

Traducido con  DeepL

Inclusive research in higher education: Insights and challenges from the voices of young people with intellectual disabilities and academics

Investigación inclusiva en la universidad: aprendizajes y desafíos desde las voces de jóvenes con discapacidad intelectual y académicas

*Anabel Moriña¹ and **María Rivero

*Department of Didactics and Educational Organisation. University of Seville (Spain)

**Department of Didactics and Educational Organisation. University of Seville (Spain)

Abstract

The article examines the benefits, challenges, and recommendations of conducting inclusive research in a university context, carried out in collaboration between 17 young people with intellectual disabilities and two academics. Photovoice was used with an inclusive approach to explore life inside and outside the university. Data collection was conducted through two focus groups and a research diary. The findings highlight several benefits, including the development of personal autonomy, the improvement of teamwork skills, and the increased credibility of the results obtained. However, significant challenges were identified, such as data selection and effective time management. Based on these findings, recommendations are proposed to optimise future inclusive studies, including extending data collection timelines and improving the planning and organisation of the research process. The conclusions emphasise the importance of the active participation of people with disabilities in research, promoting their inclusion and recognition in all phases of the study.

Keywords: Inclusive research; intellectual disabilities; higher education; photovoice.

¹ **Correspondence:** Anabel Moriña, anabelm@us.es, Faculty of Education Sciences, c/ Pirotecnia, s/n, 41013, Seville.

Resumen

El artículo analiza los beneficios, desafíos y recomendaciones de realizar una investigación inclusiva en un contexto universitario, desarrollada en colaboración entre 17 jóvenes con discapacidad intelectual y dos académicas. Se utiliza la fotovoz con un enfoque inclusivo para explorar la vida dentro y fuera de la universidad. La recogida de datos se realizó mediante dos grupos de discusión y un diario de investigación. Los resultados subrayan beneficios, como el desarrollo de la autonomía personal, la mejora de las habilidades para el trabajo en equipo y el incremento de la credibilidad de los resultados obtenidos. No obstante, se identifican desafíos importantes, entre ellos la selección de datos y la gestión eficaz del tiempo. A partir de estos resultados, se proponen recomendaciones orientadas a optimizar futuros estudios inclusivos, tales como ampliar los plazos para la recogida de datos y mejorar la planificación y organización del proceso investigativo. En las conclusiones, se resalta la importancia de la participación activa de las personas con discapacidad en la investigación, promoviendo su inclusión y reconocimiento en todas las fases del estudio.

Palabras clave: investigación inclusiva; discapacidad intelectual; universidad; fotovoz.

Introduction

The slogan "Nothing about us, without us" reflects a historic demand by people with disabilities to be heard, recognised and, above all, included in all decisions that affect their lives (Oliver, 1992). This proposal, which emerged from the independent living movement, has taken on particular relevance in the field of research, highlighting the need for people with disabilities not only to participate as subjects of study, but also to be actively involved in the research process (Walmsley and Johnson, 2003).

This approach promotes emancipation, self-representation and social justice, ensuring that studies accurately reflect the experiences and needs of those who live these everyday realities (Callus, 2024).

In the field of research, the development of inclusive and emancipatory approaches that seek to break with traditional hierarchies between researchers and participants has been promoted. In particular, inclusive research conducted in collaboration with people with intellectual disabilities has been influenced by two value-based theoretical currents that have guided its principles and practices. The first is the valorisation of social role (Wolfensberger, 1980), which holds that all people, including those with intellectual disabilities, should be recognised and valued socially, promoting their active and meaningful participation in society. The second is emancipatory research (Walmsley and Johnson, 2018), which understands research as a tool for social transformation, whose purpose is to change attitudes, discourses and practices in order to move towards a more just and inclusive society. Both approaches have contributed to positioning people with

intellectual disabilities not only as objects of study, but also as protagonists and generators of knowledge, questioning traditional power relations in research and promoting models based on collaboration and mutual recognition.

Walmsley and Johnson (2003) defined inclusive research as research that promotes the active participation of people with disabilities in all phases of the study, from the formulation of the research problem to the dissemination of the results, ensuring that their perspectives and experiences are authentically reflected.

In recent decades, researchers such as Embregts et al. (2018) and Nind (2014) have emphasised the importance of developing skills to carry out high-quality inclusive research, highlighting the need to build relationships of trust and ensure that people with intellectual disabilities can participate on an equal footing with other co-researchers (Callus, 2024). Similarly, authors such as O'Brien et al. (2022) have pointed out that the participation of people with disabilities in the research process not only enriches the knowledge produced, but also has a direct impact on the formulation of inclusive policies and practices.

The added value of inclusive research, as pointed out by Nind and Vinha (2012), is evident in several key aspects. Firstly, it allows questions to be addressed that would be difficult to answer solely by academic researchers, but which are essential for the people involved. Secondly, it promotes the production of shared knowledge between researchers and participants, generating results that would not be accessible without the direct collaboration of the communities involved. Thirdly, it invites critical reflection on the cultural knowledge possessed by people with intellectual disabilities, recognising the value of their knowledge and experiences. Fourthly, it is characterised by its authenticity, as it is research that is validated and recognised by those who participate in it. Finally, this type of research has a direct impact on the lives of people with intellectual disabilities, contributing to transforming their realities and improving their social participation.

This article explores the lessons learned and challenges encountered in conducting inclusive research with people with intellectual disabilities who are studying at university. Through a photovoice project, the students took on the role of co-researchers and collaborated in defining and deciding on each aspect of the research process. Based on the shared experience of two academic co-researchers and 17 student co-researchers, we reflect on the opportunities and tensions that arise when implementing this type of research, proposing strategies to strengthen inclusion and the co-production of knowledge in future projects.

Participation of people with intellectual disabilities in inclusive research

Inclusive research is conceived as a collaborative process between academic researchers and co-researchers, where participants are more than just research subjects and have control over the research process (Nind, 2014).

Walmsley and Johnson (2003) identify five principles necessary for research to be inclusive: (1) the research problem, although it may be initiated by co-researchers without disabilities, must be formulated by co-researchers with disabilities; (2) the research must promote the interests of co-researchers with intellectual disabilities; (3) people with intellectual disabilities must participate in the research process; (4) they must have some control over this process; and (5) the research questions, research process, and research reports must be accessible to people with intellectual disabilities.

The work of Crowther et al. (2024) has shown that people with intellectual disabilities can be part of a research team throughout the project and contribute to every part of the research process. Their experiences complement the skills and academic training of academic researchers to increase the relevance and quality of the research process (Moliner and Orozco, 2025; Walmsley and Johnson, 2003), with the aim of contributing to the transformation of society (Strnadová and Walmsley, 2018).

Among the most important considerations for conducting inclusive research are the accessibility of the research methodology and the presentation of the results. This coincides with the findings of the systematic review by Crowther et al. (2024), who recommend using multiple formats to present data, incorporating easy reading, and ensuring temporal flexibility, adapting to the team's pace and moving forward only when all members are ready.

Training in research skills and methods is one of the key actions of inclusive research and will vary depending on the age and characteristics of the participants, taking into account other factors such as cultural context or linguistic development (Clark et al., 2022). People with intellectual disabilities who have not had the opportunity to access university studies or similar training are less likely to be familiar with research methods. In these cases, it is valuable to provide specific training as co-researchers, complemented by the necessary support in those areas where they may require assistance due to their limited research experience (Inglis and Cook, 2011).

In another sense, when research aims to be inclusive, it is essential to review and re-evaluate ethical issues. Parrilla (2010) raises several key considerations to guide action and reflection in the field of inclusive research. These include: choosing the topic, assessing who really benefits from the study; negotiating the design with participants, questioning whether informed consent is sufficient; power relations in the research process, reflecting on who sets the rules of the game and the use of the information obtained, considering who really owns the research results.

Benefits and challenges of inclusive research

The participation of people with intellectual disabilities in inclusive research teams offers them a valuable opportunity to demonstrate their abilities (Crowther et al., 2024). At the same time, it fosters their sense of value and inclusion, allows them to experience

equal treatment, and contributes significantly to strengthening their self-esteem (Ćwirynkało et al., 2024).

The literature agrees that co-researchers enjoy learning during the research and have fun while participating (Schwartz et al., 2020). Furthermore, Van Heumen et al. (2024) conclude that the process of participating in research should be personally beneficial for people with intellectual disabilities and serve as an antidote to the marginalisation and exclusion they have traditionally experienced in research.

Another major benefit of inclusive research is that it has a significant impact on improving the quality of life of people with intellectual disabilities (Nind and Vinha, 2012; Walmsley et al., 2018). This broadens communication, digital and social skills, contributing to empowerment (Ćwirynkało et al., 2024). The study by Rojas and Haya (2022) shows that the methods used in inclusive research involve sharing personal knowledge within the group, using individual experiences as a basis for connecting with social issues, recognising the importance of human rights, discussing complex issues and questioning the traditional structures used in research.

Furthermore, collaboration between researchers with and without disabilities can significantly enrich the quality of academic research, provided that all team members are valued and recognised as equally important throughout the process (Hewitt et al., 2023).

However, co-research also faces challenges. More attention needs to be paid to power relations in inclusive research and the ways in which the voices of co-researchers with intellectual disabilities are heard in academic contexts (Salvà and Moliner, 2024; Tilley et al., 2021). Often, their perspectives are absent or communicated selectively (Strnadová and Walmsley, 2018). This type of research also requires more time and involves more people than other types of research, which can increase costs (Walmsley et al., 2018).

Another significant challenge is ensuring access to specific research training for people with disabilities, who often have not had the opportunity to acquire it. This is because the knowledge, skills, and strategies required are usually developed predominantly in academic and formal settings, which are often inaccessible to them (Clark et al., 2022). This barrier is even more evident in countries such as Spain, where funding agencies do not always offer explicit support to promote the inclusion of people with intellectual disabilities in research projects (Rojas and Haya, 2022).

It is therefore essential that the university context takes on the challenge of transforming itself into a truly inclusive space, where the participation of historically excluded groups, such as people with intellectual disabilities, is also a reality in research processes. This challenge requires questioning and critically reviewing traditional models of knowledge production and dissemination, which have often left these voices out (Pallisera et al., 2017). In line with this, with this inclusive research we aim to contribute to the development of alternative research practices that promote accessibility and the democratisation of knowledge in the university environment, enabling the active participation of people with disabilities in the different phases of the research process.

In this paper, we aim to explore, based on the voices of young people with intellectual disabilities and academic researchers, the contributions, challenges and proposals for improvement derived from an inclusive research process in the university setting. This general objective is broken down into three specific objectives: 1) to explain the benefits of conducting inclusive research; 2) to describe the challenges and difficulties encountered in the inclusive research process; 3) to identify the recommendations proposed to improve inclusive research.

Methodology

Although the research addressed social life inside and outside the university (Rivero and Moriña, 2025), this article does not focus on a detailed presentation of the specific results related to that topic. Instead, we analyse the contributions, challenges and recommendations that inclusive research raised for the co-researcher students and co-researcher academics.

Method

The research used the photovoice method (Wang and Burris, 1994), which allowed participants to contribute information by 'showing' their lived realities through photographs. This resulted in a more collaborative, inclusive and reflective process, challenging traditional positions of power (Versey, 2024). Throughout the study, photographs, interviews, focus groups, discussion groups and research diaries were used to generate data that allowed for an in-depth exploration of the participants' experiences and perspectives. However, for this article we do not use all the techniques and only focus on the discussion groups and research diaries.

Participants

The participants and co-researchers in this study were 17 university students with intellectual disabilities, 10 men and 7 women, from an Employment Training Programme at a Spanish university and two academic co-researchers. The young people belonged to the 2023-2024 cohort of the programme and were aged between 19 and 26. The participants were chosen intentionally. This 33-credit European training programme was a free course, funded by the ONCE Foundation and the European Social Fund. It aimed to promote the autonomy and personal development of young people, as well as to provide comprehensive training to help them access employment.

The academic co-researchers were a senior lecturer and a young researcher in training, both women without disabilities, both with experience in pedagogy, disability and inclusive education. As a teacher and tutor in the Employment Training programme, we contributed

complementary roles that will be explained in the description of the different phases of the study.

Procedure

The study was carried out in six phases (Figure 1). The first two phases involved presenting the research project to the students and defining the research topic. The third phase allowed the two academic co-researchers to provide research training to the student co-researchers. This was followed by data collection and analysis. The fifth phase involved reflection on the process and dissemination of the results. Finally, the results of this article were returned and negotiated.

Figure 1

Research phases



Phase I. Presentation of the research and formation of the research team

In this first phase, the research project was presented to the students. The initial approach arose naturally, as we entered one of the university classes. The research was presented with the aim of resolving any possible doubts and proposing voluntary participation. To this end, a presentation previously designed by the academic co-researchers was used, which covered the key aspects of the research process.

Once the project had been presented and voluntary participation confirmed a few days later, the research team for this project was finalised. On the one hand, it was made up of 17 student co-researchers, whose role was to make decisions throughout the process and be active agents in the different phases of the research. On the other hand, there were the two academic co-researchers, whose role was to guide the development of the research, negotiate decisions with the co-researchers or, where appropriate, propose other alternatives and, fundamentally, analyse the data and write up the results.

Phase 2. Selection and definition of the research topic

In the second phase, the study participants proceeded to choose the research topic. The co-researchers explained what a research topic consisted of. Next, the Padlet tool was used, where participants found, as an example, three topics proposed by the academic co-researchers. The student co-researchers proposed new research topics, which were then put to a vote by the entire group. The topic finally chosen was one of those proposed by the student co-researchers: "Social life inside and outside the university".

This was followed by a session in which the research topic was broken down into more specific sub-topics. The aim of creating sub-topics was to facilitate understanding of an abstract topic and to provide different aspects of social life so that the photographs taken would show variety. The students also proposed the research questions they considered appropriate. Both the research sub-topics and the questions were reviewed by the two academic co-researchers and subsequently agreed upon with the students.

Phase 3. Research training

One of the key aspects of the research took place in this phase. Research training was provided for the co-researcher students by the academic co-researchers. The training was provided in an interactive format using the Genially platform. It had previously been adapted and validated in easy-to-read format. During the training, the research team agreed to take a maximum of 10 photographs for data collection. A presentation was also used to show some technical aspects of photography, such as focus, framing and exposure. The informed consent form, adapted to easy reading, was signed during this same session.

Phase 4. Information collection and analysis

The student co-researchers had one week to take the photographs, during which time they were continuously monitored by the academic co-researchers to resolve any doubts and ensure that the process ran smoothly. Once the photography period was over, the photographs were sent to the academics by email.

Individual interviews were then conducted. A pre-designed presentation was used for this purpose, which included the photos of each student individually. This presentation

included the photograph number, the sub-theme to which it belonged, the title (if applicable), and whether or not it was selected for the interview. As decided by the students, the interviews were based on only five photographs.

Next, focus groups were held, with four or five students in each group. The Padlet tool was used to support this process. The five photos from each co-researcher in that group were collected on the board, accompanied by a brief description of what they explained in the interviews. The participants voted and finally selected five photographs representing each small group, explaining their choice during the focus group.

The final step was to hold a discussion group with the 17 students. The Padlet tool was used again. The 20 photos previously voted on by the focus groups were collected on a board at . A brief description of the photographs was provided. These descriptions were discussed by the students and then voted on by everyone, so that in the end there were five photographs on the research topic that represented the entire group. They explained their choice during the discussion group.

Phase 5. Reflection on the process and dissemination of the research

The student co-researchers shared their reflections and explanations of the five final photos. A presentation prepared by the academic co-researchers was used to provide visual support. In this phase, they also explained their perceptions of their positions in the inclusive research process.

The students contributed ideas on how to disseminate the results to the community, and the option finally chosen was an exhibition of the inclusive research process. This was organised and prepared in advance together with the academic co-researchers. It took place in a space at the University and the students gave a presentation of the project to other students, teachers, families and third sector organisations. This was followed by an exhibition of photographs. A summary video and an explanatory blog were also produced, both by the academic co-researchers.

Phase 6. Feedback and negotiation

In this phase, a face-to-face meeting was held between the participating students and the academic co-researchers to share the main results of this article, with the aim of reaching a consensus and modifying anything that was necessary. An accessible presentation was prepared to present the main results analysed in the article. At this meeting, a discussion group was held on the results. The student co-researchers did not make any modifications, but they did add new information.

Data collection strategies

Although, as explained above, different data collection instruments were used in this research, only the challenges and lessons learned about the inclusive research process were analysed for this article. This information was collected in phases 5 and 6. A discussion group was held with the 17 students. The questions were proposed by the academic co-researchers: What has being co-researchers in this process brought you personally? What have you learned during the research? Have you felt part of the process and decision-making in this research? Why? What did you like most about the whole process? What did you like least about the whole research process? Do you think there is anything that could be improved?

Subsequently, once the results had been analysed and written up by the academic co-researchers, a new discussion group was held to present the results of the article to the students. The following questions were used: Do you agree with the results presented in this article? Did conducting inclusive research provide you with any additional insights? Did you encounter any other difficulties during the research? Are there any other recommendations we can make to improve inclusive research?

The additional contributions that emerged from this meeting were recorded and incorporated into the results section, thus enriching the understanding of inclusive research. Data saturation, the systematic coding process, triangulation among the academic co-researchers, feedback and validation by the student co-researchers, and detailed recording of each phase of the process reinforced the validity and reliability of the study. This procedure ensured that the results accurately reflected the voices and experiences of all participants, strengthening the credibility and consistency of the study.

A research diary was also used as a data collection tool. The information was collected by the academic co-researchers and allowed for a description of the development of all phases that took place during the research, as well as reflections on the research process.

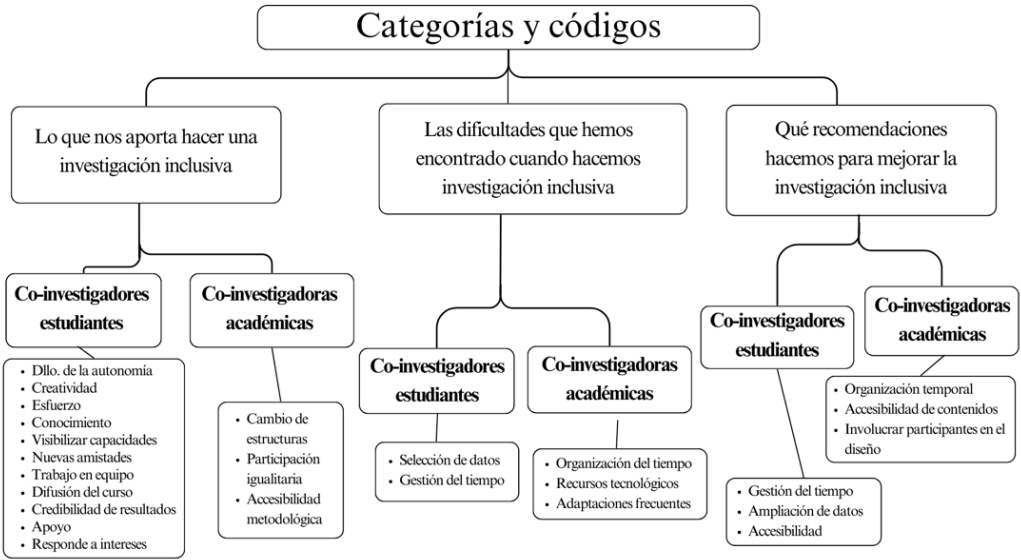
Ethical aspects of the research

This research had the corresponding ethical authorisation. Participants were assured of privacy and anonymity, with prior informed consent requested for the processing of information. Participants were thus informed of all the details and relevant aspects of this study. All participants gave their consent and offered their assistance in carrying out this work. The real names and personal data of the participants were not used, in order to ensure confidentiality. Instead, they were replaced with pseudonyms. The names Anabel and María, the academic co-researchers used in this study, are real. The information obtained throughout the process and the results of this study were returned, considering the negotiation between academic co-researchers and student co-researchers as a crucial point in the research process.

Analysis of the information

Before proceeding with the data analysis, the information collected was transcribed and returned to the participants for review. For the data analysis, we based ourselves on the proposal by Miles and Huberman (1994). In the data reduction phase, we used a coding system to identify emerging themes, grouping them into meaningful categories. Thematic and open coding was used. An inductive approach was applied, allowing categories to emerge directly from the data without imposing predefined schemes. Coding and categorisation were performed manually. Subsequently, in the presentation of data, we used a diagram (Figure 2) that facilitated comparison between the different narratives. r conclusions were obtained and verified through data triangulation between the academic co-researchers, which ensured the reliability and relevance of the results. Triangulation was carried out through an independent review by each co-researcher, analysing the same data separately and applying their own codes and categories. The results were then compared, identifying commonalities and discussing divergences. Discrepancies led to joint reflection to reach agreement on the different interpretations.

Figure 2
System of categories and codes



Results

What inclusive research brings us

One of the main benefits of participating in inclusive research was autonomy in the research process. As Hugo put it: "The freedom to make our own decisions and think for ourselves." He emphasised the value of independence in deciding and thinking for themselves throughout the research process. This aspect not only reinforced the confidence and empowerment of the co-researching students, but also fostered an environment of critical reflection in which each person could express themselves authentically and meaningfully.

Another notable advantage was the promotion of creativity throughout the process. Raúl expressed it in the following words: "I mean, here they gave us pure creative freedom. Even though we had the topic (previously decided by us), they gave us freedom. It's okay if maybe it was a photo... I don't know, crappy...".

Added to this was the personal effort required of the participants to be part of the research team, who claimed to be aware of the complexity of a research process and to have learned how to do it: "I've learned to research other things and that it's not an easy job. And that you have to put in the effort and all that" (Luis). In this regard, when the results were returned to them, the co-researching students added that learning to research also gave them greater knowledge of oral expression skills and how to conduct research. Diego explained it this way:

Well, the knowledge when it comes to explaining ourselves, developing things (...). Having more knowledge when it comes to expressing ourselves helped us a lot in the research, because maybe when we started the research we didn't know much about what to do... Then, as things progressed, we learned how to do the research.

The participation of all the co-researchers in the inclusive research process could be an inspiring example, showing how their involvement could motivate other people with disabilities to overcome barriers and take part in research. As Lucía put it: "Showing other people with disabilities what we can do and be independent." This experience not only allowed the students to gain confidence in their abilities, but also to highlight their capacity to contribute autonomously and valuably in all phases of the research.

Another notable benefit was the opportunity to meet new people and expand the participants' social circle. As Marta put it: "Understanding what we do outside and inside, and having more friends inside and outside the University." These new friendships allowed them to discover common interests and share them with other classmates.

The co-researcher students also highly valued the opportunity to work as a team during the research process and, for this reason, considered it a decisive variable in promoting social relationships among the participants and encouraging motivation. "Because you

asked us what we wanted to research, and we put it to a vote here, choosing together as a team" (Hugo). In addition, they considered that working as a team was an incentive to obtain quality results. According to Raúl:

Well, it has given us (...) I think it has given us a sense of togetherness. Because the photos that have come out are spectacular, I mean, because we all chose them. And besides, it represents us so much both inside and outside the university.

An additional benefit of the research was that it helped to raise the profile of the training programme the students were taking. By taking and showing the photos, the participants became agents of dissemination, sharing their experience with people around them and spontaneously promoting the course. As Jesús said: "I've advertised the course by telling my friends 'this photo is for this, for the course I'm doing', and that's how they found out where I am". This not only increased awareness of the programme, but also allowed the students' friends and family to better understand their educational process and university experience.

The participants reflected that being part of the research team was a new experience for them and that, in addition, the results of the study managed to capture the reality of their lives in relation to the chosen research topic. In particular, they highlighted that the use of images as a method of representation not only added an aesthetic component, but also contributed to the process being perceived as more realistic and authentic. Elena explained:

Well, I think that, first of all, being involved in research is also something new that we have learned, and also representing the topics and those things with photos may make it seem more realistic, more like the reality of what is happening, and it also looks nice and all that, but more than anything else, it seems more realistic in terms of our lives and all that.

When the results were returned, the students also considered that the support provided by the academics throughout the process was fundamental to achieving the objectives of the study, as they acted as facilitators during the inclusive research and this helped to avoid potential difficulties. Diego commented:

One of the positive things that this co-research gave us was the support and assistance we received from the teachers. Apart from the difficulties (...), with the help of the teachers, I think it was easier to do all those kinds of things.

A final benefit mentioned by the co-researching students was the importance of the chosen research topic responding to and covering their interests. This was achieved thanks to the contributions of all the participants and their joint voting. "To research what we like to do" (José).

The academic co-researchers recognised that inclusive research provided them with new perspectives and valuable learning experiences in their professional careers. One of the

main changes was the alteration of traditional power structures in research. In this study, one of the academics had to set aside her preference for a topic that was not chosen by the student co-researchers, which showed how inclusive research puts the voices and decisions of all those involved at the centre.

Throughout the process, they also learned the value of equal participation, discovering that the inclusion of co-researchers with disabilities not only improves the relevance of the results but also enriches decision-making.

In addition, inclusive research taught them to adapt their communication methods and methodologies, using tools such as easy reading, which improved collaboration among all participants. Finally, they understood that the success of research is not only measured by results, but also by the creation of an environment where everyone feels valued and listened to, which was an achievement in the study.

The difficulties we have encountered when conducting inclusive research

Conducting inclusive research can present a number of challenges. This section analyses the main difficulties identified by students and academics throughout the research process.

Firstly, one of the most notable drawbacks was the choice of photographs. The student co-researchers expressed the complexity of selecting images that adequately represented the chosen research topic, as each photograph had a different symbolic value. This process of selection and rejection generated some frustration and confusion, as reflected in Lucía's testimony:

Well, one of the things I really didn't like was deciding which photo we were going to use, because it's really difficult to choose one, to make those decisions, like which one am I going to keep? It's a real headache. But anyway, you learn from it.

Another significant challenge was scheduling the work sessions during non-teaching periods. For some participants, attending these meetings meant travelling to the university, investing personal time that was not always easy to manage: "I had to come on the day of the white week (non-teaching period)" (Manuel).

The students also indicated that the time allocated for taking the photographs was limited. From their perspective, one week was not enough to adequately capture the complexity and diversity of their daily experiences. They explained that a longer period would have allowed them to reflect more deeply on the situations they wanted to represent and select settings that truly conveyed the essence of their experiences. According to Raúl:

Well, I think what I liked least, but I think it's a bit general... The issue of time with the photos, as we said before, they told us we had a week and I think it should have been done in two phases...

The academic co-researchers agreed on the difficulties encountered with the students. Organising the sessions proved to be complex due to the length of the course and the non-teaching periods. In addition, they considered that the data collection period was too short, as the students only had one week to take the photographs and did not have the opportunity to reflect on subsequent social experiences.

The co-researchers pointed out that, on some occasions, the technological resources used did not work properly, which made it difficult to carry out some sessions.

Finally, they emphasised that the inclusive research process required a great deal of flexibility and frequent adaptation, as most decisions were made by the student co-researchers and were beyond their control. In this regard, they believed that last-minute changes and/or actions could hinder the process.

What recommendations do we make to improve inclusive research?

The recommendations made by the co-researching students referred to the time taken to complete the project, the number of photographs and accessibility. Among these, the students proposed increasing the time available to take the photographs so that they could represent social experiences that took place after the data collection period: "Give us another week for the photos" (Jesús).

In addition, they considered that it would have been appropriate to divide the taking of photographs into two different periods. This would have ensured the smooth running of the process and resolved any doubts, reducing the complexity for the group. Raúl expressed it in the following words:

Perhaps do two rounds, maybe... you have one round in the first week. Then, we give you another week for a second round. Because we've been really overwhelmed. Like... do we take 5? Do we take 15? Do we take I don't know what? And there's been a bit of stress in that regard. And maybe you could say, guys, this week is the first round, 5 photos, second round another 5. More structured.

The co-researcher students suggested increasing the number of photographs they initially decided to contribute, with the aim of capturing more information and reflecting the different perspectives of the selected topic more broadly: "Maybe being able to contribute more photographs would be good" (Hugo).

In the feedback session, the students recommended adapting all the research content to easy reading, as this would make it easier for everyone involved to understand and, as a result, improve accessibility. According to Raúl:

It would be advisable for the next research project to be adapted to easy reading so that some people who may not understand certain basic words can understand it, because with easy reading adaptation... you put a description next to it or something else (...).

The academic co-researchers also made a series of recommendations based on their experience. First, they highlighted the need for better time management so that the co-researchers could participate fully in all phases of the project without feeling pressured by deadlines. In addition, they pointed out the importance of improving the accessibility of the content, especially in the presentations, making them more visual and adapted to the needs of the group. They also recommended that the research training should have been delivered gradually, rather than concentrated in a single session, which would have facilitated a more effective assimilation of the content and techniques. They also suggested that it could have been easier for the co-researcher students to be more active in the design of some phases of the study, such as the preparation of the interview script or the analysis of the data.

Discussion

The main findings of this study show that inclusive research is a meeting point between co-researcher students and academics, where everyone learns and decision-making is a shared power (Woelders et al., 2015). For this reason, the object of study must respond to and cover the interests of co-researchers with intellectual disabilities (Bigby and Frawley, 2010; Nind, 2016).

Regarding the first research question, the main contributions of inclusive research include the opportunity to establish new social relationships, highlight the capacities and abilities of people with intellectual disabilities, and the importance of reflecting the reality of their lives on the research topic. Díaz et al. (2022) have already pointed out these results and explained that people with intellectual disabilities do not usually have the opportunity to discuss or talk about issues that interest them in the contexts in which they live their lives, which is why they decide to research these topics when they have the opportunity. Furthermore, Strnadová et al. (2014) point out that building the group and making friends during inclusive research is as important for participants with intellectual disabilities as answering the research questions.

Other relevant factors highlighted by the student co-researchers in our study were the support they received from academics (Fullana et al., 2016), teamwork skills and communication skills (Pallisera and Puyalto, 2014). They also highlight benefits such as the development of autonomy and creativity, the personal effort required of students to participate in research, and the increased visibility of the educational programme they are enrolled in.

In another sense, academics consider that inclusive research has involved a process of equal participation between co-researchers with and without disabilities. Pallisera et al. (2017) recognise the commitment of academic researchers to democratising research processes, relinquishing the control they have traditionally assumed. The academics also emphasise the importance of methodological accessibility in order to encourage the

participation of people who may have difficulties in accessing research-related knowledge (Parrilla and Sierra, 2015).

Regarding the second research question, the difficulties encountered by co-researcher students during inclusive research are related to data selection and time management. Both challenges were already highlighted in the study by Strnadová et al. (2014), which concluded that researchers with intellectual disabilities often need support with time management and task organisation.

The difficulties encountered by academics relate to time management, technological resources and adaptations. These results were also identified by Pallisera and Puyalto (2014), who emphasise the flexibility and adaptability necessary to balance the demands of the research itself with personal and collective availability.

The third research question invites us to reflect on key recommendations for future inclusive research. Both students and academics agree that it would be beneficial to improve time management and ensure the accessibility of content through the use of easy-to-read formats. This result coincides with Fullana et al. (2016), who highlight the importance of providing accessible information to participants, suggesting easy reading as a fundamental element in any inclusive research material.

Finally, the academics, in agreement with Fullana et al. (2016), emphasise the need to actively involve students in the different phases of the research process. Moriña (2017) has already pointed out the importance of including all co-researchers in the construction and methodological decision-making, highlighting how this involvement can enrich both the process and the results of the research.

Implications for practice

The co-researcher students who participated in this study highlighted that the experience of participating in inclusive research provided them with great benefits. These included acquiring new research skills and knowledge, promoting socialisation, and feeling valued and included throughout the process.

These reflections highlight the need to ensure that people with intellectual disabilities have real and meaningful opportunities to participate in research, not only as sources of data, but as protagonists who contribute their first-hand expert knowledge. Recognising the value of their experiences is key to moving towards more democratic and socially engaged research, as already pointed out by Parrilla and Sierra (2015).

In this vein, inclusive research, by incorporating the voices of people with intellectual disabilities in all phases of the process, not only enriches the quality and relevance of the knowledge generated, but also has a transformative impact on teaching and research practices. It allows teachers and researchers to question their own conceptions and methodologies, opening up to more inclusive, collaborative and participatory approaches that promote equity and social justice in the university environment. In this way, inclusive

research not only produces knowledge, but also contributes to changing the ways of teaching, researching and relating, promoting a more accessible university that is committed to diversity.

Given that the difficulties encountered relate to the timing of the different phases of the study, it would be beneficial for the academic co-researchers to have greater flexibility, creativity and adaptability, as well as to devote sufficient time to organising the research process for people with intellectual disabilities (Embregts et al., 2018). To this end, the co-researcher students themselves can be involved in the temporal organisation and adaptation of materials throughout the process.

The research training carried out in this study has proved to be an essential support for participants to acquire knowledge about research techniques and procedures, coinciding with the evidence provided by Bigby and Frawley (2010). In this regard, although there is no agreement on what aspects research training should include (O'Brien et al., 2014), we propose that it cover the concept of research and task management (Strnadová et al., 2014), as well as practical activities applied to relevant aspects of research and its ethical aspects.

Finally, it would be necessary to accompany these processes with continuous ethical reflection, which places the voice, pace and priorities of people with intellectual disabilities at the centre, favouring spaces for dialogue and negotiation that allow for the construction of truly inclusive research with social impact.

Limitations and future research

The main limitation encountered in this study, and identified by the research team, was the time frame. In future studies, this will be one of the modifications to be considered in order to ensure a rewarding experience for all. Another limitation was conducting the research with a small, homogeneous group of co-researchers with intellectual disabilities. Therefore, it seems important to conduct inclusive research with other co-researchers, with and without intellectual disabilities, who reflect diversity in terms of sociodemographic characteristics and different experiences in conducting inclusive research.

In future research, it would be interesting to explore the personal benefits of young people with intellectual disabilities studying at university, or what their experiences of internships in ordinary work contexts are like. Another future inclusive research project could consider the voices of university lecturers to discover what people with intellectual disabilities contribute to this context.

Conclusions

Inclusive research must safeguard and promote inclusion and, for this reason, it must serve people with intellectual disabilities, not researchers. An example of this is the reflection of a 22-year-old woman from Parrilla's study (2009) who, when invited to participate in the research, said: "No one has ever been interested in me before, in what I

have been through. Are you sure it's worthwhile, that it will be useful to you?" (p.111). This statement demonstrates the commitment we must make, as it is our responsibility to move towards greater inclusion in research.

This study highlights the experiences and testimonies of people with intellectual disabilities who have traditionally been marginalised in research. Recognising and valuing their voices has meant breaking with positions of power and the interests of academics regarding the subject of research. The study represents a practice of social justice and by positioning the co-researcher students as active subjects, challenging traditional hierarchies and promoting their agency and self-determination. We dare to point out that inclusive research is a powerful tool for generating opportunities for analysis, promoting transformation and encouraging the improvement of existing practices.

References

- Bigby, C., y Frawley, P. (2010). Reflections on Doing Inclusive Research in the "Making Life Good in the Community" Study. *Journal of Intellectual and Developmental Disability*, 35(2), 53-61. <https://doi.org/10.3109/13668251003716425>
- Callus, A. M. (2024). Inclusive Research: Doing Participatory and Emancipatory Research with People with Intellectual Disabilities. In M. H. Rioux, A. Buettgen, E. Zubrow, y J. Viera (Eds). *Handbook of Disability* (pp. 417-431). Springer.
- Clark, A. T., Ahmed, I., Metzger, S., Walker, E., y Wylie, R. (2022). Moving from Co-Design to Co-Research: Engaging Youth Participation in Guided Qualitative Inquiry. *International Journal of Qualitative Methods*, 21, 1-14. <https://doi.org/10.1177/16094069221084793>
- Crowther, F., Beinke, H., High, R., Ru, C., y Rillotta, F. (2024). Our Recipe for Good Inclusive Research. *Social Sciences*, 13(8), 401. <https://doi.org/10.3390/socsci13080401>
- Ćwirynkało, K., Parchomiuk, M., y Wołowicz, A. (2024). Cooperation with Persons with Intellectual Disabilities: Reflections of Co-Researchers Associated with Conducting Inclusive Research. *Social Sciences*, 13(3), 136. <https://doi.org/10.3390/socsci13030136>
- Díaz, G., Fullana, J., Pallisera, M., Puyaltó, C., y Rey, A. (2022). ¿Aprender, Compartir, ¿Contribuir? Perspectivas de Personas con Discapacidad Intelectual sobre su Participación en Investigaciones. *Revista Internacional de Educación para la Justicia Social*, 11(1), 175-195. <https://doi.org/10.15366/riejs2022.11.1.010>
- Embregts, P. J. C. M., Taminiau, E. F., Heerkens, L., Schippers, A. P., y Van Hove, G. (2018). Collaboration in Inclusive Research: Competencies Considered Important for People with and without Intellectual Disabilities. *Journal of Policy and Practice in Intellectual Disabilities*, 15(3), 193–201. <https://doi.org/10.1111/jppi.12248>

- Fullana, J., Palliser, M., Vilà, M., y Puyalto, C. (2016). Las Personas con Discapacidad Intelectual como Investigadoras. Debates, Retos y Posibilidades de la Investigación Inclusiva. *Empiria. Revista de Metodología de Ciencias Sociales*, (33), 111–138. <https://doi.org/10.5944/empiria.33.2016.15866>
- Gill, C. J. (1999). Invisible Ubiquity: The Surprising Relevance of Disability Issues in Evaluation. *American Journal of Evaluation*, 20(2), 279–287. <https://doi.org/10.1177/109821409902000209>
- Hewitt, O., Langdon, P. E., Tapp, K., y Larkin, M. (2023). A Systematic Review and Narrative Synthesis of Inclusive Health and Social Care Research with People with Intellectual Disabilities: How are Co-researchers Involved and What are their Experiences? *Journal of Applied Research in Intellectual Disabilities*, 36(4), 681–701. <https://doi.org/10.1111/jar.13100>
- Inglis, P., y Cook, T. (2011). Ten Top Tips for Effectively Involving People with a Learning Disability in Research. *Journal of Learning Disabilities and Offending Behaviour*, 2(2), 98–104. <https://doi.org/10.1108/20420921111152441>
- Miles, M. B., y Huberman, A. M. (1994). *Qualitative Data Analysis: An expanded sourcebook* (2nd ed.). Sage Publications, Inc.
- Moliner, O., y Orozco, I. (2025). Inclusive Research for an Inclusive University: Analysing the Investiguem Programme Experience. *British Journal of Learning Disabilities*, 53(3), 394–404. <https://doi.org/10.1111/bld.12648>
- Moriña, A. (2017). *Investigar con Historias de Vida: Metodología biográfico-narrativa*. Narcea.
- Nind, M. (2014). *What is Inclusive Research?* Bloomsbury Academic. <https://doi.org/10.5040/9781849668149>
- Nind, M. (2016). Inclusive Research as a Site for Lifelong Learning: Participation in Learning Communities. *Studies in the Education of Adults*, 48(1), 23–37. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02660830.2016.1155847>
- Nind, M., y Vinha, H. (2012). Doing Research Inclusively: Bridges to Multiple Possibilities in Inclusive Research. *British Journal of Learning Disabilities*, 42(2), 102–109. <https://doi.org/10.1111/bld.12013>
- O'Brien, P., Garcia Iriarte, E., McConkey, R., Butler, S., y O'Brien, B. (2022). Inclusive Research and Intellectual Disabilities: Moving Forward on a Road Less Well-Travelled. *Social Sciences*, 11(10), 483. <https://doi.org/10.3390/socsci11100483>
- O'Brien, P., McConkey, R., y García-Iriarte, E. (2014). Co-researching with People who Have Intellectual Disabilities: Insights from a National Survey. *Journal of Applied Research in Intellectual Disabilities*, 27(1), 65–75. <https://doi.org/10.1111/jar.12074>
- Oliver, M. (1992). Changing the Social Relations of Research Production? *Disability, Handicap & Society*, 7(2), 101–114. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02674649266780141>

- Pallisera, M., y Puyalto, C. (2014). La Voz de las Personas con Discapacidad Intelectual en la Investigación: hacia el Desarrollo de Investigaciones Inclusivas. *Revista de Educación Inclusiva*, 7(2), 84-97. <https://revistaeducacioninclusiva.es/index.php/rei/article/view/149>
- Pallisera, M., Fullana, J., Puyaltó, C., Vilà, M., y Díaz, G. (2017). Apoyando la Participación Real de las Personas con Discapacidad Intelectual: una Experiencia de Investigación Inclusiva sobre Vida Independiente. *Revista Española De Discapacidad*, 5(1), 7-24. <https://www.cedid.es/redis/index.php/redis/article/view/282>
- Parrilla, A. (2009). ¿Y si la Investigación sobre Inclusión no Fuera Inclusiva? Reflexiones desde una Investigación Biográfico-Narrativa. *Revista de Educación*, (349), 101-117. <https://www.educacionfpydeportes.gob.es/revista-de-educacion/ca/numeros-revista-educacion/numeros-anteriores/2009/re349/re349-05.html>
- Parrilla, A. (2010). Ética para una investigación inclusiva. *Revista de Educación Inclusiva*, 3(1), 165-174. <https://revistaeducacioninclusiva.es/index.php/REI/article/view/218>
- Parrilla, A., y Sierra, S. (2015). Construyendo una Investigación Inclusiva en torno a las Distintas Transiciones Educativas. *Revista Electrónica Interuniversitaria de Formación del Profesorado*, 18(1), 161-175. <https://doi.org/10.6018/reifop.18.1.214381>
- Rivero, M., y Moríña, A. (2025). The Social Life of Young People with Intellectual Disabilities Studying at University: An Inclusive Research Using Photovoice. *Journal of Applied Research in Intellectual Disabilities*, 38(2), e70035. <https://doi.org/10.1111/jar.70035>
- Rojas-Pernia, S., y Haya-Salmón, I. (2022). Inclusive Research and the Use of Visual, Creative and Narrative Strategies in Spain. *Social Sciences*, 11(4), 154. <https://doi.org/10.3390/socsci11040154>
- Salvà, A., y Moliner, O. (2024). Análisis del Uso de la Fotovoz en un Proceso de Investigación Inclusiva. *Contextos Educativos. Revista de Educación*, (34), 9-33. <https://doi.org/10.18172/con.6297>
- Schwartz, A. E., Kramer, J. M., Cohn, E. S., y McDonald, K. E. (2020). "That Felt Like Real Engagement": Fostering and Maintaining Inclusive Research Collaborations with Individuals with Intellectual Disability. *Qualitative Health Research*, 30(2), 236–249. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1049732319869620>
- Strnadová, I., y Walmsley, J. (2018). Peer-reviewed Articles on Inclusive Research: Do Co-researchers with Intellectual Disabilities Have a Voice? *Journal of Applied Research in Intellectual Disabilities*, 31(1), 132–141. <https://doi.org/10.1111/jar.12378>
- Strnadová, I., Cumming, T. M., Knox, M., y Parmenter, T. (2014). Building an Inclusive Research Team: The Importance of Team Building and Skills Training. *Journal of Applied Research in Intellectual Disabilities*, 27(1), 13-22. <https://doi.org/10.1111/jar.12076>

- Tilley, E., Strnadová, I., Ledger, S., Walmsley, J., Loblinzk, J., Christian, P. A., y Arnold, Z. J. (2021). 'Working Together is like a Partnership of Entangled Knowledge': Exploring the Sensitivities of Doing Participatory Data Analysis with People with Learning Disabilities. *International Journal of Social Research Methodology*, 24(5), 567–579. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13645579.2020.1857970>
- Van Heumen, L., Krueger, C., y Mihaila, J. (2024). The Development of a Co-researcher Training with and for People with Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities. *Journal of Applied Research in Intellect Disabilities*, 37(3), e13200. <https://doi.org/10.1111/jar.13200>
- Versey, H. (2024). Photovoice: A Method to Interrogate Positionality and Critical Reflexivity. *The Qualitative Report*, 29(2), 594-605. <https://doi.org/10.46743/2160-3715/2024.5222>
- Walmsley, J., y Johnson, K. (2003). *Inclusive Research with People with Learning Disabilities: Past, Present, and Futures*. Jessica Kingsley Publishers.
- Walmsley, J., Strnadová, I., y Johnson, K. (2018). The Added Value of Inclusive Research. *Journal of Applied Research in Intellectual Disabilities*, 31(5), 751–759. <https://doi.org/10.1111/jar.12431>
- Wang, C., y Burris, M. A. (1994). Empowerment through Photo Novella: Portraits of Participation. *Health Education Quarterly*, 21(2), 171–186. <https://doi.org/10.1177/109019819402100204>
- Woelders, S., Abma, T., Visser, T., y Schipper, K. (2015). The Power of Difference in Inclusive Research. *Disability and Society*, 30(4), 528-542. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09687599.2015.1031880>
- Wolfensberger, W. (1980). La definición de normalización: Actualización, problemas, desacuerdos y malentendidos. En R. Flynn y K. Bitsch (Eds.), *Normalización, integración social y servicios comunitarios* (pp. 71-115). University Park Press.

Traducido con  DeepL

Date received: 28 January 2025

Date of revision: 2 February 2025

Date of acceptance: 30 July 2025