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Researching Inclusively with College Students with Intellectual Disabilities

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Abstract: This paper reports on an inclusive research project which was conducted in one Irish higher education institution where a postsecondary educational (PSE) program is offered for students with intellectual disabilities (ID). A definition of inclusive research is presented and the current research project is placed within this framework with the roles of both participants (six co-researchers with ID) and sample (eighteen students with ID) outlined. This paper focuses on the processes of this collaboration and the benefits and challenges encountered. While the input and expertise of co-researchers were vital in providing guidance to the design and presentation of information on the research to their peers with ID, the participation of these students also involved risks. These included the identity shift that came with the role of co-researcher that was on occasions, problematic for co-researchers to navigate, and the inherent difficulties with the unequal power relationships between this current author and co-researchers. Despite these challenges however, it is concluded that the participation of these co-researchers with ID goes some way in addressing preconceived notions that come with the label of ID, and that the research field stands to benefit significantly from their involvement.

Keywords: People with Intellectual Disabilities, Inclusive Research, Students as Co-Researchers, Higher Education

Introduction

The concept of inclusive research is underpinned by the key principle that research should be conducted with, rather than on, the people whose lives are its focus (Walmsley and Johnson 2003). Inclusive research recognizes the existence of unequal power relations in traditional research approaches between researchers and ‘the researched’ and has been developed to counteract this trend. Although a diversity of approaches in inclusive research exists, it has mainly been undertaken in collaboration with individuals with intellectual / learning disabilities. However, a number of studies have included children, young people, parents and adults (for example, Booth and Booth 1994; Johnson and Traustadottir 2000; Nind and Vinha 2012), families and advocates (National Institute for Intellectual Disability 2010), as well as university students (Black-Hawkins and Amrhein 2014). In the field of disabilities, a wealth of inclusive research exists with its supporters and practitioners highlighting the benefits power sharing can have for the marginalized and excluded (Walmsley and Johnson 2003). This paper offers an account of a small scale inclusive research project which involved the current author - a lecturer in an Irish university - working alongside college students with intellectual disabilities (ID). These individuals were trained as co-researchers and collected qualitative data using one-to-one semi structured interviews. This paper reports on the processes of this collaboration and the benefits and challenges encountered. The study offers an opportunity for reflecting on the learning that was gained both on the part of the student co-researchers and the current author. The many challenges in sharing power and control with a group of student co-researchers resulted in the expenditure of a substantial amount of personal reflection and pragmatic decision-making. The impact of these choices is documented in this paper in an aim to be transparent and authentic.

Student Research in Education

The label of inclusive research is not necessarily associated or used within the discipline of education (Seale, Nind, and Parsons, 2014). Terms such as ‘student voice’ (see Bradley, Deighton and Selby 2003; Shevlin, and Rose, 2008) have been used to address the exclusion of students from conversations about teaching, learning and schooling and challenges the dominant images of students as silent, passive recipients of what is defined as education (Bullough and

Gitlin 2001). Other terms such as ‘insider research’ describe the research conducted from the social and cultural standpoint of the participant (Fielding 2004). It has been argued that this research is less disruptive because of the absence of ‘outsiders’ and facilitates the access of otherwise inaccessible data that emerges from “the world which children know as insiders” (Alanen 2005, 31-45). The term ‘participatory research’ (Reason and Bradbury 2006) has also been used for its benefits to the all-round ethos of an institution (MacBeath, Myers, and Demetriou 2001). Other participatory studies (i.e. Kaplan and Howes 2004; Thomson and Gunter 2007) have demonstrated how the active involvement of students and stakeholders in schools can encourage change and improvement within this environment.

Although the active engagement of students in research has long been practiced within school contexts creating significant shifts in the understanding of roles, purpose and agency (Fielding 2001), research collaborations with students in higher education remains ‘under-theorized and under-utilized’ (Kirshner and O’Donoghue 2001, 4) and no clear conceptualization of the term exists in this context. This complexity highlights the importance of the need for the engagement of the construction of a clear vocabulary in order to make meaning of collaborative research and to view partnerships as an “on-going struggle for teachers and students and for researchers and students” to co-create meanings (Cooke-Sather, 2006, 361). A rationale for attempting inclusive research in this current study was based on a need to engage students with ID in an active and meaningful manner, and to gain access to their personal views and opinions (Bragg 2007).

Contextualizing Inclusive Research

Certain conditions need to be in place for inclusive research with Walmsley (2004, 69) arguing that “only the excluded need inclusive research”. Consequently there is a wealth of inclusive research in the field of learning and intellectual disabilities. However, within academic disability debates, the views and needs of physically disabled individuals have tended to dominate (Chappell 2000). Furthermore, it had been acknowledged that a disability hierarchy exists in some disabled communities (Shakespeare 2006); those with ‘unseen’ disabilities – such as learning and intellectual disabilities – often feel that there is less recognition of the disabling issues they face than for those with physical disabilities.

Inclusive research is associated with social movements that include self-advocacy (Walmsley and Johnson 2003), healthcare (Minkler and Wallerstein 2008) and user-led services (Frankham 2009). Within these contexts it is argued that people with ID have long been excluded from much of the research that occurs within the area of disability (Walmsley and Johnson 2003). Increasingly some people with ID have indicated that they no longer wish to have research done *on* them or to be the *objects* of research; rather individuals with ID have expressed the desire to be equal partners, or at least involved in the research design, its implementation and use (for example, see Atkinson and Williams 1990; Byers et al. 2008; Fendler and Muzaffar 2008). This paradigm shift that views people with disabilities as active subjects in research has become associated with new action research networks (i.e. Ainscow, Booth and Dyson 2004; National Institute for Intellectual Disability, 2010) which have taken place in the broad social science and qualitative research arenas, but not extensively applied to education research specifically.

However, inclusive research has its advocates and its critics and has attracted recent critical debate (see Nind, 2014; Seale, Nind, and Parsons, 2014). This paper is written in recognition of this critical examination and from the standpoint of this author’s interest in introducing creative and innovative methodologies in educational research, with a particular concern for student voice and participation. However, it is vital to be cognizant of the fact that critiques of inclusive research urge caution about being naïve and viewing the possibilities of inclusive research with a ‘rose-tinted’ perspective. Consequently, practitioners in this area are encouraged to challenge

current thinking about the benefits and quality of inclusive research in relation to their own particular projects (Seale, Nind, and Parsons, 2014). Going some way to respond to the call of “who did what, whose voice is heard and who has the final say?” (p. 352), in the context of this current study, this author endeavored to remain realistic about co-researchers’ level of responsibility. While decisions made could be viewed as more researcher than co-researcher lead, MacLeod, Lewis, and Robertson, (2014, 416) interpret this involvement as a process of “dialogue” rather than “handing over control of something”. Rather than concentrating on the issue of power, these authors observe that what matters more is the question of whether the research and those involved benefit from the dialogue and co-production, and whether the experience provided a positive and empowering learning experience. In the following sections it is advanced and outlined that co-researchers - *and* the author of this paper, benefited enormously from working inclusively, and that such collaborations can inspire other partnerships in this research field.

Higher Education Opportunities for People with Intellectual Disabilities

This research took place in a higher education institution in the Republic of Ireland – Trinity College Dublin - that offers a 2-year full-time postsecondary (PSE) education program entitled the Certificate in Contemporary Living (CCL) for adults with ID (O'Brien et al. 2009; Kubiak and Espiner 2009). Opportunities for adults with ID to learn in higher education have gained traction internationally over the last number of years (i.e. see University of Alberta 2006; Flinders University 2011; Stefánsdóttir 2010). In the US access to postsecondary education in college settings was given a boost from U.S. Department of Education funding to create comprehensive Transition Programs for Students with Intellectual Disabilities (TPSID) (Nevill and White 2011), and over 250 TPSID programs are now being offered in the U.S. (Grigal and Hart 2010). Indeed it is now argued that students with ID are very gradually becoming more recognized as part of a subgroup of diverse learners in the higher education landscape (Grigal, Hart, and Paiewonsky, 2010). Participation in college for these students provides opportunities to learn a diverse range of skills, such as communication, problem solving and self-regulation skills (Kubiak 2015; Kubiak and Shevlin 2015). It has been advanced that the prestige associated with higher education helps individuals secure better jobs earning higher wages, with the majority of jobs requiring skills associated with at least some education beyond second level (Carnevale and Desrochers 2003).

Methodology

Research Process 1: Preparation

Co-researchers’ selection process: This paper forms part of a doctoral research study (see Kubiak 2013), that used a phenomenographic approach (see Marton and Booth, 1997; Marton 1981) to examine how students with ID experienced learning while attending university. This article reports on one stage of this research – the participatory element, which involved working inclusively with student co-researchers with ID. This research therefore addressed the following question: How can students with ID be meaningfully included in a phenomenographic research project about their peers’ experiences of learning?

The challenge of selecting a ‘representative’ group of participant students has been highlighted as a complicated issue. Possible ways of recruiting students such as random selection (Leitch et al. 2007), or targeting a specific marginalized group (Bland and Atweh 2007) were considered. However, after weighing up these options, and after having presented an outline of the research to CCL students explaining the purposes, aims and ideals behind the research project, this author left it to the students themselves to select of a group of their peers who they

felt would be responsible co-researchers of the project. Six students who ranged in ages from 22 to 37 (identified in this paper as CR1 – CR6) were self-selected from a group of 38 first and second years. For ethical purposes, an information and consent letter was provided to both participants (in accessible format) and to their parents/guardians, explaining the project and offering the opportunity to ask further questions. The option to withdraw consent was made explicit and participants had multiple opportunities to raise questions or concerns. The university’s relevant ethics committee approved the study and confidentiality and anonymity were guaranteed to co-researchers and all participants in reporting results.

Timetable of training: The preparation and training of co-researchers was organized and led by the current author. In the first session the aims and objectives of the project were explored in more detail and co-researchers’ understanding of research and the role of the researcher was explored. A timeline covering a period of eleven weeks was outlined and agreed upon (see Table 1) with key objectives defined. Co-researchers were asked to write an individual reflection after each class, expressing what they felt was good, what was difficult and what they’d change about the particular session and its content. The feedback from these responses was used by this author to inform the framework and delivery of subsequent training sessions. In total, three focus groups were conducted, at the beginning, the middle and the end of the training. The aim of these meetings was to offer a space where co-researchers could reflect openly and contribute collectively as a group to the process as it was unfolding.

Table 1: Timetable for Training Co-Researchers

Week one	Establishing a baseline: Exploring co-researchers’ understanding of research and the role of the researcher
Week two	Stages of the research: Introducing the stages involved in a social research project and the meaning of key words
Week three	The research question: Addressing the question: ‘What and why are we researching?’
Week four	Inclusive research: Understanding the theory and application of inclusive research
Week five	Consent form: Designing the consent form and exploring ways to share information of the project to people with intellectual disabilities Signing up: Getting consent: ensuring that participants know what they are signing up for
Week six	Interview techniques: Exploring facilitation and questioning
Week seven	Role play: Practicing interviewing skills
Week eight	Presentation: Presenting the research project and gaining consent accessibly
Week nine, ten and eleven	Data collection: Interviewing the research sample.

By week six, the training sessions had covered the following topics: key words used in research; the research question; a brief background of inclusive research; gaining consent/designing a consent form; designing a PowerPoint of the project to present to the sample, and finally, the process of questioning and interviewing.

Presenting the project: The group’s decision on how to present information of the research to their peers centered on two choices: whether co-researchers should talk to the group and give out information sheets, or if a PowerPoint should be used accompanied by information sheets. It was decided that the latter was the better choice with one co-researcher stating: “we should have a meeting with the group and ... use... a PowerPoint presentation. (It’s) better than just telling them... it should have the words written out and add pictures as well.” Much thought and

discussion went into designing the PowerPoint to make it accessible; this included: font size; choice and proximity of words, as well as choice of images. The importance of how co-researchers felt about these decisions is captured by one individual: *“The message is how learning is important for all people, disabled or not. People all learn in different ways... (when presenting) you need to speak clear and make it interesting.”* The group also designed a quiz that individuals had to complete if they chose to participate in the research; this was to ensure that they demonstrated knowledge of what exactly they were signing up for. Finally, the group designed a poster that gave information on the time and date of the presentation; this was placed on the notice board inside the lobby of the institute.

The climate of encouragement and support during the rehearsal process of the presentation is captured by a co-researcher who responded to one individual’s first attempt at presenting: *“You did well... we’re not out to ‘get’ you – rather we’re here to support you”*. By the end of week six, co-researchers felt confident enough to present the finished PowerPoint outlining the research project to thirty-five of their peers. This resulted in seventeen students declining and eighteen students choosing to participate (eight females $n=8$, ten males $n=10$), all of whom had been attending the certificate program for over one year. These students were encouraged to discuss the research with their parents/guardians, and letters with information on the project were brought home.

Preparing for the interviews. Ashworth and Lucas (2000) assert that a researcher’s interviewing skills should be subject to ongoing review. For this current author an overriding question was: did co-researchers have the confidence and competence to conduct the interviews? Competence is defined as being “an expert in the topic of the interview as well as in human interaction” (Kvale 1996, 147), and possessing “great self-assurance, knowledge about others, a certain maturity as a person and a tangible presence” (Kroksmark 2006, 16-17). Mindful of these definitions, there was a real need to consider how co-researchers could be supported to develop their skills of interviewing, and encourage them to become more self-assured. Consequently, training sessions covered some theoretical perspectives on listening and questioning; these classes were supported with accessible worksheets (covering the skills of listening and responding; examples and use of open and closed questions) that reinforced the material that was covered in class. A semi-structured interview tool was also developed that encompassed some set questions, while allowing space during the interview for co-researchers to follow-up on individual responses.

During weeks seven and eight, co-researchers used role play to practice the process of interviewing, taking turns with each other to be both interviewer and interviewee. By week nine each co-researcher had some theoretical understanding and practical experience of the process of questioning and interviewing. At this stage however, they were becoming increasingly concerned and anxious at the prospect of carrying out the ‘real’ interviews with their peers over the following three weeks. As one co-researcher stated: *“I’ve never actually done an interview... I’ll find it hard to look at the person”*, while another individual remarked: *“I’m a little nervous and concerned...how am I going to ask the questions? What’ll people’s responses be? It’s nerve-racking”*. To alleviate these fears, co-researchers requested that the current author would be present for reassurance and support during the interviews and would only intervene when asked.

Each interviewee was asked by co-researchers to complete a visual representation (see Loxley and Prosser 2008) that illustrated how they learn on the certificate program. A large number of respondents produced a variation of concept maps or mind maps – a learning strategy taught in class - while others drew a simple representation of their thoughts. These stimuli proved to be highly effective in (1), helping co-researchers elicit information from the interviewees; and (2), enabling interviewees to select a starting point for the conversation to unfold, thus allowing the interviewer space to think about forming further questions during this process.

The venue: People with intellectual disabilities, like many people, do not always adapt well to unusual situations, and can find it difficult to cope with an unfamiliar environment (Bull 1995). Poor adaptation has a deleterious effect on memory and communication, and according to Milne and Bull (2001) can increase stress levels. Taking these concerns into account, co-researchers agreed that a small meeting room was the most suitable location for interviews to take place as it was a space that all students would be familiar with and a place that had an intimate atmosphere, yet it was large enough to accommodate a number of people comfortably without feeling crowded or contained. It was agreed that a ‘Do not disturb’ sign should be placed outside the door of the room, informing people that an interview was taking place.

Research Process 2: Undertaking the Interviews

Bull (1995) recommended a phased approach to interviewing people with ID which consists of: (1) building rapport, (2) free narrative, (3) questioning, and (4) closure. As outlined above, the training sessions delivered to co-researchers covered a number of topics that included the process of questioning and interviewing. In collaboration with this author, co-researchers adapted Bull’s approach by using phases that consisted of: building rapport; questioning (which consisted of the use of a visual stimulus to elicit information, using open/closed questions, follow-up questions and probing), and closing.

Building rapport. Even though co-researchers were familiar with the individuals they were interviewing, they opened the conversation by thanking and welcoming the student, before asking them if they were happy to proceed with the interview. CR6’s opener was characteristic of what other co-researchers said: “*I’d like to thank you for coming along today for this interview, and your drawing is brilliant, can you explain what you have in your drawing?*” Other features of this phase included co-researchers’ awareness of good body language and the need for direct eye contact; on occasions they also smiled at the interviewee, further helping to bring them into the conversation.

Questioning, keeping the talk going: For all interviews, co-researchers used a visual stimulus as a catalyst for eliciting information from the interviewee. The following section offers an insight into this method by focusing on one interview exchange between CR1 and P1, a participant who brought in a drawing of how she learns (Picture 1):

CR1: “Hello (P1). Can you tell me about what this picture is about?”

P1: That’s me working in class in a group. I learn in lectures, on computers, writing. I keep a journal.

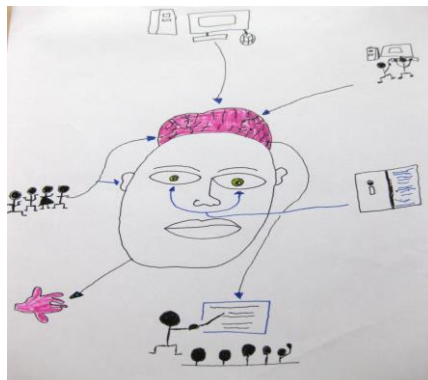


Figure 1: P1’s visual stimulus

After an awkward period of silence, CR1 referred back to P1's drawing and asked:

CR1: Do you like listening to music? How does music help you to learn?

P1: I find music helps me to learn because I listen to foreign music from other countries. I pick up a few words. I know some French and German. I just listen to the words of the song and that's how I find things out.

The flow of conversation between CR1 and P1 also occasionally came to a standstill from the unwitting use of 'closed' questions. For example:

CR1: Why do you not put unhappy feelings into your journal? Does it make you feel upset?

P1: Yes. (long pause)

When open questions were used however, it kept the flow of the conversation going, and on occasions, elicited some deep thoughts. On this occasion, views regarding the role of emotions in learning were expressed:

CR1: "Why did you put those smiley faces in (your journal) and how do they help you learn?"

P1: I use these because I find that they help me come out of my shell more and they make me not upset, and any time I write I use them and I find I learn more and that I make my writing look more happy.

Intervening and Prompting

This author intervened in the interviews when requested by the co-researchers. This happened for a variety of reasons and in a number of ways: prompting, advising and responding. The following conversation illustrates one such intervention when CR4 interviewed a female peer (P5) who arrived with a completed drawing.

CR4: Hello (P5). I see that you have a few things in your picture... let's see what you have done here, right, right I see a picture of a book, a computer, and what's this here? (Continues to describe at length what's in the picture)

Author (A): (Hand gestures used for CR4 to stop talking).

P5: That's me learning in lectures. I...

CR4: (talking over P5) And will that help you to think, once you've finished college, will it help you to do other things by. Right, okay, and tell me, has this helped you, has this helped you to improve in any way, say towards learning or anything like that?

A: Let him talk. Just say "tell me a bit more", draw him out.

CR4: You said working with others helps you learn. Could you tell me more about that?

P5: I get feedback from other people, I.....

CR4: (talks over P5) And how do you feel in class, how do you feel say, say working with others in class?

A: (Interrupts) You could ask: "Do you prefer to learn in a group or on your own?" It will give you an indication if he likes to learn alone or with others.

CR4: (Repeats) "Do you prefer to learn in a group or on your own?"

P5: In a group because I like to learn from and get feedback from other people. I like [

CR4: [Why?

P5: Because I like to hear other people's ideas. I...

CR4: (Interrupts) What sort of ideas?

A: Try not to break the flow of conversation – just let it flow. Try not to chop the responses down.

When CR4 was asked to reflect on his performance during the interview, he said he felt it went well, but thought that: *“I should have come to the point sooner, but I don’t do that and that’s something I need to work on”*. When P5 was asked for feedback on how the interviewer performed, she responded: *“I felt that he did very good... He needs to watch the long sentences and don’t cut people off with a ‘how’ or ‘why’; let them explain ‘till they’re finished... he could have waited me to finish... sometimes he answered questions for me”*.

The examples of dialogue outlined above offers an insight into the difficulties of the interviewing process for co-researchers. These hitches however provided much learning and co-researchers ultimately managed to complete eighteen interviews and collect data, albeit with much support and encouragement from this author. The following section discusses the intricacies of this collaboration and raises the complex issue regarding the level of support offered by non-disabled researchers in inclusive research projects.

Discussion

This paper reports on a research project which was conducted with co-researchers with ID. The key purpose of this study was to explore how an inclusive research approach could be used as a methodological lens to encourage learner participation and co-operation and to enable students with ID to have some agency in the production of research. Central to this was their opinions on the relevance of the methodology both to them as individuals and as members of a group with diverse abilities and needs. People with ID are often under-represented within disability research; the views and needs of physically disabled individuals have tended to dominate and those with ‘unseen’ disabilities – such as ID – often feel that there is less recognition of the disabling issues that they face. The fact that these voices are conspicuously absent in much of the current literature highlights the imperative for current research practice to adapt in order to be accessible a diversity of abilities. Furthermore, the voices of individuals with ID have a critical role in conveying the subjective experiences, such as those outlined above in this current study. This input is not just desirable, but crucial to the development of knowledge of research methodology and the abilities of people with ID to contribute to our understanding of this. A critical gaze of this project’s collaboration with students with ID is now offered and the benefits and challenges experienced in the student-researcher partnership are discussed.

Students as Co-Researchers: Benefits and Challenges

Benefits: This partnership created an opportunity for students to become co-researchers and be actively involved in a research project about their peers’ learning. Co-researchers made decisions that significantly informed how the research was designed and presented this to the peer group. The process of this project – ‘preparation’ and ‘interviewing’ – described above, was as important as the project’s outcomes that lead to a categorization of how certificate students learn (see Kubiak 2015).

The nature of student involvement in this project had a profound influence on the development of their sense of self and emotional well-being as well as the beliefs and attitudes they developed about themselves as co-researchers. For one student, the research project offered a context for reflection on how other students in the class perceived him: he relayed how being a researcher was a positive label given by fellow students who *“would notice how you would (engage) in class or how you answer questions”*. He became a role model with a voice, a decision-maker that was listened to. This empowering identity helped reshape his long held views on his perceived limitations that come with the label of ID.

Challenges: Research conducted alongside students with ID can present as many challenges as it does opportunities. Particular challenges that were encountered in this project included the following:

1. *Time restraints:* Time limitations existed for training co-researchers to become more involved, particularly in the analysis stage of the research. The process of transcription demands certain knowledge of skills and competencies; to even read even the shortest transcripts would have taken a substantial amount of time. This raises a key question regarding the use of participatory methodology: what should be reasonably expected of participants of inclusive research, particularly when there is no funding available to offer any incentive for participation?
2. *Identity shift- from student to researcher:* Co-researchers – who were all students of the certificate program – had to negotiate the uncertain shift that came from being a student to becoming a researcher. The expectation that they would be able to collect data and independently fulfill the role of the ‘interviewer’ after a period of 11 weeks of training was unreasonable. It was originally envisaged by this author that training co-researchers might minimize the perceived imbalance in the status of the interviewer and the interviewee, and increased the level of responsiveness of the interviewees. Placing the focus in the importance of the interviewer resonates with Milne and Bull (2001, 96), who state that in order to retrieve information that is accurate and reliable, the focus should be on “the abilities of the interviewer rather than the capabilities of the interviewee”.
3. *Unequal power relationships:* While this author endeavored to minimize the inherent difficulties regarding the unequal power relationships in this study, it was noted that inequalities were reflected and re-enacted on a regular basis. This mainly occurred through patterns of talk as seen in this author’s interventions during the co-researchers’ interviews with certificate students. According to Williams (2011), an imbalance of power almost defines the identity of people who have the label of ‘intellectual disability’. Consequently it is vital to analyze how disempowerment did happen in the talk that unfolded in these interviews, so that it can be challenged and changed. In response to this observation, allowing co-researchers to speak with no, or minimum verbal interventions may - or may not - have resulted in a more authentic set of findings. It is also noted by Williams (2011) that the right to speak is often weakened by the presence of others, and in particular by the presence of others who are familiar to people with ID. An analysis of the interviews shows how often this author ‘supported’ co-researchers by prompts and verbal instructions. While the intentions were good, there is however a very narrow dividing line between providing support to the talk, and threatening to take it over. A key implication for further inclusive research practice in this area is to explore what can be gained by researchers supporting people with ID to say less, to step back and to let the co-researcher speak.

Conclusion

Central to this paper has been an examination by both author and students to ‘learn about the process’ of inclusive research as this small-scale study evolved. Studies such as this are important because individuals with ID are under-represented in research and are often viewed as a group that possess complex impairments that act as a barrier to their participation (Nind 2008). Yet the need to recognize the importance of these voices has been highlighted and current research practice must adapt in order to be accessible to a wide diversity of individuals and abilities. In this current project, the voices and insights of the co-researchers were given prominence with a view to demonstrate that the participation of these individuals with ID has

much to offer, which goes some way in addressing preconceived notions and myths that come with the label of ID – for example, being unable to learn, lazy, non-productive, comic or childlike (O'Brien 2007). These myths need to be continually challenged as the research field has the potential to benefit significantly from the involvement of people with ID.

This study has also demonstrated that when staff and students come together to share their expertise, ideas and voices in the service of a shared cause, everyone gains. The working relationship outlined in this paper also benefited from the fostering of a relaxed and respectful atmosphere during the training sessions, a rapport that was, as far as possible, one of equality, where, in the words of Freire (1988), the teacher is someone who learns from a learner who teaches. However, the cynic may argue that this utopian ideal is a difficult to implement in a system that possesses a hierarchical structure. Consequently, the educator or researcher must be humble enough to be disposed to relearn through interaction with the learner, that which s/he already thinks s/he knows. For this current author, this study offered an opportunity to re-learn first-hand about research from a group of “expert witnesses” (Roberts and Nash 2009, 174-187). In this way, it is argued that disability research in general, and intellectual disability research in particular, can engage more thoroughly with participatory methodologies, to the benefit of all.

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