

SEND Focus: School toilets teach disabled students that they are "different"

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SEND Focus: Are school toilets making disabled students feel out of place?

The toilet is often considered the most mundane of spaces. Yet, for many of us, school toilets bring back vivid memories, and for disabled children there are particular issues that need to be addressed. School toilets can take on huge significance and may reinforce feelings of being different, inconvenient or unwelcome.

I am part of a project called [Around the Toilet](#), in which we're thinking about gender and disability to ask what makes a safe and accessible toilet space. Disabled pupils often don't have access to the same toilet space as their peers and must instead use a separate accessible toilet. Disabled people have told us that feelings of 'difference' are engendered through the separation of the accessible toilet.

Moreover, the use of the iconic, blue wheelchair user symbol means that those with invisible impairments are often scorned for using the accessible loo by others deeming them not to be "disabled enough".

And that is, of course, when a suitable toilet is available: many find that accessible toilets aren't accessible enough, particularly those requiring a hoist and adult changing bench.

Inaccessible, separated, non-existent, or "policed" toilets teach disabled people several messages, according to the participants of our workshops:

- You are different
- You are an inconvenience
- You are not welcome here

These are clearly not messages that schools want to communicate to disabled students, and luckily there are some simple steps that can help to prevent this.

Our participants suggested that toilet doors should simply indicate what facilities are available (urinals, sanitary bins, handrails, etc.), rather than who is welcome (men, women, disabled people). This would prevent accusations of being in the "wrong" toilet. They also suggested that there should be a much greater range of facilities available: from providing shelves to change colostomy bags, to avoiding strip lighting and noisy hand driers.

It was also raised that the toilet is often the only "private" space that children have access to in school and that providing other private spaces could help all students. For disabled pupils that may require adult assistance to use the toilet – and therefore do not get privacy in the toilet - this could be particularly important.

Teachers have to remember that while the humble school loo may seem straightforward, for disabled students, it can be anything but.

*Dr. Jenny Slater is Senior Lecturer in Education and Disability Studies at Sheffield Hallam University. Around the Toilet is hoping to do more work with schools around their toilet spaces in the future. If your school would be interested to take part, contact: j.slater@shu.ac.uk
Find out more on the project blog, aroundthetoilet.wordpress.com or on Twitter [@cctoilettalk](https://twitter.com/cctoilettalk)*