



Article

Inclusive Research and the Use of Visual, Creative and Narrative Strategies in Spain

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Abstract: In recent decades, there have been many works on inclusive research that provide a clear framework on its meaning and the implications it entails. They also highlight the importance of addressing outstanding challenges, among others, to inquire after research strategies that respond to the diversity of situations in which people with intellectual disabilities find themselves. This article presents a research project carried out in Spain over a period of eighteen months by a team of researchers with and without intellectual disabilities. Specifically, we explore how the construction of enabling relationships, both dialogic and horizontal, requires giving greater emphasis to visual and creative methodological strategies, such as photographs, image-theatre, body-mapping, murals or visual presentations. The findings reported by the researchers and co-researchers have encouraged us to review some methodological premises such as our role as researchers or the type of relationships we establish. They also demonstrate the value of using a variety of collaborative enquiry strategies that recognise the agency of all researchers.

Keywords: inclusive research; collaborative groups; qualitative research; creative methodologies; people with intellectual disabilities



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1. Introduction

This article presents part of a research project developed in Spain by a group of researchers with and without intellectual disabilities on “The importance of social relationships and loneliness”.

The article was written by two academic researchers and is based on an essential idea: the principles that underpin research articulate how it develops and, therefore, the relationships that are built in it. Thus, it can be said that the research strategies we used support these principles and, within the framework of inclusive research, they should contribute to improving the lives of people with intellectual disabilities and help transform the type of unequal relationships that are established with them. It is important to bear in mind that the strategies and activities developed are not essentially participatory or emancipatory; consequently, it is necessary to review the experience of the people who use them, where they come from and to what extent they improve the academic research we have been doing.

This research is part of a project coordinated by the National Research Plan and Innovation Networks for Educational and Social Inclusion that aims to promote innovation and development by educational and social agents and entities in four regions of Spain. It is the result of collaborative work carried out over 18 months, after which the results have continued to be disseminated.

This article focuses on three of the research strategies used in the project—specifically narrative, visual and creative strategies—and reflects on how they can facilitate and promote dialogue and debate within the research group and contribute to collaborative research by providing more choice and control for people with intellectual disabilities.

2. Background

2.1. Inclusive Research

The term inclusive research is used to refer to a type of knowledge production that questions the consideration of people with intellectual disabilities merely as sources of data and demands their right to participate in decisions and spaces that concern them as citizens, including academic spaces (Walmsley and Johnson 2003; Nind 2014, 2016).

In a recent review of the term (Walmsley et al. 2018), inclusive research is defined as:

- “Research that aims to contribute to social change, helping to create a society in which excluded groups belong, and which aims to improve the quality of their lives.
- Research based on issues important to a group and which draws on their experiences to inform the research process and outcomes.
- Research which aims to recognise, foster, and communicate the contributions people with intellectual disabilities can make.
- Research that provides information which can be used by people with intellectual disabilities to campaign for change on behalf of others.
- Research in which those involved in it are ‘standing with’ those whose issues are being explored or investigated” (p. 758).

The term inclusive research encompasses a broad set of research approaches in which the type of relationships established within it—horizontal and collaborative—are fundamental. It refers to a set of approaches and methods that emphasise the democratisation of research processes (Nind 2014), in contrast to extractive and assimilative approaches that sustain unequal power relationships with people with disabilities (Milner and Frawley 2019). Thus, regardless of the degree of control that people with intellectual disabilities have in the research—as advisors, collaborators or leaders—it creates a space for life experiences to be discussed. As a collaborative practice, our research provides space for new content and dynamics to emerge within the group. Evidently, this presents challenges that do not appear in other types of research that follow traditional methods.

Research involves a broad range of acquired knowledge, abilities and strategies that have traditionally been part of the academic sphere. Firstly, in this context it is important to recognise that people with intellectual disabilities have not had access to this specific training. Furthermore, in some countries, such as Spain, there has been no overt support from funding agencies that value the inclusion of people with intellectual disabilities in research projects, something which adds more uncertainty to the meaning of specific pre-designed or pre-packaged research training.

According to Nind (2016), inclusive research is in itself a learning opportunity, addressing complex questions in complex ways, thus providing an opportunity to learn how to research by researching, taking care not to exclude those who may need the most support. Therefore, within the framework of each phase of this research project, the co-researchers have taken different kinds of decisions throughout the whole process, including what techniques or methods should be used to respond to the questions raised.

2.2. The Use of Visual and Narrative Strategies

As a dialogical practice involving researchers with and without intellectual disabilities, research activities should promote analysis and reflection within the group. Therefore, they must be meaningful and accessible for the participants and recognise the knowledge and experience of people with intellectual disabilities (Nind 2014; Holt et al. 2019; Fudge et al. 2019). In this process it is necessary to include a variety of strategies and activities that encourage dialogue and allow transition from the individual to the general, from the concrete to the abstract or from the personal to the social and vice versa (Nind and Vinha 2014; Bigby et al. 2014; Nind 2014, 2016; Murray 2019; Holt et al. 2019).

In short, we are talking about ways of learning how to research, types of research relationships and a form of co-production of knowledge that needs to be supported by a diversity of methods and visual, narrative and creative activities that ensure dialogue throughout the research process. As highlighted by several authors (Fulcher 1995; Booth

and Booth 1996; Aldridge 2007), the limitations of methods serve to legitimise the exclusion of people with intellectual disabilities. Therefore, it becomes necessary to use alternative methodological approaches rather than more traditional ones.

The use of visual and creative methods is not new. As Mannay (2016) points out, the preoccupation with visual and creative works in disciplines such as history, art and archaeology goes back a long way. “There is much to be learnt from the humanities, where art and artefacts have been thoughtfully considered by a range of scholars; and engaging with different fields and disciplines is fundamental in progressing visual studies” (p. 24).

The inclusion of images, physical objects or theatre during the research process does not aim to substitute narration but rather complement it. The introduction of visual and creative elements can be used to establish dialogue and facilitate mutual knowledge, e.g., about what we want to research or what we think about the issues that affect us as citizens (Martínez 2008). Thus, enabling access to the spaces and lives of the participant and leading to more personal communication. It can also provide different ways of understanding and knowledge that contributes to making the familiar strange and deepening what is known (Mannay 2016). In addition, having access to more resources, other than oral language, gives more control to participants to propose or organise the issues being addressed or to share previous work with other people (Serrano et al. 2016). As Goodley and Moore (2000) point out, when we carry out research with people with intellectual disabilities, such contextualisation allows the theoretical and political qualities of the actions to be revealed.

Recent work in inclusive research also supports the qualities outlined above. Photography or video was used to identify and analyse ideas relevant to people with intellectual disabilities requiring support in verbal communication (Booth and Booth 2003; Rojas-Pernia and Sanahuja 2011; Cluley 2016; Krisson et al. 2022). In some of these works, the images were pre-selected by researchers with the aim of eliciting dialogue and ensuring the participation of those who could not read (Mooney et al. 2019). In others, the images produced by the participants were shared with relatives and professionals, giving them the opportunity to learn about and reflect on the issues raised by people with disabilities and providing them with the possibility of returning to the topics discussed (Sitter et al. 2019; Kim et al. 2021).

In research where people with disabilities act as advisors or co-researchers, diverse strategies are incorporated throughout the whole process, including in the analysis of the data obtained. For Pallisera et al. (2015), photography and drawing were essential to conducting the interviews and focus groups, facilitating the participation of a group of young advisors between 17 and 22 years old. Sitter et al. (2019) refer to numerous creative activities (drawings, images and photographs from magazines) during the analysis phase of the research topics. The use of arts-based activities such as collage throughout the whole process encouraged dialogue and collaboration between its members with the eventual creation of a set of videos about the sexual rights of people with disabilities.

Photography, music or collage are also referred to by Kennedy and Brewer (2014) as valuable resources for learning about the beliefs, experiences and perspectives of the four people with intellectual disabilities involved in this research.

Less frequently, other works have been supported by creative resources such as theatre or body-mapping. The project carried out in CHANGE on affective relationships and sexuality used the theatre as a means to address embarrassing issues, elicit new topics or make the familiar strange (Garbutt et al. 2009). This is also the main resource used by a group of young people to explore the dilemmas they faced when taking a more active role in the transition to adulthood (Goddard 2015). As highlighted by the author, theatrical techniques that produce knowledge through interaction with others can contribute to the construction of a model of collaborative work between people with and without disabilities. For their part, Dew et al. (2019) used body-mapping to understand the planning experiences of adults with intellectual disabilities and complex support needs. Each participant created two body maps through a guided group process. Participants received a range of art materials and were invited to use symbols, images and text to fill in the inside and outside of the to fill in the inside and outside of their body schema.

On the whole, uses visual, creative and narrative resources that facilitate or promote participation in some phases or throughout the entire process.

Our research project developed in Spain by a group of researchers with and without intellectual disabilities on “The importance of social relationships and loneliness” uses different visual and creative research strategies and resources to create a collaborative relational space. As Nind (2016) points out, the authenticity of the relationships in the group, based on the recognition of personal experience and collective learning, determines the genesis and dynamics of the research group. In addition, to facilitate the participation and collaboration of all members of the group various strategies were developed using different materials and languages throughout the research process which involved design, data analysis and dissemination, thus resulting in participatory productions.

3. Study Context

This research is part of a project coordinated by the National Research Plan and Innovation Networks for Educational and Social Inclusion¹, which aims to promote innovation and development by educational and social agents and entities in four regions of Spain.

The project on importance of social relationships and loneliness began in February 2017. The first information meeting was addressed to young people with intellectual disabilities, their families and some professionals from an association for people with disabilities. In this meeting the meaning of the proposal was discussed: to set up a collaborative research project made up of academic professionals and young people with intellectual disabilities. The two academic researchers also emphasised the inclusive nature of the research and the importance of selecting a research topic relevant to the group. One of the families gave a positive assessment of the project, while highlighting the necessary commitment involved in this kind of work. This provided further information on what the proposal entailed and also an opportunity for the young people attending the meeting to express their interest in taking part.

The framework of the research project was approved by the Ethics and Social Sciences Committee at the University of Cantabria (Spain). At the first meeting the participants were informed of the ethical conditions of the research. These were included in a written document which we reviewed together, a signed copy of which was given to the attendees. The document requested permission to take photographs and videos for the sole purpose of disseminating the research. Consent was obtained from all co-researchers. Subsequently, all members of the team decided to use our real names for the dissemination and publication of the results of the research process and anonymity was guaranteed for all people interviewed on the topic of social relationships and loneliness. Real names and photographs provided by the interviewees are not revealed under any circumstances.

Lastly, eight young people joined the proposal, four men and four women aged between 19 and 26 years old. It is important to point out that while all have different experience and backgrounds it is essential that all voices are heard. Joining the research team was a personal decision. With regard to the co-researchers' social and cultural backgrounds, it should be noted that they all lived in their family home, two were looking for employment and the rest were enrolled in some type of training programme aimed specifically at people with intellectual disabilities. All the co-researchers were able to express their concerns, ideas and feelings using spoken language. In addition, they could read and write and use ICT. They showed different levels of competence, and therefore, we used easy-to-read materials to facilitate access to information by all group members.

3.1. Methodology

Over 18 months, the research team met every two weeks for two hour sessions in which decisions were made about what to research, the participants, the data collection strategies, the analysis of information or the dissemination of the results. Following the completion of the research, the team continued working together and produced some

academic texts collaboratively (Álvarez et al. 2022; Rojas-Pernia et al. 2020), among other activities.

The academic researchers made it clear at the first meeting that it was necessary to ensure from the first meeting that the whole team would participate in the decisions that were adopted. To this end, the sessions started by sharing work carried out in the previous session (via the website or one of the audios produced); some of the activities to be undertaken were anticipated (designed by the academic researchers or devised by the co-researchers); key concepts or ideas were organised on a whiteboard to make them visible throughout the session, and the information was repeated using different strategies; either an academic researcher or one of the co-researchers took responsibility for this task. To conclude the session, the issues or ideas relevant to the team were synthesised. All of the above helped to organise the research activity and make it more comprehensible.

As discussed in previous papers (Haya-Salmón and Rojas-Pernia 2021; Rojas-Pernia and Haya-Salmón 2021), this research revolved around four interconnected phases. The first phase was the creation of the team and consultation on the research topic; the second phase focused on designing the research process and data collection; the third phase was data analysis; and the fourth phase was the dissemination of the results.

From a methodological point of view, it is possible to identify two approaches. Firstly, our research was documented by the two academic researchers. This was performed using audio and video recordings and a field diary. In addition, the co-researchers recorded each session through voice notes in which a brief summary of the session and important issues were recorded. Photographs were also taken of the activities carried out. All this material, organised in sessions, was uploaded to the website² by the two academic researchers.

Secondly, different strategies, techniques and materials were used in order to promote listening and the participation of all members of the research team. We worked with personal objects, image-theatre, photography, audiovisual material and body-mapping. We focused on the use of some of these resources with the aim of sharing how they could help us get to know each other and encourage dialogue in the team. Consequently, the findings presented in this article are the result of the systematic documentation process carried out by the academic researchers over two years.

The documentation process we followed allowed us to think about techniques that would facilitate the participation of people with intellectual disabilities in the research team. Specifically, this article describes three techniques (objects, image-theatre and body-mapping) that rely on languages other than verbal language. Therefore, the visual methods we present in the results section are used as elements that facilitate inclusive research processes and collaborative inquiry within the team rather than tools for data collection.

3.2. Mediated Spaces of Reflection through Objects, Image-Theatre and Body-Mapping

Three of the techniques used by the research team are described below. A brief description of the technique, the research phase in which it was used, the purpose of its use and reflections by the authors of this article are also included.

a. Personal Objects

As Mannay (2020) points out, the use of participant-selected objects can be an opportunity to explore their everyday lives as well as a very useful resource in social research. Whether the objects are produced by the participants or selected by them, the participants can lead the conversation and highlight or focus on what is important to them. Furthermore, as the author notes, “the artefacts metaphorically took the researchers to different times and places, and physically shifted the interview setting from the confines of the room” (p. 323).

As we said earlier, the first meeting was informative and was attended by some young people who had been involved in an organisation for people with intellectual disabilities from the region. As a result, some of the young people knew each other through the organisation, although not all of them had participated in the same programmes. For all of us, it was the first time we researched together.

The use of personal objects was introduced in the initial meetings during the first phase, the creation of the team and consultation on the research topic. The academic researchers suggested that each team member bring a personal object that was important to them, whatever they wanted. We had two objectives, to begin to discover ourselves and narrate to others and also to promote an interest in getting to know other people (what links us and what we share or do not share). To this end, we each selected an important personal object and shared it with the rest of the group. The objects that were selected were: a clown's nose, a playstation remote control, a loudspeaker, a cuddly toy, a photo album, a bracelet, a letter, another cuddly toy, a music CD and a book.

"This makes me feel a bit embarrassed, because for me this is already a bit childish". Finally, Elena (co-researcher) uncovered her object: "This is very important to me because it has photos of my first communion. That day was very important, I felt emotional, for me it is very important".

Belén (co-researcher): "My object is a letter (. . .) but it was a special moment for me because after many years of bullying, it was the first time, it was my first boyfriend, the first boy that paid attention to me . . . it brings back a nice memory". (Field Notes, s2)

As each person presented their object, other members of the team freely asked questions: Why is that object important to you? What do you use it for? What does it represent? How long have you had it? Memories are linked to people or situations that have been important in our lives.

Susana (academic): What do you think the things we have done have been useful for?

Belén: To get to know something about ourselves.

Susana: How has it helped you?

Ernesto (co-researcher): To know a bit more about the others.

Susana: Nearly everyone has said important things. Why? We go through each of the objects and link them to people that have been or are important in our lives. (AudioRecording, s2)

The objects took us from the past (a special moment, a hobby that we gave up or a person that does not share our life anymore) to the present (hobbies that we have now or new friends). The objects helped us to discover that some people in the group have things in common and that all of us have chosen objects that link us to other people.

b. Image-Theatre

Image-theatre is a type of Theatre of the Oppressed (Boal 1979, 2006) that uses non-verbal language to express the experiences of everyday situations. Non-actors can express their ideas, emotions or fears through theatre. The application of this theatrical technique in the context of social and educational research reveals numerous possibilities, increasing the channels and forms of expression and communication while allowing us to explore oppressive or unjust situations that people we work or research with may experience (Rigano 2021; Enghart 2004). Specifically, and within the context of inclusive research, we found inspiring examples in which the Theatre of the Oppressed and image-theatre are used by the co-researchers to denounce socially unjust situations that people with intellectual disabilities experience (Ignagni and Schormans 2016). Thus, according to Perry (2012), image-theatre may "provide participants with a lens through which they can witness instances of domination and oppression as they are enacted by themselves and by others in each moment" (p. 116).

We used the resource of image-theatre in different sessions during the first phase of our research with two main objectives: to use the body as an expressive element and as a means to investigate, reveal or denounce situations of injustice or oppression experienced by the participants.

Specifically, the resource was useful to start thinking about possible research topics. Thus, as described in the following example, image-theatre allowed the group to act out situations from their daily lives (from the present to the past) that were interesting in order to start talking about episodes in their lives in which some of the “characters” saw their rights being violated.

One of the group sculptures represents a break time in a school (Figure 1).



Figure 1. Group sculpture.

In the scene, one of the characters is a teenager who is crying. The character wanted “Not to be hit, not to be insulted, not to be made fun of and not to be called a nerd”. The fictitious situation allows some ideas to emerge about what this character experiences and how other young people and adults behave in such a context. Once the performance is over, the team stops to talk about what has been performed.

Nacho, one of the academics, states that out of the whole performance he focused on Santi’s statue because it represented an unjust situation. He asks the group if they agreed with him. Without hesitation they answer that it is an unfair situation.

“Do you think that it is an unrealistic situation?” Unanimously, they reply, “quite the opposite”. From that moment on, they began to recount situations they have experienced. Mónica (co-researcher) says that she was treated very badly and had to leave school. Belén (co-researcher) said that, for her, the situation went on for 12 years in two different schools. She points out that telling other people did not help her. Elena (co-researcher) points out that she has also experienced it.

Nacho asks why the situation is unfair. Elena replies that “people like us deserve to be in a good environment, free of bullying, without discrimination . . . just in a group”. “*why do people with disabilities deserve these situations?*” Some classmates react and correct Elena, stressing that we have the right to be well-treated (Field Notes, S1).

Three months following the start of the research project and with work already underway on the formulation of questions around the research topic, the photographs taken during the application of the image-theatre were used to represent our ideas and imagination on the importance of social relationships and loneliness (Phase 2).

At the request of one of the co-researchers, the photographs taken during the activity were incorporated into a PowerPoint presentation, which was used to discuss on our topic in several meetings (Figure 2). The images helped us talk about what we can communicate through the body or facial expressions or how we occupy space.

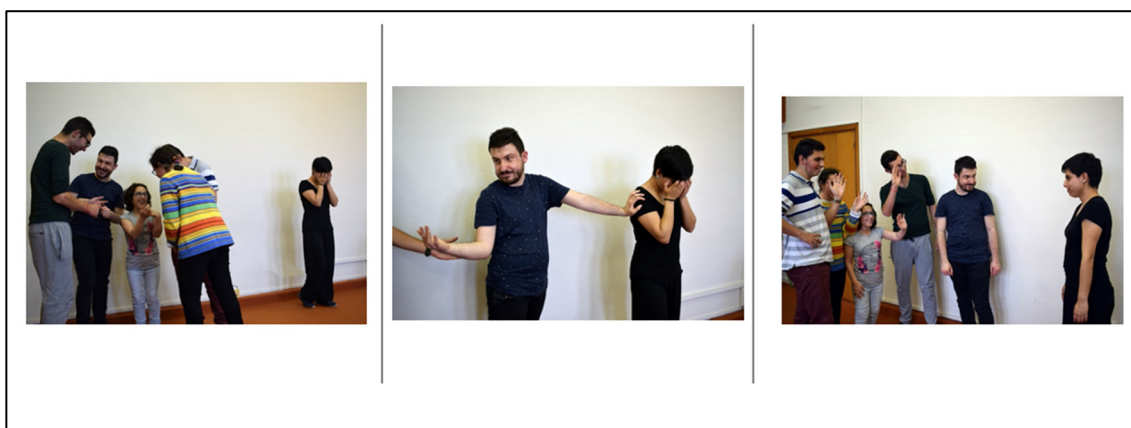


Figure 2. Sequence on the importance of social relationships.

These and other images were used for the dissemination of the results phase and for the preparation of the exhibition open to the public.

c. Body-Mapping

Body-mapping reveals perspectives that would otherwise be oppressed or obscured. It is a way of representing first-person accounts and social relationships through the body.

As described by some authors (Jager et al. 2016; Gastaldo et al. 2018; Dew et al. 2019), body-mapping involves drawing a life-size outline of the body and decorating the outline with images, symbols and words in response to a series of semi-structured questions. More specifically, body-mapping draws the participants' attention to their bodies and their bodily experience, encouraging awareness and reflection on that bodily experience (Jager et al. 2016).

The body-mapping technique was used in the second phase of our research—designing the research process and data collection. The purpose was to enable those involved to indicate what they feel and where they feel loneliness. It is important to point out that the introduction of this technique resulted from the process of analysing the initial interviews with the participants.

Initially it was decided to use semi-structured interviews to explore the subjective experience on relationships and loneliness of young people with and without disabilities. The first two interviews with young people without learning disabilities made us realise that some questions were confusing: for the interviewees some questions were too abstract and their answers did not help us to understand their experiences, e.g., when we asked them how they feel loneliness.

Susana: We also said something about the interviews (. . .) What had we missed?

Santi: Some things were missing!

Mónica: We have to change questions 6 and 7, some of the terms.

Santi: Terms, and a close to end the interview.

Susana: (. . .) someone told us the questions were very difficult, we had to repeat them several times and give examples so that they would understand us. So those of us who were in the last session decided that Nacho and I should give the questions some more thought and come up with a proposal. (VRecording 12)

The body-mapping was a result of this interview analysis process. Before incorporating them, we decided to test them between ourselves and assess their suitability.

Susana: How do you see this activity and the questions we asked the interviewees?

Ernesto: Good!

Elena: Oh! I think it's complicated.

Santi: Would it be this activity?

Susana: The interview would be the one we prepared together, but do you remember that some questions weren't clear?

Santi: Yes!

Susana: So, we would do this in the middle: they would have to talk about a situation . . .

Santi: Oh OK! But without the post-its or the figures

Susana: No, no! With the figures and the post-its, and later we would bring the 60 figures and 60 post-its, whatever . . .

Santi: That would be great! But it's going to be complicated to sort all that out

Elena: That's right! (VRecording 12)

The team carried out five body-mappings (Figure 3). The use of cartographies provided the team with access to personal experiences (something which the interview questions did not achieve) and made it possible to draw what was difficult to put into words. The body-mapping technique “will give us twice as much information because we have the answers to the interview and with this other technique we get more information” (Santi), “so more people participate” (Gerardo, co-researcher), “without using words” (Santi), although “there are things that are difficult to say” (Elena).

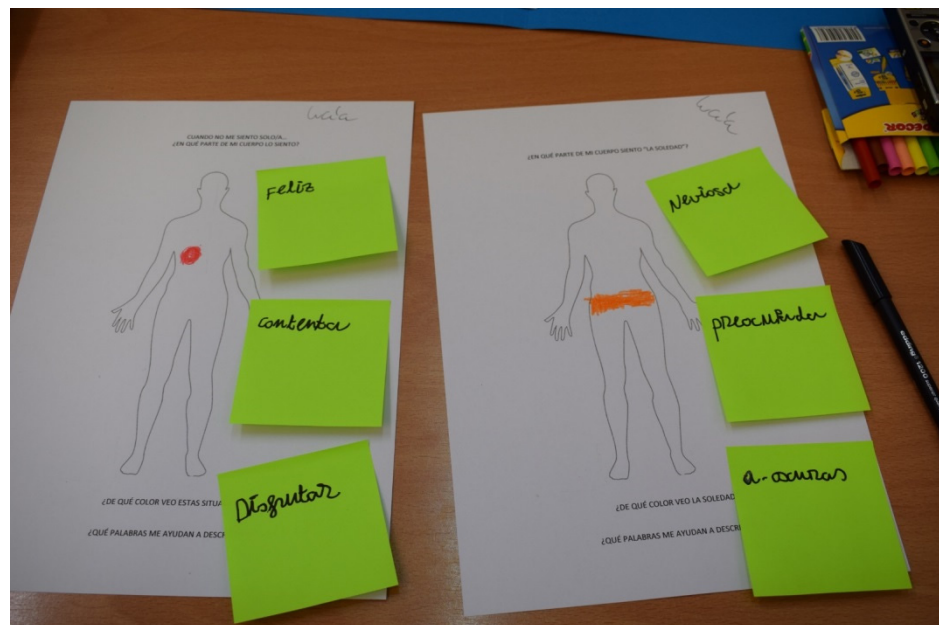


Figure 3. Personal cartography example. Left: “When I don’t feel lonely—Where do I feel it in my body? What colour would represent it? What words would I use?” (Response: “happy, content, enjoy”). Right: “Where do I feel loneliness? What color would represent it? What words would I use?” (Response: “nervous, worried, in the dark”).

Overall, it can be seen that the methods used during our research on the importance of social relationships and loneliness made it possible for the following:

- Share personal knowledge within the group.
- Talk about the importance of looking after ourselves and others and, therefore, the need to know how to set limits.
- Return to important issues, remembering work carried out so far.
- Use personal experience to connect to social issues.
- Debate complex topics, identify ways of thinking and being in different worlds.
- Recognise the value of basic human rights.
- Organise the process followed.

- Share the research process followed or the work carried out with other people.
- Question the ways in which we traditionally carry out research and the extent to which methods distance us from the people being interviewed or observed.
- Continually reflect on the ways in which research limits and restricts our ability to talk, act and imagine.

4. Discussion of the Results

Research processes that have participatory and dialogical qualities encourage democratic forms of learning for everyone. The research strategies used during all phases of the project, mainly narrative, visual and creative, facilitated the exchange of experiences, interests and curiosity in other people. Dialogue between members widened the options for expressing what is personal and connecting with what is social as well as gave more control to the co-researchers.

As we said before, we made clear that it was necessary to ensure from the first meeting that the whole team was involved in the decisions that were adopted. The issue is not so much a question of accessibility. Thus, while everyone should have access to information, inclusive research must ensure that researchers do not continue to reproduce outdated oppressive dynamics, even when the methods promote participation, and their ethical appeal could lead us to believe that their introduction changes the type of relationships that are built in research and the discourses they promote (Milner and Frawley 2019).

Therefore, it was necessary to develop ways of inquiring, debating or making proposals that recognise all voices from the outset. From the first session, different techniques were incorporated in order to promote forms of communication other than the spoken word, such as the use of objects or body language (theatre-image) to relate situations and relevant ideas to each of us. We were all able to share our experiences and share personal information and ideas about what was important to us.

Moreover, as a relational space, this way of working was maintained throughout the project. The development of the project was an opportunity to get to know each other, discover our strengths, value listening, practice asking questions, respect personal space and appreciate the attention of the people we work with. There needs to be a safe space for all members of the research team and for everyone to recognise that they have authoritative voices.

Thus, valuing research-inquiry strategies that emphasise visual language, for example recording our research process through photography, provides us with tools that help us all to think about the process itself and disseminate it. It is essential to be aware of the opportunities that each research meeting provides in order to be able to review how research is constructed.

As mentioned previously, photographs were taken throughout the research project. The images were taken by the academic researchers and by the co-researchers to document work processes. Some of the productions were used to document work on the website, but they were also very valuable in the dissemination of the results phase (phase 4). Specifically, they were used to record the whole process, which was formatted into a poster (see Figure 4), and for the preparation of the exhibition.

It is important to note that the academic researchers carried out a pre-selection of the images due to the number of photos they had (around 1500). Afterwards, they prepared a guide with questions (image functionality, aesthetic aspects and content) that helped us decide which images would be exhibited.



Figure 4. Poster of the research process used in the exhibition. (From left to right and from top to bottom: We have something to say/How did we conduct our research? Images, objects, theater, asking questions, looking for answers. Which concerns us? Looking around us. Working as a team: dialogue and discussion).

Similarly, research processes cannot merely feed the expert role of the academic researchers (extractive research). We believe that academic standards (implementation times, publication rules, etc.) may weaken the principles on which inclusive research is based. Therefore, it is necessary to ensure that there is enough time to stop and think about the ways in which we move forward in research in order for it to be truly transformative. As some works highlight (Ellis 2018), it is possible for research discourses and practices to move in opposite directions if we do not stop to think about it. We agree with Chalohanová and colleagues that “time is needed to relax into relationships that are allowed to build slowly and organically” (Chalochanová et al. 2020, p. 155).

What emerges is a way of working in which academic researchers need to show an attitude of receptiveness, permeability and genuine listening. We recognise a phenomenological attitude in which researchers learn from the situations that arise from what is constructed together, placing us in different positions in the research relationship. From there, it is possible to question, e.g., the use of the interview as the only strategy that can be used, and allow other ways of researching experience, such as body-mapping.

Finally, the productions made by the team and shared with other people later on in the exhibition, e.g., allowed professionals, students or families to think about the research topic, the results obtained and the work processes followed. Similarly, the creation of a space where visitors assessed issues raised in the exhibition and which the team could return to in later meetings was important in the process of personal empowerment.

Reflection on research methods increases knowledge about the ways we have been carrying out research and contribute to recognising the knowledge that emerges from collective learning and the co-production of knowledge. In line with Bigby et al. (2014) and Fudge et al. (2019), the diversity of methods and activities produced a fluid positioning of all collaborators. The contributions and control over the process and the results increased at every stage to the extent that they felt respected. They were progressively exercising more control.

The examples show how the use of different tools and methods is a constant throughout this research. Working with images from the activities we were developing allowed us to return to and discuss important issues, raise questions and share experiences. Objects, image-theatre, the images we made of the objects and the dramatised situations clearly enabled the participation of all members of the team. These images have shaped the biography of the project.

5. Conclusions

As we highlighted at the beginning of this article, the principles that underpin research articulate how it develops and the relationships that are built. The research strategies support the principles and, within the framework of inclusive research, these should contribute to improving the lives of people with intellectual disabilities and transforming the type of unequal relationships that are established with them.

We have identified a range of practices in which listening and a willingness to permanently learn from the people we research is essential (article 3 2021) and in which academic researchers support researchers with intellectual disabilities throughout the research process, thus maximising participation.

The development of research projects supported by visual, creative and narrative strategies contributes to imagining other avenues of inquiry. These works also highlight the need for funding agencies to take into account that collaborative research requires time. It is essential not to forget that co-production in its deepest sense is slow knowledge, where history matters.

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Notes

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² <https://inclusionlab.unican.es> (accessed on 27 March 2022).

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