. Familiarity through establishing common ground could lead to offers of employment to disabled jobseekers, resulting in opportunities for them to acquire cultural and economic capital. Increased numbers of disabled people in the workforce may also promote a greater understanding between disabled and nondisabled people, including comfort with disclosure by disabled employees (Adams & Oldfield, 2012).

Rather than including questions about impairment at the job application stage, this study finds that employers could consider approaching the provision of impairment-related accommodations once a job has been offered and accepted. Discussion of such issues at this stage would ensure disabled people are not screened out of contention for employment when submitting applications. It may also be helpful for disabled jobseekers to take the initiative to review the specifications for given roles in light of any obvious functional limitations, and be prepared to discuss these during job interviews, to assuage any doubts in the minds of employers. Willingness to identify ways in which tasks could be done differently to achieve desired results demonstrates motivation, capability, and planning, and highlights lateral thinking skills.

Disabled study participants advised that they experienced at least as much difficulty acquiring employment in the disability sector as in any other field of employment, and this view was acknowledged by some of the employers participating in this research. It was recognised by these employers that their peers often reference preconceived notions of incapability when considering whether or not to employ disabled people (Baker et al., 2018; Von Schrader et al., 2014).

Those disabled research participants who did gain work in the disability sector tended to be restricted to largely administrative positions, reducing their access to the social capital required to gain promotion within the sector. Lack of access to such opportunities implies a level of ableism and discrimination evident within the disability field, which echoes social influences, based on the disabled/nondisabled binary (Jammaers et al., 2019). Thus, it appears that ableism in the New Zealand disability sector may represent a major barrier to disabled people gaining and retaining jobs, and accessing promotion. Indeed, the sector currently excludes many qualified disabled people in favour of nondisabled people who do not possess the key qualifier of disability, but nevertheless expect to retain their status and control within the sector (Disabled Leadership Now, 2022). While employment marginalisation is accepted by some disabled individuals and their families who may be fearful of loss of services, disabled participants in this study felt they were qualified and entitled to become the authors and practitioners of policies and programmes designed for their use (Branfield, 1998).

An apparent preference for placing people with less discernible impairments in voluntary and paid positions was raised by several disabled participants. Many agreed that disability sector employers may choose to employ only those individuals with unseen impairments and minimal functional limitations, but which nevertheless entitles them to state they employ disabled people. Thus, disability sector employers may be incentivised to choose people with few functional limitations, requiring little or no financial outlay for accommodations, over those who may be better qualified. Moreover, it is unlikely that people with significant accommodation requirements will be chosen to fill short-term voluntary positions (Crothall, 2004).

Coordination of disability-related work by disabled people across the whole disability sector, including government policies and programmes, was considered to be critically important by disabled research participants, and this view was echoed by most of the nondisabled employers. It was strongly felt that a ‘by disabled people, for disabled people’ approach to leadership and management of the disability sector means leadership and management by disabled people themselves, rather than nondisabled people speaking and acting in their name. The employment of disabled people in all parts of the disability sector would ensure a disability lens is applied to policy and programme development for and by disabled people.

Objective Three – Highlight Enablers to Employment Success in all Sectors

Several enablers to employment have been highlighted by this research, including undertaking voluntary work leading to paid employment (Yanay-Ventura, 2019); supported employment, beginning with job placement (Agovino et al., 2019); and workplace accommodations (Delva et al., 2021). The criticality of developing resilience and confidence to mitigate employment barriers has also been identified.

Access to time-limited voluntary opportunities can assist with the development and growth of social and cultural capital, which can lead to the acquisition of economic capital, and thence to additional opportunities within the labour market (Kulik, 2018; Yanay-Ventura, 2019). Therefore, providing internships with planned pathways to paid employment, may assist to introduce more disabled people into the paid workforce. Once employed, access to on-the-job training and in-work support is of critical importance to ensure disabled people retain employment.

Since many barriers to employing disabled people are economic, especially where workplace accommodations may be required, the ability to utilise funding through personal budgets could enable disabled New Zealanders to enter the voluntary or paid workforce with the tailored support and necessary adaptations required. While such funding should not be used to subsidise the ordinary costs of employment, major benefits may be derived to some significantly disabled people who can access a range of technologies for communication (Hayhoe et al., 2015). Any technological solutions must however be affordable, accessible, and usable. Access to ongoing training is also crucial, in order for disabled people to use the technology and subsequent iterations, for example, updated versions of computer hardware and software (Workbridge, 2020). Funding through EGL could greatly enhance self-determination, choice, and control by disabled people, leading to the ability to utilise individual agency to insist on barrier removal where this is possible and, critically, deploy lateral thinking skills to manage situations where tasks may need to be undertaken differently.

It was suggested by the majority of disabled participants who had experienced supported employment through the Mainstream Programme (prior to its transfer to MSD), that supported employment should be utilised more broadly as a vehicle for a range of disabled people to gain entry to the workforce. Traditional approaches that feature ‘train then place’ employment models are often colloquially referred to by disabled people as ‘training treadmills’, because many people never get past the training and into employment. However, research confirms that the supported employment model of placement first, followed by training and ongoing support, is particularly effective for people with mental distress and people with learning disability, to both gain and retain employment (Rosenthal et al., 2012; Van Dalen, 2018).

The effort made by disabled people themselves is a key determinant of employment success (Saunders et al., 2015; Sundar et al., 2018). Disabled people need to be both assertive to insist on the removal of structural and attitudinal barriers to employment participation, and willing to use their individual agency to find alternative solutions to difficulties encountered when seeking work.

Objective Four – Recommend Strategies for the Practical Application of Research Findings that Ultimately Enable Disabled People to Lead and Manage a Sector that Exists in Their Name

Although the barriers to employment related to negative attitudes and behaviours of employers have been identified as issues for many years, solutions have tended to focus on individuals (Oliver, 2013). Several suggestions for improving the employment chances and opportunities available in the disability sector were provided by both employers and disabled people who participated in this research. Disabled participants felt that solutions needed to come from everyone associated with the disability sector, primarily disabled people themselves, but also government and non-governmental employers. For instance, it was noted that project-focused tasks might be a useful model for the future of work, particularly post-pandemic employment for some disabled people. Such work would be concerned with project deadlines, instead of being overly proscriptive as to start/finish times and numbers of hours worked. There are many benefits to organisations that offer flexible working conditions and practices for all employees (Schur et al., 2014). This approach meets the employer's need for specific pieces of work to be completed to time, while meeting the disabled employee's requirement for flexibility. It was observed by some employers and disabled study participants that the advent of technology provides flexibility for the majority, which potentially enables different ways of working. Moreover, the various assistive technologies available to disabled people can enable some to access employment opportunities that were previously impossible to undertake due to functional limitations. It is acknowledged however that assistive technology itself adds further complexity to the hardware, software, and skillset normally required (Workbridge, 2020). This creates an urgent need for training which must be cost-free and regularly available to disabled people.

A tension exists between offering disabled people overly proscriptive jobs which employers believe must be undertaken in certain ways, and tailoring positions especially for disabled people to fill. However, neither approach works particularly well to ensure disabled people gain and retain employment or are promoted in the workplace. Roles which specify that tasks must be completed in particular ways and in a certain order are not flexible enough to allow for the different ways in which disabled people, with a range of impairment types and degrees of impairment, may need to learn and do the job. Moreover, bespoke roles designed by others who assume what is appropriate for disabled people can stifle creativity and the development and use of lateral thinking skills. Indeed, the proscriptive nature of work is a barrier for many, and could be ameliorated by simply combining tasks for people based on what they can do, rather than on what they may struggle with.

Several research participants spoke of the need for in-work support to assist those disabled people who require this to maintain their employment and eventually seek promotion. NGO employers cited strict contracting arrangements, which do not currently include funding to provide in-work support, as a major barrier to their ability to provide ongoing support. Indeed, many employers pointed out that the provision of such support would save taxpayer funds in the long run, since the alternative is using taxpayer contract funding to arrange several placements for the same person.

Disabled participants in particular suggested more raising of awareness is needed, especially in the area of employment, and several suggested a national disability employment campaign. There was also a good deal of support for transferring the Mainstream Employment

Programme to a disability-led community provider, increasing funding, and broadening eligibility criteria.

Since ACC had initially been intended to cover all disabled people, many research participants suggested this proposal be revisited, in order to ensure greater equity between congenitally disabled people, and those disabled by accident. Finally, the majority of disabled and nondisabled study participants stated that disability sector roles require lived experience of disability as a key attribute, bringing increased legitimacy to a sector that exists to serve disabled people.

The inclusion of more disabled people in disability sector management would not only mean greater numbers of disabled people in employment, but also herald substantial changes to the operation of the sector. Such change could begin with the adoption of EGL principles relating to enhancement of mana, self-determination, and relationship building for and by disabled people. In order to genuinely enshrine EGL principles of 'choice and control', putting disabled people at the helm of their own affairs including through employment, hiring practices will need to change (Disabled Leadership Now, 2022). Moreover, those currently in leadership roles in such organisations, including human resource managers, will need to ensure that organisational recruitment policies and practices include the cultural capital of lived disability experience as a key component of merit in disability sector hiring practices. The inclusion of lived experience of disability as an essential competency would mean disabled people with the required professional qualifications could gain access to greater opportunities to obtain senior-level employment, while those qualified through their extensive disability knowledge and networks could also be considered positively for employment, in order to increase the social and cultural capital within disability sector organisations.

Historically, disability has tended to be perceived as being reducible to a range of environmental barriers, along with adverse attitudes. Together, these factors create and reinforce disabling effects. The present research has moved theory forward by questioning the exclusion of impairment as a key disabling factor within the social model. Including impairment alongside other forms of embodied difference, such as gender and ethnicity, recognises that oppression on the basis of disability is not experienced equally by disabled people, who have multiple identities that often go unseen by nondisabled people (Hickey & Wilson, 2017). Impairment includes effects that can disadvantage and disable people differentially. The inclusion of individual agency as a barrier mitigation tool illustrates the various ways in which disabled people manage both impairment and the structural barriers which impact their access to employment opportunities. Thus, by applying Bourdieu’s theory of practice (Bourdieu, 1977, 1980, 1986), this thesis overcomes the difficulties associated with structure and agency that are underdeveloped within the social model. Rather than merely describing the tangible, and symbolic structures as barriers to be overcome, disabled people can build capitals that can be accumulated through individual knowledge and skill development to advance in employment. The present study provides a nuanced approach to examining the lived experiences of disabled people, particularly those relating to education and employment, an approach that acknowledges their deployment of individual agency to challenge structural hegemony and overcome many disabling effects within the field of employment.

Recommendations

Based on the findings of this research, recommendations are now provided for consideration by the government and NGO arms of the New Zealand disability sector. Many of the recommendations apply equally to mainstream employment settings, including the commercial sector.

Recommendations for Government

1. Provide funding for:
    - annual disability responsiveness training, developed and facilitated by disabled people, as part of regular teacher training and development, and within Public Service and NGO disability sector organisations
    - opportunities for disabled people and employers to meet to make connections, as part of vocational service contracts with NGOs
    - technology training by and for disabled people, to keep up to date with technological changes that enhance their employment prospects and their lives
    - in-work support as part of vocational service contracts
    - national disability employment awareness-raising, possibly as part of a reinvigorated 'Think Differently' campaign, led and managed by disabled people.
2. Increase and transfer the funding, management, and delivery of the Mainstream Programme to a disability-led community provider.
3. Broaden current eligibility criteria for ACC support to include all disabled people.
4. Undertake a thorough review of disability-related funding alongside the disability community, who can provide their lived experiences of the ways in which the current funding landscape has become difficult to navigate.
5. Ensure that the Enabling Good Lives initiative includes provision for disabled people to use their personal budgets to support their voluntary or paid employment, but not for ordinary employment costs.
6. Include a disability employment clause in all government contracts with disability sector NGOs, providing preferential funding to organisations who employ high numbers of disabled people, especially in leadership and management positions.

7. Include lived experience of disability as a key competency for work relating to disabled people, in strategic and business planning, in position descriptions, and in induction and ongoing training, to encourage greater participation by disabled people in the Public Service workforce.
8. Promote the employment and retention of disabled people in the Public Service, and require the Public Service Commission to annually publish disaggregated data on the employment of disabled people in the Public Service workforce.
9. Remove the present requirement to disclose disability and impairment in online pre-employment forms. Rather, discuss any needs for workplace accommodations with new recruits during induction.

Recommendations for NGOs

1. Provide internships with planned pathways to employment, in order to introduce more disabled people into the disability sector workforce.
2. Provide and promote on-the-job training and in-work support to disabled staff.
3. Include lived experience of disability as a key competency for work relating to disabled people, in strategic and business planning, in position descriptions, and in induction and ongoing training, to encourage greater participation by disabled people in the disability sector workforce.
4. Investigate flexible working options with disabled staff, such as project-based work, working from home, and combining disparate tasks together to create accessible employment opportunities.
5. Employ experienced disabled people in leadership and management positions in all areas of the disability sector.

Conclusion

This study of employment barriers and enablers to work for disabled people seeking work or promotion in the New Zealand disability sector, undertaken by a disabled researcher, provides unique insights into a group which tends to be marginalised and largely disenfranchised from their sector, particularly from leadership and management of that sector. The resulting thesis has given voice to disabled research participants, and those of nondisabled employers. It differs from the majority of research into employment barriers and enablers, which tend to be restricted to mainstream employment options for disabled people. Analyses and interpretations have resulted from the knowledge and experience of participants.

This study was unique in its examination of barriers and enablers to work for disabled people in the disability sector, particularly since it also highlights the criticality of self-determination by disabled people as a key enabler. Bourdieu’s theory of practice has led to a deeper understanding of the disability sector field of power, in an area touched on but not addressed by previous research. Despite a range of access barriers to education and employment, many disabled people deploy their individual agency to navigate such challenges. The New Zealand disability sector could greatly benefit the people they support, by assimilating disability into the culture of the sector field, to maximise the importance of the key cultural capital of living a disabled life. This may facilitate the construction of a logic of practice to act as the ‘principal locus’ (Bourdieu, 1990), which could be reflected in organisational policies and procedures. Many disabled people would like to extend the often-quoted mantra of 'choice and control' to include power, with respect to their leadership and management of a sector that exists in their name. Just as people in other sectors of society have done before us, it is now our time to lead and manage the sector which exists to serve us, with the mandate and guidance of fellow disabled people. The employment of far greater numbers of disabled people in disability sector leadership and management could herald the beginning of real change, not only to employment practices, but also to the fundamental operation of the New Zealand disability sector.

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Appendix A: Letter seeking permission to recruit participants

MASSEY UNIVERSITY
TE KUNENGA KI PŪREHUROA
UNIVERSITY OF NEW ZEALAND
COLLEGE OF HEALTH
TE KURA HAUORA TANGATA

Date

Dear …….
My name is Pam MacNeill. I am a PhD student at Massey University undertaking research about employment opportunities for disabled people in the New Zealand disability sector.

As part of the study I would like to talk to both government and non-governmental disability sector employers. I am writing to invite staff of your organisation to participate in an individual interview to explore their experiences of recruiting disabled people to the disability sector. I seek your assistance to pass on the attached flyer and information sheet to potential participants. If there are people within your organisation who are interested in the study and would like more information, they can contact me directly or I can provide a presentation at a meeting of relevant staff.

I would be extremely grateful if you could forward the request for participation via your networks.

This research has been approved by the Massey University Human Ethics Committee *Southern A, Approval SOA 19/08.* Should you have any questions please contact me on [redacted] or via email to [redacted]

You can also contact my research supervisor, Dr Suzanne Phibbs, School of Health Sciences, Massey University, e-mail: S.R.Phibbs@massey.ac.nz, Phone: +64 6951 8349.

Yours Sincerely

Pam MacNeill
PhD Student Researcher

Appendix B: Flyer – government and NGO

Massey University

Do you work in the government or non-government disability sector?

Are you interested in sharing your views on employment issues for disabled people in the New Zealand disability Sector?

The study aims to:

- Investigate employment opportunities and barriers to work, highlight the reported success factors
- Identify strategies for the practical application of research findings and enable disabled people to achieve greater influence in a sector which exists in their name

If you are interested in participating in a one hour face-to-face interview, please contact Pam MacNeill (PhD student) on [redacted] or [redacted]

This project has been reviewed and approved by the Massey University Human Ethics Committee: Southern A, Approval SOA 19/08.

Appendix C: Flyer for focus group – disabled people

Massey University

What do you think about the employment of disabled people in the New Zealand disability Sector?

The study aims to:

- Investigate employment opportunities and barriers to work, highlight the reported success factors
- Identify strategies for the practical application of research findings and enable disabled people to achieve greater influence in a sector which exists in their name

If you self-identify as a disabled person, work in the disability sector or have unsuccessfully tried to get work in the sector during the past five years, I would like to invite you to participate in a small focus group in Wellington.

Please contact Pam MacNeill (PhD student) on [redacted] or [redacted]

This project has been reviewed and approved by the Massey University Human Ethics Committee: Southern A, Approval SOA 19/08.

Appendix D: Flyer for individual interviews – disabled people

Massey University

What do you think about the employment of disabled people in the New Zealand disability Sector?

The study aims to:

- Investigate employment opportunities and barriers to work, highlight the reported success factors
- Identify strategies for the practical application of research findings and enable disabled people to achieve greater influence in a sector which exists in their name

If you self-identify as a disabled person, work in the disability sector or have unsuccessfully tried to get work in the sector during the past five years, I would like to invite you to participate in a one hour face-to-face interview with me.

Please contact Pam MacNeill (PhD student) on
[redacted] or [redacted]

This project has been reviewed and approved by the Massey University Human Ethics Committee: Southern A, Approval SOA 19/08.

Appendix E: Focus group information sheet

MASSEY UNIVERSITY
TE KUNENGA KI PŪREHUROA
UNIVERSITY OF NEW ZEALAND
COLLEGE OF HEALTH
TE KURA HAUORA TANGATA

Employment opportunities for disabled people in the New Zealand disability sector

Information sheet for disabled people – Focus group

This information sheet is available as an electronic Word document, in easy-read and in braille. Please contact the researcher at [redacted] or phone [redacted] to request one of these formats.

My name is Pam MacNeill, I am a disabled PhD student enrolled in the School of Health Sciences at Massey University in Palmerston North. I am the Deputy Chair of the Workbridge Board of Management and owner of Disability Responsiveness New Zealand Ltd., which provides disability responsiveness training and capability building resources. You are invited to participate in this research which focuses on the employment opportunities, barriers and success factors experienced by disabled people in the disability sector.

Purpose and aims of the study

Disabled people represent a large section of the total New Zealand population. One sector in which they might be expected to have access to a range of employment opportunities is the disability sector. This study aims to investigate employment opportunities and barriers to work in the disability sector, highlight success factors, identify strategies for the practical application of research findings and enable disabled people to achieve greater influence in a sector which exists in their name. This will have positive economic and other implications for this group, along with reduced welfare benefit payments for the state. For the purposes of this study, disabled people are those who self-identify as having physical, sensory or intellectual impairments and those who experience mental health issues.

Research procedures

This research will also invite both government and non-governmental disability sector employers to participate. However, this invitation to participate is for disabled people, who are either currently working in the disability sector or who have unsuccessfully tried to gain employment in the sector during the past five years, to participate in a small focus group. This will be digitally recorded. The focus group will discuss a range of topics relating to employment in the disability sector. This will be held at an accessible hotel in Wellington for up to three hours, including refreshment and rest periods. A further hour is requested of you to review the discussion summary document from the focus group. This summary will be used as the basis of a semi-structured interview schedule.

Storage of research information

All digital data will be stored securely on two external hard-drives and in the cloud in a password protected folder on Dropbox. This will be available to me and my supervisors only. The hard-drives and written consent forms will be stored in a locked filing cabinet at my home. I am the only person who will have access to the filing cabinet. After the required waiting period (five years), all documents and digital files will be destroyed.

Participant rights

You will be advised of your rights as a participant in this research and asked to give written consent before proceeding with the focus group or interview. You are under no obligation to accept this invitation. If you do decide to participate, you have the right to:

- decline to answer any particular question;
- withdraw from the study prior to signing the release of the focus group transcript authorisation form;
- ask any questions about the study at any time during participation;
- provide information on the understanding that your name will not be used unless you give permission to the researcher;
- be given access to a summary of the project findings when it is concluded.
- ask for the recorder to be turned off at any time during the interview.

Confidentiality of information will be protected throughout by the following measures:

While the research information outlined in the information sheets may be available to all members of the New Zealand disability sector, including disabled people and both government and non-governmental disability sector employers, participation is voluntary and no one will know the identity of individual participants other than the researcher.

i. The recorded interviews will only be heard by the researcher.
ii. All transcribed data will have identifying characteristics removed and pseudonyms provided.
iii. Material from the transcripts may be used in the final report and academic publications. However, all information will be presented with no names specified. Every endeavour will be made by the researcher to protect the identity of participants, confidentiality cannot be guaranteed, due to the small size of the disability community.

As this research forms the basis of my PhD thesis it is a supervised piece of work. If there are any concerns about the research, they can be conveyed to my supervisors:

Student Researcher	Research Supervisors		
Pam MacNeill [redacted] [redacted]	Dr. Suzanne Phibbs School of Health Sciences Massey University +64 6951 8349 S.R.Phibbs@massey.ac.nz	Dr. Gretchen Good School of Health Sciences Massey University +64 6 9516510 g.a.good@massey.ac.nz	Dr. Polly Yeung School of Social Work Massey University 06 3569099 Ext. 83514 p.yeung@massey.ac.nz

This project has been reviewed and approved by the Massey University Human Ethics Committee: Southern A, Application 19/08. If you have any concerns about the conduct of this research, please contact Dr Lesley Batten, Chair, Massey University Human Ethics Committee: Southern A, telephone + 646 356 9099 x 85094, email humanethicsoutha@massey.ac.nz.

Appendix F: Individual interviews information sheet

MASSEY UNIVERSITY
TE KUNENGA KI PŪREHUROA
UNIVERSITY OF NEW ZEALAND
COLLEGE OF HEALTH
TE KURA HAUORA TANGATA

Employment opportunities for disabled people in the New Zealand disability sector

Information sheet for disabled people – Individual Interviews

This information sheet is available as an electronic Word document, in easy-read and in braille. Please contact the researcher at [redacted] or phone [redacted] to request one of these formats.

My name is Pam MacNeill, I am a disabled PhD student enrolled in the School of Health Sciences at Massey University in Palmerston North. I am the Deputy Chair of the Workbridge Board of Management and owner of Disability Responsiveness New Zealand Ltd, which provides disability responsiveness training and capability building resources. You are invited to participate in this research which focuses on the employment opportunities, barriers and success factors experienced by disabled people in the disability sector.

Purpose and aims of the study

Disabled people represent a large section of the total New Zealand population. One sector in which they might be expected to have access to a range of employment opportunities is the disability sector. This study aims to investigate employment opportunities and barriers to work in the disability sector, highlight success factors, identify strategies for the practical application of research findings and enable disabled people to achieve greater influence in a sector which exists in their name. This will have positive economic and other implications for this group, along with reduced welfare benefit payments for the state. For the purposes of this study, disabled people are those who self-identify as having physical, sensory or intellectual impairments and those who experience mental health issues.

Research procedures

This research will also invite both government and non-governmental disability sector employers to participate. However, this invitation to participate is for disabled people, who are either currently working in the disability sector or who have unsuccessfully tried to gain employment in the sector during the past five years, to participate in an individual interview. This will be digitally recorded. It is anticipated that interviews will take about one hour of your time. Up to a further two hours is requested of you, to review your interview transcript. Each interview will be conducted at a mutually agreeable time and location.

Storage of research information

All digital data will be stored securely on two external hard-drives and in the cloud in a password protected folder on Dropbox. This will be available to me and my supervisors only.

The hard-drives and written consent forms will be stored in a locked filing cabinet at my home. I am the only person who will have access to the filing cabinet. After the required waiting period (five years), all documents and digital files will be destroyed.

Participant rights

You will be advised of your rights as a participant in this research and asked to give written consent before proceeding with the focus group or interview. You are under no obligation to accept this invitation. If you do decide to participate, you have the right to:

- decline to answer any particular question;
- withdraw from the study prior to signing the release of the interview transcript authorisation form;
- ask any questions about the study at any time during participation;
- provide information on the understanding that your name will not be used unless you give permission to the researcher;
- be given access to a summary of the project findings when it is concluded.
- ask for the recorder to be turned off at any time during the interview.

Confidentiality of information will be protected throughout by the following measures:

While the research information outlined in the information sheets may be available to all members of the New Zealand disability sector, including disabled people and both government and non-governmental disability sector employers, participation is voluntary and no one will know the identity of individual participants other than the researcher.

i. The recorded interviews will only be heard by the researcher.
ii. All transcribed data will have identifying characteristics removed and pseudonyms provided.
iii. Material from the transcripts may be used in the final report and academic publications. However, all information will be presented with no names specified. Although every endeavour will be made by the researcher to protect the identity of participants, confidentiality cannot be guaranteed, due to the small size of the disability community.

As this research forms the basis of my PhD thesis it is a supervised piece of work. If there are any concerns about the research, they can be conveyed to my supervisors:

Student Researcher	Research Supervisors		
Pam MacNeill [redacted]	Dr. Suzanne Phibbs School of Health Sciences Massey University +64 6951 8349 S.R.Phibbs@massey.ac.nz	Dr. Gretchen Good School of Health Sciences Massey University +64 6 9516510 g.a.good@massey.ac.nz	Dr. Polly Yeung School of Social Work Massey University 06 3569099 Ext. 83514 p.yeung@massey.ac.nz

This project has been reviewed and approved by the Massey University Human Ethics Committee: Southern A, Application 19/08. If you have any concerns about the conduct of this research, please contact Dr Lesley Batten, Chair, Massey University Human Ethics Committee: Southern A, telephone + 646 356 9099 x 85094, email humanethicsoutha@massey.ac.nz.

Appendix G: Easy Read focus group information sheet

MASSEY UNIVERSITY
TE KUNENGA KI PŪREHUROA
UNIVERSITY OF NEW ZEALAND
COLLEGE OF HEALTH
TE KURA HAUORA TANGATA

Employment opportunities for disabled people in the disability sector

Information sheet for disabled people – Focus group

My name is Pam MacNeill.

I work with disabled people.

I am a student at Massey University.

I want to hear from disabled people who work with other disabled people.

That might mean helping disabled people achieve their rights, or speaking up for disabled people when something is going wrong.

I want to talk to disabled people who do this work now, or have done it in the last five years.

Help with my research

If you are a disabled person and your work is helping other disabled people, I would like to talk to you about your work.

I invite you to come to a small group meeting with other disabled people.

The meeting will be in a hotel in Wellington.

I will ask you about when you would like to meet.

The meeting will be for three hours.

You don't have to come to the meeting if you don't want to.

You don't have to answer all the questions if you don't want to.

You can ask questions if you’re not sure about something I ask you.

I will ask for your permission before I share anything you tell me.

I won't put your name on any information.

I will keep the information safe and only I will be able to read it.

Please telephone me on [redacted]

or email [redacted]

Appendix H: Easy Read individual interviews information sheet

MASSEY UNIVERSITY
TE KUNENGA KI PŪREHUROA
UNIVERSITY OF NEW ZEALAND

COLLEGE OF HEALTH
TE KURA HAUORA TANGATA

Employment opportunities for disabled people in the disability sector

Information sheet for disabled people – Interview

My name is Pam MacNeill.

I work with disabled people.

I am a student at Massey University.

I want to hear from disabled people who work with other disabled people.

That might mean helping disabled people achieve their rights, or speaking up for disabled people when something is going wrong.

I want to talk to disabled people who do this work now, or have done it in the last five years.

Help with my research

If you are a disabled person and your work is helping other disabled people, I would like to meet to talk to you about your work.

I invite you to come and meet me.

I will ask you about when you would like to meet.

The meeting will be for about two hours.

You don't have to come to the meeting if you don't want to.

You don't have to answer all the questions if you don't want to.

You can ask questions if you’re not sure about something I ask you.

I will ask for your permission before I share anything you tell me.

I won't put your name on any information.

I will keep the information safe and only I will be able to read it.

Please telephone me on [redacted]

or email [redacted]

Appendix I: Government disability sector employers – individual interviews information sheet

Employment opportunities for disabled people in the New Zealand disability sector

Information sheet for government disability sector employers – Individual interviews

This information sheet is available as an electronic Word document, in easy-read and in braille. Please contact the researcher at [redacted] or phone [redacted] to request one of these formats.

My name is Pam MacNeill, I am a disabled PhD student enrolled in the School of Health Sciences at Massey University in Palmerston North. I am the Deputy Chair of the Workbridge Board of Management and owner of Disability Responsiveness New Zealand Ltd, which provides disability responsiveness training and capability building resources. You are invited to participate in this research which focuses on the employment opportunities, barriers and success factors experienced by disabled people, who are either currently employed in the New Zealand disability sector, or who have unsuccessfully tried to gain employment in the sector during the past five years.

Purpose and aims of the study

Disabled people represent a large section of the total New Zealand population. One sector in which they might be expected to have access to a range of employment opportunities is the disability sector. This study aims to investigate employment opportunities and barriers to work in the disability sector, highlight success factors, identify strategies for the practical application of research findings and enable disabled people to achieve greater influence in a sector which exists in their name. This will have positive economic and other implications for this group, along with reduced welfare benefit payments for the state. For the purposes of this study, disabled people are those who self-identify as having physical, sensory or intellectual impairments and those who experience mental health issues.

Research procedures

This research will also invite disabled people and non-governmental disability sector employers to participate. However, this invitation is for government employers working in the disability sector, to participate in an individual interview. It is anticipated that interviews will take about one hour of your time. Up to a further two hours is requested of you, to review the interview transcript. Each interview will be digitally recorded and take place at a mutually agreeable time and location.

Storage of research information

All digital data will be stored securely on two external hard-drives and in the cloud in a password protected folder on Dropbox. This will be available to me and my supervisors only. The hard-drives and written consent forms will be stored in a locked filing cabinet at my home. I am the only person who will have access to the filing cabinet. After the required waiting period (five years), all documents and digital files will be destroyed.

Participant rights

You will be advised of your rights as a participant in this research and asked to give written consent before proceeding with the interview. You are under no obligation to accept this invitation. If you do decide to participate, you have the right to:

- decline to answer any particular question;
- withdraw from the study prior to signing the release of the interview transcript authorisation form;
- ask any questions about the study at any time during participation;
- provide information on the understanding that your name will not be used unless you give permission to the researcher;
- be given access to a summary of the project findings when it is concluded.
- ask for the recorder to be turned off at any time during the interview.

Confidentiality of information will be protected throughout by the following measures:

While the research information outlined in the information sheets may be available to all members of the New Zealand disability sector, including disabled people and both government and non-governmental disability sector employers, participation is voluntary and no one will know the identity of individual participants other than the researcher.

i. The recorded interviews will only be heard by the researcher.
ii. All transcribed data will have identifying characteristics removed and pseudonyms provided.
iii. Material from the transcripts may be used in the final report and academic publications. However, all information will be presented with no names specified. Although every endeavour will be made by the researcher to protect the identity of participants, confidentiality cannot be guaranteed, due to the small size of the disability community.

As this research forms the basis of my PhD thesis it is a supervised piece of work. If there are any concerns about the research, they can be conveyed to my supervisors:

Student Researcher	Research Supervisors		
Pam MacNeill [redacted]	Dr. Suzanne Phibbs School of Health Sciences Massey University +64 6951 8349 S.R.Phibbs@massey.ac.nz	Dr. Gretchen Good School of Health Sciences Massey University +64 6 9516510 g.a.good@massey.ac.nz	Dr. Polly Yeung School of Social Work Massey University 06 3569099 Ext. 83514 p.yeung@massey.ac.nz

This project has been reviewed and approved by the Massey University Human Ethics Committee: Southern A, Application 19/08. If you have any concerns about the conduct of this research, please contact Dr Lesley Batten, Chair, Massey University Human Ethics Committee: Southern A, telephone + 646 356 9099 x 85094, email humanethicsoutha@massey.ac.nz.

Appendix J: Non-governmental disability sector employers – individual interviews information sheet

Employment opportunities for disabled people in the New Zealand disability sector

Information sheet for non-governmental disability sector employers – Individual Interviews

This information sheet is available as an electronic Word document, in easy-read and in braille. Please contact the researcher at [redacted] or phone [redacted] to request one of these formats.

My name is Pam MacNeill, I am a disabled PhD student enrolled in the School of Health Sciences at Massey University in Palmerston North. I am the Deputy Chair of the Workbridge Board of Management and owner of Disability Responsiveness New Zealand Ltd, which provides disability responsiveness training and capability building resources. You are invited to participate in this research which focuses on the employment opportunities, barriers and success factors experienced by disabled people, who are either currently employed in the New Zealand disability sector, or who have unsuccessfully tried to gain employment in the sector during the past five years.

Purpose and aims of the study

Disabled people represent a large section of the total New Zealand population. One sector in which they might be expected to have access to a range of employment opportunities is the disability sector. This study aims to investigate employment opportunities and barriers to work in the disability sector, highlight success factors, identify strategies for the practical application of research findings and enable disabled people to achieve greater influence in a sector which exists in their name. This will have positive economic and other implications for this group, along with reduced welfare benefit payments for the state. For the purposes of this study, disabled people are those who self-identify as having physical, sensory or intellectual impairments and those who experience mental health issues.

Research procedures

This research will also invite disabled people and government disability sector employers to participate. However, this invitation to participate is for non-governmental employers working in the disability sector, to participate in an individual interview. It is anticipated that interviews will take about one hour of your time. Up to a further two hours is requested of you, to review the interview transcript. Each interview will be digitally recorded and take place at a mutually agreeable time and location.

Storage of research information

All digital data will be stored securely on two external hard-drives and in the cloud in a password protected folder on Dropbox. This will be available to me and my supervisors only. The hard-drives and written consent forms will be stored in a locked filing cabinet at my home. I am the only person who will have access to the filing cabinet. After the required waiting period (five years), all documents and digital files will be destroyed.

Participant rights

You will be advised of your rights as a participant in this research and asked to give written consent before proceeding with the interview. You are under no obligation to accept this invitation. If you do decide to participate, you have the right to:

- decline to answer any particular question;
- withdraw from the study prior to signing the release of the interview transcript authorisation form;
- ask any questions about the study at any time during participation;
- provide information on the understanding that your name will not be used unless you give permission to the researcher;
- be given access to a summary of the project findings when it is concluded.
- ask for the recorder to be turned off at any time during the interview.

Confidentiality of information will be protected throughout by the following measures:

While the research information outlined in the information sheets may be available to all members of the New Zealand disability sector, including disabled people and both government and non-governmental disability sector employers, participation is voluntary and no one will know the identity of individual participants other than the researcher.

i. The recorded interviews will only be heard by the researcher.
ii. All transcribed data will have identifying characteristics removed and pseudonyms provided.
iii. Material from the transcripts may be used in the final report and academic publications. However, all information will be presented with no names specified. Although every endeavour will be made by the researcher to protect the identity of participants, confidentiality cannot be guaranteed, due to the small size of the disability community.

As this research forms the basis of my PhD thesis it is a supervised piece of work. If there are any concerns about the research, they can be conveyed to my supervisors:

Student Researcher	Research Supervisors		
Pam MacNeill [redacted] [redacted]	Dr. Suzanne Phibbs School of Health Sciences Massey University +64 6951 8349 S.R.Phibbs@massey.ac.nz	Dr. Gretchen Good School of Health Sciences Massey University +64 6 9516510 g.a.good@massey.ac.nz	Dr. Polly Yeung School of Social Work Massey University 06 3569099 Ext. 83514 p.yeung@massey.ac.nz

This project has been reviewed and approved by the Massey University Human Ethics Committee: Southern A, Application 19/08. If you have any concerns about the conduct of this research, please contact Dr Lesley Batten, Chair, Massey University Human Ethics Committee: Southern A, telephone + 646 356 9099 x 85094, email humanethicsoutha@massey.ac.nz.

Appendix K: Focus group consent form

Focus Group Participant Interview Consent Form

Employment opportunities for disabled people in the New Zealand disability sector

I have read, or have had read to me in my first language, and I understand the Information Sheet attached as presented to me. I have had the details of the study explained to me, my questions have been answered to my satisfaction, and I understand that I may ask further questions at any time. I have been given sufficient time to consider whether to participate in this study and I understand participation is voluntary and that I may withdraw from the study at any time.

I understand that I can review a summary of focus group discussion points once this is complete.

1. I understand that I have an obligation to respect the privacy of the other members of the group by not disclosing any personal information that they share during our discussion.
2. I understand that all the information I provide will be kept confidential to the extent permitted by law, and the names of all people in the study will be kept confidential by the researcher.
3. Note: There are limits on confidentiality as there are no formal sanctions on other group participants from disclosing your involvement, identity or what you say to others in the focus group. There are risks in taking part in focus group research and taking part assumes that you are willing to assume those risks.
4. I agree to participate in the focus group under the conditions set out in the information sheet attached.

Declaration by Participant:

I ___________ [print full name]__________ hereby consent to take part in this study.

Signature: ________________________ Date: ________________

This project has been reviewed and approved by the Massey University Human Ethics Committee: Southern B, Application 4000020149. If you have any concerns about the conduct of this research, please contact Dr Rochelle Stewart-Withers, Chair, Massey University Human Ethics Committee: Southern B, telephone 06 356 9099 x 83657, email humanethicsouthb@massey.ac.nz

Appendix L: Individual interview consent form

Individual Interview Consent Form

Employment opportunities for disabled people in the New Zealand disability sector

I have read, or have had read to me in my first language, and I understand the Information Sheet attached as presented to me. I have had the details of the study explained to me, any questions I had have been answered to my satisfaction, and I understand that I may ask further questions at any time. I have been given sufficient time to consider whether to participate in this study and I understand participation is voluntary and that I may withdraw from the study at any time.

I understand that I can review a copy of my interview transcript once this is complete.

1. I agree/do not agree to the interview being sound recorded.
2. I wish/do not wish to have my recordings returned to me.
3. I agree to participate in this study under the conditions set out in the information sheet.

Declaration by Participant:

I ___________ [print full name] _________ hereby consent to take part in this study.

Signature: _______________________ Date: ________________

This project has been reviewed and approved by the Massey University Human Ethics Committee: Southern B, Application 4000020149. If you have any concerns about the conduct of this research, please contact Dr Rochelle Stewart-Withers, Chair, Massey University Human Ethics Committee: Southern B, telephone 06 356 9099 x 83657, email humanethicsouthb@massey.ac.nz

Appendix M: Guide sheet for focus group

Employment opportunities for disabled people in the New Zealand disability sector.

Discussion guide for focus group

Paired introduction exercise

Ask respondents to introduce themselves to each other and then to the group - Name, where they live and family

Ask each group member to advise where they work and at what? If not in work: where they would like to work and at what?

Themes for discussion

Meaning/value of work

Employment goals/dreams

Opportunities for employment in the disability sector

Barriers to employment and/or promotion in the disability sector

Solutions to these barriers – what works

Government action to assist more disabled people into disability sector employment?

Any other areas or themes to discuss - is anything missing?

Appendix N: Interview schedule for disabled people

Employment opportunities for disabled people in the New Zealand disability sector

Interview schedule for disabled people

Opening question

Do you identify as a disabled person, or a person with a disability? (Do you make a distinction between the two terms?)

How apparent would you say your impairment is? Would you say this has impacted on your ability to gain employment? (Prompt: why do you think this?)

Education

What qualifications (if any) did you gain at school or through a polytechnic or university? (Prompt: What kinds of challenges and support did you have in gaining your qualifications).

Work

Tell me about your employment history and how you came to be employed in those positions. (Prompt: Include experience of applying for jobs, attending interviews, use of any disability employment schemes and training in your reflections on your employment history).

What, if any, employment barriers did you encounter to gaining work?
(Prompt: employer concerns about capability, accommodation costs, health & safety, emergency preparedness or negative employer attitudes, transport)

Please tell me about your experience of applying for work in the disability sector.
(Prompts: how many jobs applied for, how did you hear about these jobs?)

Do you believe you had the right skills, experience and qualifications for these positions?
(Prompt: why do you believe this?)

If you have worked in both the regular and disability sectors, what are your thoughts on the similarities and differences between those sectors as a disabled person (Prompt: also ask about differences between countries if the person has worked overseas).

Do you think employment opportunities for disabled people have improved or deteriorated during the past 20 years? In what ways have things changed or stayed the same?

Tell me about your current job? (how was this located, how long in the job, hours worked, job tasks)

(Prompt: why do you like / not like your current job? What is good or bad about it?)

What, if any, job accommodations has your employer provided for you?

(Prompt: adaptations to building, equipment or hours of work)

Tell me about any recent positive or negative experiences you have had at work? (Prompt: Include issues relating to job-type or promotion, pay, training or social interactions).

How appropriate do you believe your salary is for the work you do?

Do you have any thoughts about pay equity for disabled people?

Do you have any successful employment strategies you wish to share with other disabled people?

Closing questions

What is your long term employment goal or dream?

How do you think government policy could be enhanced to create more opportunities for employment of disabled people in the workforce in general and in the disability sector in particular?

Do you have any other comments or suggestions to make regarding employment opportunities, barriers or success factors for disabled people working in, or wishing to work in the disability sector?

Demographic information
Age group?
16 to 20 years?
21 to 30 years?
31 to 40 years?
41 to 50 years?
51 to 60 years?
61 to 65 years?
66 years or older?

Ethnicity?
Māori
New Zealand European
Non-New Zealand European
Pacific Islands Person
Asian
Other – please state ………………………

Gender?
Male
Female
Gender diverse
Other

Appendix O: Interview schedule for government and non-governmental disability sector employers

Employment opportunities for disabled people in the New Zealand disability sector

Interview schedule for government and non-governmental disability sector employers

Opening questions

Please tell me about the main purpose and activities of your organisation?

How is recruitment managed in your organisation?
(Prompt: via recruitment agencies or in-house) (Prompt: if using a recruitment agency, is this a regular or disability-focused agency?)

Employment of disabled people

Tell me about your experience of hiring disabled people. What worked well? (Prompt, involvement of specialist employment agencies or schemes for disabled people)
What were the challenges? (Prompt: capability, accommodation costs, health and safety, work accommodations, emergency preparedness)

Thinking about the disabled people who work in your organisation now and in the past, what preferences for employment flexibility have been identified (part time, full time, working from home, job sharing, accessing training and career progression)? If disabled employees have expressed particular employment needs in one or more of these areas, can you provide an example of how your organisation has accommodated these needs?

Do you think employment opportunities for disabled people have improved or deteriorated during the past 20 years? In what ways have things changed or stayed the same?

Have you had any contact with disability employment agencies and or community groups seeking to place disabled people in your organisation for work experience or employment? If so, what has been your experience of this process (both positives and negatives)?

Do you think some employers may be reluctant to hire disabled people? If so why, if not why not?

What advice would you give to employers who may be reluctant to hire disabled people?

Do you have any positive strategies relating to the employment of disabled people you wish to share with other employers?

Closing questions

How do you think government policy could be enhanced to create more opportunities for employment of disabled people in the disability sector workforce?

Do you have any other comments to make regarding employment opportunities, barriers or success factors for disabled people working in, or wishing to work in, your organisation?

Appendix P: Ethics approval 25 March 2019

MASSEY
UNIVERSITY
TE KUNENGA KI PŪREHUROA
UNIVERSITY OF NEW ZEALAND

Date: 25 March 2019

Dear Pamela MacNeill

Re: Ethics Notification - **SOA 19/08 - Employment opportunities for disabled people in the New Zealand disability sector**

Thank you for the above application that was considered by the Massey University Human Ethics Committee: **Human Ethics Southern A Committee** at their meeting held on **Monday, 25 March, 2019**. On behalf of the Committee I am pleased to advise you that the ethics of your application are approved.

Approval is for three years. If this project has not been completed within three years from the date of this letter, reapproval must be requested.

If the nature, content, location, procedures or personnel of your approved application change, please advise the Secretary of the Committee.

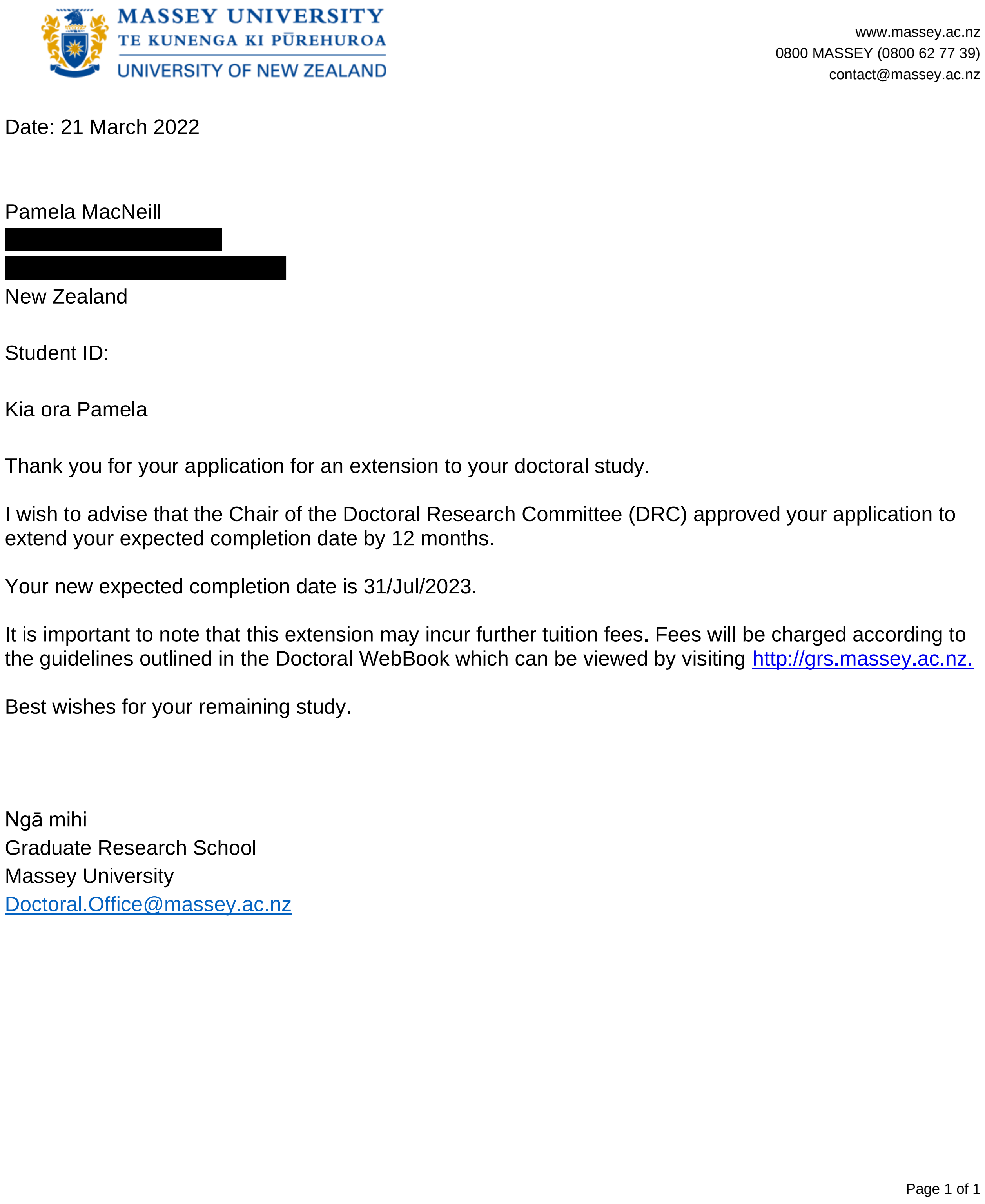
Yours sincerely

C Johnson

Professor Craig Johnson
Chair, Human Ethics Chairs' Committee and Director (Research Ethics)

Research Ethics Office, Research and Enterprise
Massey University, Private Bag 11 222, Palmerston North, 4442, New Zealand **T** 06 951 6841; 06 95106840
E humanethics@massey.ac.nz; animalethics@massey.ac.nz; gtc@massey.ac.nz

Appendix Q: Ethics extension to 31 July 2023



MASSEY UNIVERSITY
TE KUNENGA KI PŪREHUROA
UNIVERSITY OF NEW ZEALAND

www.massey.ac.nz
0800 MASSEY (0800 62 77 39)
contact@massey.ac.nz

Date: 21 March 2022

Pamela MacNeill
[redacted]
New Zealand

Student ID:

Kia ora Pamela

Thank you for your application for an extension to your doctoral study.

I wish to advise that the Chair of the Doctoral Research Committee (DRC) approved your application to extend your expected completion date by 12 months.

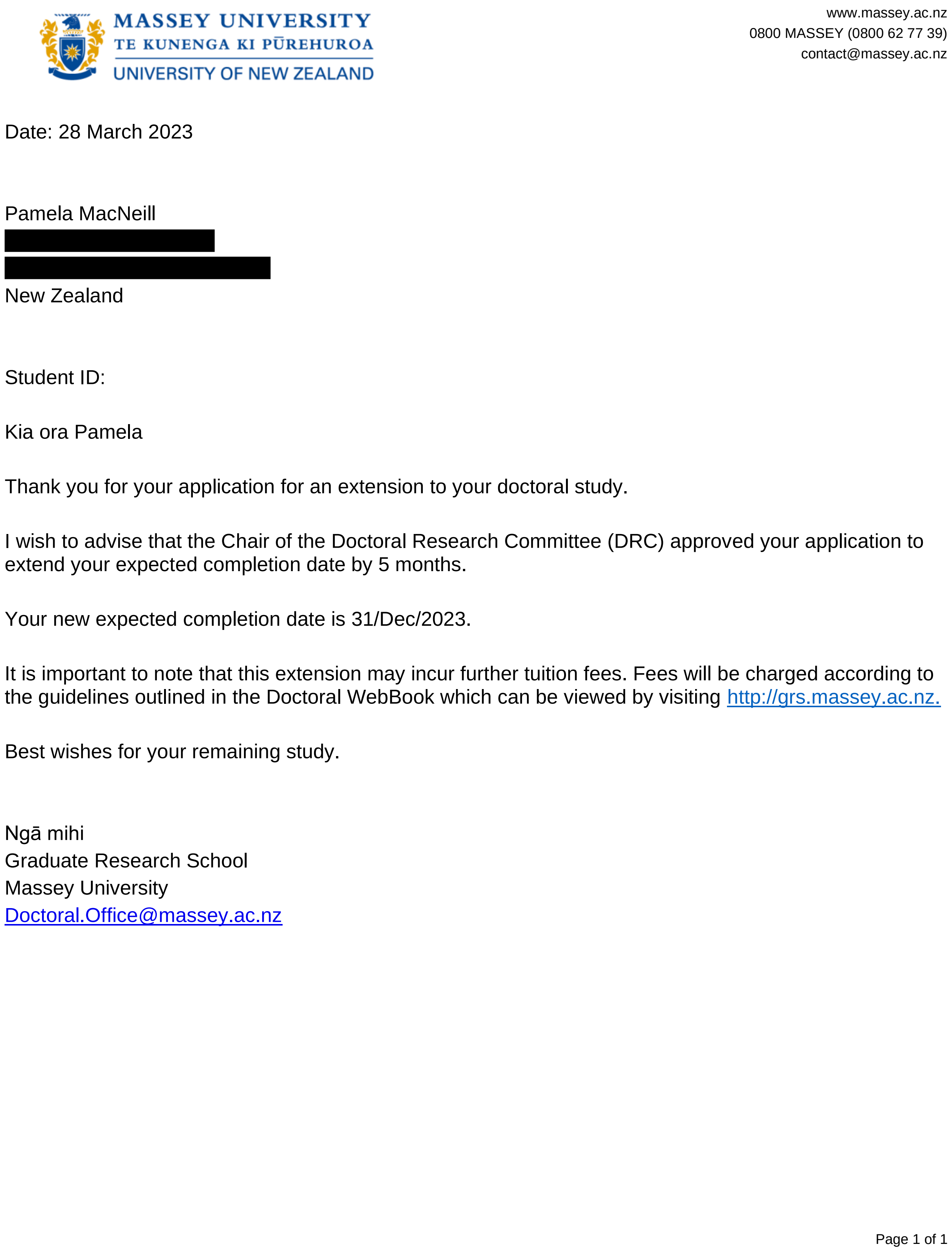
Your new expected completion date is 31/Jul/2023.

It is important to note that this extension may incur further tuition fees. Fees will be charged according to the guidelines outlined in the Doctoral WebBook which can be viewed by visiting http://grs.massey.ac.nz.

Best wishes for your remaining study.

Ngā mihi
Graduate Research School
Massey University
Doctoral.Office@massey.ac.nz

Appendix R: Ethics extension to 31 December 2023



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www.massey.ac.nz
0800 MASSEY (0800 62 77 39)
contact@massey.ac.nz

Date: 28 March 2023

Pamela MacNeill
[redacted]
New Zealand

Student ID:

Kia ora Pamela

Thank you for your application for an extension to your doctoral study.

I wish to advise that the Chair of the Doctoral Research Committee (DRC) approved your application to extend your expected completion date by 5 months.

Your new expected completion date is 31/Dec/2023.

It is important to note that this extension may incur further tuition fees. Fees will be charged according to the guidelines outlined in the Doctoral WebBook which can be viewed by visiting http://grs.massey.ac.nz.

Best wishes for your remaining study.

Ngā mihi
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