Mainstream or special educational settings: the views of Spanish people with intellectual disabilities

Abstract

This paper aims to contribute to the debate on how different educational contexts can facilitate the inclusion or exclusion of people with intellectual disabilities (ID). We carried out a qualitative study based on the principles of inclusive research with 36 Spanish adults with ID. The data were gathered through individual interviews, which were transcribed, summarised and adapted for later analysis and coding with participants. Together with participants, we coded the interviews into two main categories: 'mainstream schools' and 'special schools'. The results revealed the experiences of people with ID in mainstream schools, resource rooms and special education schools, analysing their preferences for regular or special contexts. The main conclusions drawn suggest that people with ID had both negative and positive experiences of inclusion at mainstream schools. Nevertheless, they preferred regular contexts, valued the help provided by SEN support teachers and highlighted the importance of adjusting the curriculum to students' educational needs. They also emphasised the need for greater empathy from classmates at mainstream schools.

Keywords: Intellectual disability, Mainstream school, Special school, Inclusive education, Inclusive research.

Introduction

The 1994 World Conference on Special Needs Education (UNESCO, 1994) set the political and practical agenda for inclusive education. In this agenda, regular or mainstream schools were identified as the most effective means of fighting discrimination and guaranteeing the participation and learning of all students.

However, 25 years after the Salamanca Statement, inclusive education is still a concern and a priority for many international organisations and national education systems. There is still a long way to go, since educational exclusion practices and discrimination continue to exist (Lacono et al., 2019; Qvortrup & Qvortrup, 2018). Indeed, one of the Sustainable Development Goals established by the United Nations for 2030 is to ensure an education for everyone (UN, 2015). This pro-inclusive discourse is supported by the European Agency for Special Needs and Inclusive Education (2018) and by the United Nations High Commissioner, who has underscored inclusive education as an opportunity for empowerment (UN, 2019).

However, despite the efforts of international organisations and national education systems, most practices continue to be based on approaches that single out 'special' students through individualised responses and diagnoses (Florian, 2019). Spain is no exception in this sense, and the practical reality of inclusive education is far from ideal in educational agendas. In Spain, compulsory schooling consists of primary education (age 6-12 years) and lower secondary education (13-16 years). For SEN students, compulsory education may be extended up to the age of 21 years. Organic Law 8/2013, of 9 December, regulates the Spanish education system for the Improvement of Educational Quality (LOMCE). This law promotes the principles of inclusion and the normalisation of differences in education. It establishes four types of schooling for students: (a) full-time schooling in regular classes, (b)

a combination of resource classes and regular classes to satisfy needs that cannot be met solely in the latter, (c) SEN classes and (d) special schools.

Inclusive Settings Benefit Students with Disabilities

The benefits of inclusive contexts for students with ID have been widely reported in the extant literature. In a study with Italian students with ID, Note et al. (2018) concluded that these students learned more academic skills through inclusive education than through segregated education. Similar studies in other countries have shown that inclusive classes are the best option for students with ID, since the mainstream setting promotes cognitive and social development (Dessemontet et al., 2012). Other studies report that positive social experiences at school promote the well-being and quality of life of students with ID (Scharenberg et al., 2019; Smogorzewska et al., 2019).

Similarly, in Australia, Wilson et al. (2017) observed that people with ID are happy when they feel included and share friendships with other people. Non-disabled peers are a key element in the educational inclusion of students with disabilities (Georgiadi et al., 2012). Teachers are another decisive figure in the inclusion of students with ID. A study carried out in Germany by Schwab et al. (2016) highlighted the importance of training teachers to facilitate social relationships among students in order to promote the inclusion of students with ID.

Resource Rooms as an Aid to Inclusion

In Spain, Sandoval et al. (2019) have linked resource rooms to the medical/therapeutic model of disability. In an Italian and Norwegian study, Nes et al. (2017) found that segregated classes were exclusive if attended only by certain students or if attendance was determined on the basis of a lack of academic competence. For their part, Riitaoja et al. (2019) reported that Finnish students had a negative perception of classroom practices in SEN classes due to the lack of academic knowledge provided in them and the division

between them and regular classes. In contrast, Author (2010) and Mañas-Olmo et al. (2020) found that Spanish students with disabilities liked resource rooms more than mainstream contexts, not because they were inclusive, but because they actually segregated them from their classmates. The participants in these two studies claimed to feel more comfortable in resource rooms than in regular classrooms because they offered them a safe place to be, away from the discrimination and exclusion they experienced in mainstream contexts.

Some authors suggest that resource rooms may be a key element for inclusion when SEN teachers collaborate with subject teachers, working together in the same classroom, both attending to student diversity (Butt, 2016). However, the literature points to two requisites that must be met in order to ensure inclusive guidance in classrooms of this kind: (1) regular teachers must be trained to work alongside support teachers in mainstream classrooms (Gómez-Zapeda et al., 2017; Sandoval et al., 2019), and (2) regular teachers must be trained in inclusive practices to enable them to work with different methodological strategies and learning rhythms in a classroom (Nes et al., 2017). According to a study by Sandoval et al. (2019), if these two requisites are not met, teachers may simply delegate these duties to the SEN teacher, due to their lack of knowledge and confidence for dealing with special educational needs, which in turn may lead to the provision of therapeutic support rather than true inclusion. These results have been confirmed also in other international studies (Boynton & Mahon, 2018; Tones, et al., 2017).

Special Schools vs. Pseudo-inclusive Practices

Kassah et al. (2018) state that student segregation is the most extended form of exclusion in education. However, there are other authors who support special schools. For example, Kelly et al. (2014) report the inability of Irish mainstream schools to satisfy the academic, social, emotional and behavioural needs of students. In relation to affective aspects, Hornby

(2011) found that students in New Zealand develop a sense of belonging in special schools, as they feel comfortable among peers who have similar disabilities.

In the social realm, Cook et al. (2016) explored experiences of friendship, intimidation and learning among children with disabilities in both regular and special schools in the UK, concluding that special schools facilitated social interactions and helped children overcome feelings of intimidation.

In contrast, Norwich (2007) argues that it is not a case of choosing between mainstream and special schools. Rather, he believes that both types of school must learn from and complement each other with the aim of designing curricula adjusted to students' needs, thereby creating an 'inclusive system' between them. However, this requires the commitment and collaboration of teachers from both school types, as indeed has been pointed out by Hedegaard-Soerensen et al. (2018) and Liasidou and Antoniou (2013).

Taking the Experiences of People with ID into Account in order to Transform Practices

Choosing which type of school to attend is an ongoing dilemma for people with disabilities. However, the opinions of those most affected have rarely been reported. Recent studies have shown that listening to people with disabilities may be a powerful tool for improving inclusive education (Messiou, 2019; Milner & Frawley, 2019).

Recent inclusive studies have sought to explore the outlook of people with ID, providing testimonies and recommendations for developing more inclusive contexts (Author et al., 2019; Milner & Frawley, 2019). Although the number of inclusive studies carried out with people with ID is very small, some, such as that by Author et al. (2019), explore how people with ID envisage their ideal school. Puyalto et al. (2016) also describe studies related to inclusive research, identifying the steps and aspects to consider when working with people with ID within an inclusive approach.

Based on the principles of inclusive research, the present study aimed to add to our existing knowledge of how different educational contexts (mainstream or segregated) contribute to the inclusion or exclusion of people with ID. The objective was to make a meaningful contribution to scientific literature by providing personal testimonies identifying the strengths and weaknesses of the mainstream and segregated contexts. To this end, we proposed three research questions: 1) Do mainstream schools facilitate or hinder the learning of people with ID? 2) Do people with ID prefer mainstream schools or resource rooms? And 3) Are special schools barriers or facilitators?

Method

This study is based on the principles of inclusive research (Walmsley & Johnson 2003), in which people with disabilities play an active role as co-researchers (Nind, 2014). We selected this methodology based on our belief that the views of people with ID have too often gone unheard and their opinions may be valuable in creating inclusive educational settings (Messiou, 2019). Moreover, we believe that this type of methodology fosters the empowerment of people with ID in the fight for their rights (Frankena et al., 2019). By adhering to the principles of inclusive research, we also strove to avoid a power hierarchy between researchers and co-researchers, establishing horizontal rather than vertical relationships. Although in any research there is always some kind of hierarchy, in our study, we made a concerted effort to break away from conventional power structures, offering participants the opportunity to act as co-researchers involved in choosing the study topic and designing and analysing the interviews. We strove at all times to ensure that the study was conducted in a collaborative manner. However, it was the first author of the paper who held and transcribed the interviews and drafted the conclusions.

The PhD commission of the University at which the study was conducted approved all ethical considerations. Moreover, the criteria established by the American Psychological

Association Ethics Code (APA, 2017) in relation to confidentiality, respect for participants and informed consent were also taken into account.

Recruitment and participants

To recruit the sample, we e-mailed eight occupational training centres for people with ID, of which only two agreed to meet with us. We then arranged a meeting with the directors of these two organisations to present the research project. We are aware that recruiting through service providers has its difficulties. However, the directors acted solely as gatekeepers, providing us only with access to people with ID; the final decision to participate (or not) in the study was made by participants themselves (Walmsley & Johnson, 2003). At the initial meeting with potential participants we emphasised that participation in the project was voluntary, and at the end we asked everyone to think about whether or not they wanted to participate. All those who attended the initial meeting expressed an interest in participating.

Recruitment was the result of intentional sampling. Participants were required to meet the following criteria: adult male or female with ID willing to participate in the study voluntarily.. The final sample comprised 36 people from the two centres that agreed to participate in the study: 13 women (36%) and 23 men (64%). Regarding age ranges, 10 participants (28%) were between 18 and 30 years old, 12 participants (33%) were between 31 and 40 years old, 10 participants (n= 28%) were between 41 and 50 years old, and 4 participants (n= 11%) were between 51 and 63 years old. Age was not considered an exclusion criterion for the sample since, given that the ultimate aim was to analyse educational experiences in different contexts (mainstream schools, resource rooms and special schools), we decided to include all testimonies, regardless of the educational policies and historical contexts that had affected participants' schooling. Indeed, we found only a few minor differences between the school experiences of older and younger participants.

Most participants attended mainstream schools (70%). Three participants (8%) started out in mainstream schools but were referred to special schools at some point during their school life. Four participants attended only special schools (11%) and, finally, four participants (11%) were not sure which type of school they had attended. Additionally, half of the participants in this study had attended resource classes at some point during their school life (50%).

Data Collection

We gathered the data in accordance with the principles of inclusive research (Nind, 2014). The co-researchers played an active role in both information collection and data analysis. We held an initial meeting, in which we explained what a study consisted of and how it was usually carried out. The process was similar in the two centres, although it was carried out independently in each organisation. In other words, the same sessions were held in both occupational training centres (one with 20 participants and the other with 16).

We also presented the aims and scope of the present study. During the meetings, we talked about participants' experiences at school and the type of school they had attended. This helped introduce participants to the world of research. Next, we held a brainstorming session focusing on the topics participants considered most important for research, from which we extracted a list of possible questions for the interviews. The following topics emerged from the brainstorming session: participants' preference for either special or mainstream contexts, their experiences in resource rooms and their relationships with their classmates and teachers. The co-researchers therefore participated in choosing the research topics to be studied. In the same session, we thought together (researcher and co-researchers) about what questions could be asked to elicit information about these topics. The researcher ensured everyone's participation by asking each person questions in order of seating. All questions were written on a board. The only task completed by the researcher alone was the unification of questions

from the two centres. This was done by eliminating all duplicate questions and ordering the remaining ones to ensure consistency. The final interview was designed using this procedure, i.e., the interview was not validated by experts and the researcher and co-researchers were the only ones involved.

The following are some of the questions asked during the interview: Were there people with disabilities at your school? Did you have classmates with disabilities? How did you feel about the SEN classroom? Would you have preferred to go to a special school? Would you have preferred to have classmates with or without disabilities?

Interview Process

The first author of this paper conducted the 36 interviews. During this process, participants acted only as interviewees. Each interview lasted between 20 and 40 minutes and was recorded using a portable digital device. Interviews were held in places with which participants were familiar (all interviews were held in the corresponding occupational training centre), since this helped them feel more comfortable, thereby building trust and encouraging honesty. Participants were given the transcription of their interview so that they could review and modify it, eliminating or expanding on any piece of information provided by them during the session. Some participants reviewed their interviews autonomously, while others were assisted by peers. For the sake of privacy, pseudonyms were used. Participants and their legal representatives signed informed consent forms. Before each interview, the authors explained to each participant the fundamental aspects of the study to ensure that the people with ID understood their rights.

Data Analysis

The data were analysed by a work team formed by the first author and the 36 participants. Therefore, in this phase also participants acted as co-researchers. Data analysis workshops comprising three sessions of approximately one hour each (three hours in total) were held at

the two centres. The process followed was the same in both. In the first session, the researcher explained the basic concepts of the study (definition, aims, phases and participants) and showed them examples of several anonymous interviews. The transcriptions had previously been edited by the researcher with the aim of rendering them easier to read and understand. Interviews were edited for three reasons: (1) each transcription contained 15-20 pages, a large volume for group data analysis; (2) complex phrases were used through oral language, which were difficult for co-researchers to understand, as many had reading difficulties and were accustomed to easy-to-read texts; and (3) there were 36 participants, all of whom had different vocabularies. Some participants used complex words that may have made their transcriptions hard to understand for some of their peers. The interview editing process was as follows:

- Removal of personal data (e.g., the sentence: '*My name is María and I studied at San Antonio's School in Seville*' was replaced with: '*My name is ___ and I studied at ___ School in ___*').

- Transformation of morphosyntactically complex sentences into simple sentences (e.g., the sentence: '*I would have liked to have gone to the school that I attended later on, where there were people with disabilities. I learned more there than in the school I studied in at the beginning*' was replaced with: '*I preferred the special school. At the special school I learned more than at the regular school*').

- Replacement of difficult words with simple ones (e.g., the sentence: '*I had curricular adaptations and, thus, I understood the subject matter more easily*' was replaced with: '*the teachers adapted the subject matter to my level. This meant I could understand everything*').

- Elimination of repeated ideas (e.g., *'I went to a special school. I do not know why I went to a special school, but, all I know is that I went to a special school'* was replaced with: '*I do not know why I went to a special school*').

The second and third sessions were dedicated to a group analysis of each interview. The researcher randomly assigned each participant an anonymous transcription and asked them to read it individually. Next, a mural was put up on the wall with two clearly marked sections or categories: 'mainstream schools' and 'special schools'. The first area was divided into two subcategories: 'mainstream classes' and 'SEN classes'.

Once all the participants had read their assigned interviews, the researcher explained the process for categorising them. First, she selected a category, explained its meaning and showed examples that could be included in it. Next, she asked participants to look in their assigned interviews for any suitable fragments that could be labelled with that category. Once they had found one, it was read and discussed with the rest of the group. When the group reached a consensus, the researcher wrote that fragment on the mural. This process was repeated with each category.

An effort was made to ensure that everyone participated actively in each category. Whenever participants could not find any fragments in their interviews for any of the categories, the rest of the group helped them. Finally, once all the transcriptions had been categorised in accordance with the perspective of people with ID, we used ATLAS Ti to analyse the qualitative data. This software package was only used to facilitate the analysis (data storage), since we had gathered a large amount of data. There was therefore no change between the categorisation of the interviews on the mural by participants and the results.

Results

Mainstream Schools: Facilitator or Barrier?

When analysing the results pertaining to mainstream schools, we differentiated between mainstream classes and resource (or SEN) classes. Both were spaces which the people with ID participating in this study attended within the mainstream schooling system. In relation to mainstream classes, participants reported both positive and negative experiences. They all mentioned the way they were treated by their classmates and teachers and highlighted situations in which they were helped by their peers during curricular activities (especially when they had difficulty completing assignments), as well as pleasant moments experienced during playtime.

> **Manuel**: *My classmates knew that I had trouble carrying out certain activities and they helped me.*

However, most participants claimed they had been discriminated against or bullied by classmates at some point for having an impairment. This turned school into a hostile and unpleasant place.

> **Nicolás**: *I used to tell my parents I was sick. I lied to avoid going to school, because they hit me and discriminated against me for having an impairment.*

In most cases, teachers acted as barriers rather than facilitators. Participants said they felt excluded, since the materials and contents were not adapted to their needs. This hindered their participation in the teaching and learning process. Furthermore, participants explained that teachers contributed to the discrimination they suffered, since they ignored them and, in some cases, did not treat them with respect (they were occasionally insulted or spoken to in a way that made them feel inferior). This contributed to their feelings of rejection in mainstream classes.

> **Saray**: *Everything sounded alien to me in class. I did not understand anything.*

Nevertheless, there were also positive words about teachers. Some participants remembered their teacher as an ally who prevented discrimination and fostered their learning

by adjusting the curriculum to their educational needs. For example, teachers adapted assignments by using a larger font and simpler vocabulary.

> **Manuel:** *The teacher adapted the subject matter to my level and stood up for me when someone insulted me.*

Families also intervened in the teaching and learning process, acting as intermediaries between participants and their teachers. They supported their children's learning, helping them with their homework and practising reading and writing at home. Furthermore, they also helped to fight bullying and foster good interactions with classmates, since, in some cases, it was families who informed teachers of incidents of classroom bullying.

> **Fran:** *Every now and then, my mother would go to talk with my teacher about my grades. Once, I arrived home crying because I had been insulted, and my mother told the teacher about it.*

In relation to resource rooms, most of the experiences reported were positive. Participants tended to remember the resource room as a place of empathy and respect. They felt loved and understood by their SEN teachers and classmates. Indeed, some participants perceived this setting as a space where they felt safe from discriminatory labels.

> **Javi:** *In the resource room I was calm. There were no insults. I was understood there. For me, going there was total bliss.*

Moreover, at an academic level, this classroom was considered beneficial, since it adapted the curriculum to each student's educational needs–something which did not happen in the mainstream classroom.

> **Pepe**: *Sometimes I went to the resource room, where I was taught things more slowly than in the mainstream class. This meant I learned better.*

However, some of the experiences recounted were negative. According to a large number of participants, being called out to the resource room caused exclusion, since going to a different classroom made them feel inferior and less valued than their classmates.

> **Lola:** *I used to go to the resource room. I felt a bit inferior to my classmates. I preferred to be in the regular classroom, with everyone else.*

Furthermore, some participants felt stressed by the change of classroom. Going from one space to another involved a constant change of teachers, methodology and content.

> **Chary:** *I felt nervous when I had to go to the resource room, because I had to change books, notebooks...*

All the participants who attended the resource room talked positively about their SEN teachers, describing them as affectionate, attentive, patient people who talked to them in a gentle tone of voice. Some remembered these teachers as people who took their feelings and opinions into account and who believed in their academic potential. They associated them with pleasant sensations, such as feeling loved, supported and listened to.

> **Mario:** *The SEN teacher was very nice. She loved me and gave me good advice.*

What if the Choice were yours to Make: Mainstream Classroom or Resource Room?

In order to explore participants' preferences, we asked them to imagine they were school principals and had to decide whether people with ID should attend a resource class or remain in the mainstream classroom. In general, participants said they would prefer students with ID to remain in the mainstream classroom, thus demonstrating an opposition to the use of resource classes. However, the degree of opposition varied in accordance with each participant's personal experiences in the educational field.

Most of those who had attended resource classes were against sending students to a different room. This group of participants said they would not recommend this method, since they thought it was unfair for a student to be separated from their classmates. They claimed

that they would have preferred to remain with their peers in the mainstream classroom. The main issue with this for them was that, given their past experiences, they found it difficult to imagine that all teachers would adapt their teaching to students' needs and that their classmates would treat them without discrimination.

> *María: I would prefer to be with my classmates in the same classroom, but I would need them to treat me well, and I would also need the teachers to help me. I do not know if that would be possible.*

According to this group of participants, going to a different classroom was a sign of discrimination that contributed to establishing differences between students. This did not foster educational inclusion and made them feel different from the rest.

> *Fernando: I liked the resource room, but I preferred the mainstream classroom, because my friends were there; I got along well with them and they loved me.*

They believed that the benefits provided by the resource room could easily be offered in the mainstream classroom. One participant said he thought educational support and assistance should be provided in the mainstream classroom, with a SEN teacher being brought in for students with ID.

> *Álvaro: If I were a school principal, I would keep students with disabilities in the regular classroom, but with a different teacher.*

Participants also thought it was unfair that their opinion was not taken into account in this matter, and claimed that students should be listened to when deciding whether or not to send them to the resource room. However, some participants who had received this kind of support were in favour of this method, due to the adapted teaching they had received in the resource room.

> *Pepe: If I were a school principal, I would put students with a lower level in a different classroom. I did well in the resource room. I was calm and the subject matter was adapted to my needs.*

Among those participants who had never attended a resource class during their time at school, opinions differed. Some were in favour of this kind of support, since they said that in the mainstream classroom they had found it difficult to understand the contents being taught. They said they thought that the resource room should have been made available to them as a means of overcoming the difficulties they had had at school.

> *Saray: I think it would have been better for me to attend a different classroom, where everything would have been explained to me in a way I could have understood better.*

However, other participants who had never been to a resource room were against such spaces, since their experiences in the mainstream classroom had been positive. They even stated that, if they were teachers, they would find a way to help students with ID cope with the academic contents and keep up with the rest of the class, thus fostering social inclusion. They would achieve this by using different methodologies, adjusting contents and promoting cooperation among students.

> *Lucas: If I were a teacher, I would teach the same subject matter to all my students, but I would explain it in two different ways, i.e., slowly and simply to some students and in more detail to others.*

Table 1 summarises the arguments used by participants to justify their choices.

Please include Table 1 here

Experiences in Special Schools: Facilitator or Barrier

Seven participants had studied in special schools. Four had attended a special school throughout their entire educational career, whereas the other three had started out at a

mainstream school and had been transferred to a special school at some point during their school lives. The experiences recounted by these participants varied. Some remembered their school as a place completely adapted to their learning needs and adjusted to the individual characteristics of each student.

> *Manuela: The special school was perfect for me. I felt at peace and there was no discrimination from either my classmates or my teachers. Moreover, the teachers explained the contents better than in the mainstream classroom, which meant I could understand everything.*

However, others recalled negative experiences, since, as in mainstream schools, they were bullied by their classmates at the special school.

> *Marcos: The special school was horrible. It was hell for me, because they harassed me all the time.*

Other participants described their special school as a place isolated from society, viewing this type of school as a form of social rejection or exclusion.

> *Lucas: I did not like the special school. It seemed to be a place where they piled together people who were not normal. That is discrimination.*

What if the Choice were yours to Make: Mainstream Schools or Special Schools?

We asked participants whether they would rather have attended a mainstream school or a special school. Some of those who had studied at mainstream schools mentioned the social discrimination they had suffered there, giving this as the reason for their being in favour of special schools. One participant said they were sure that an environment with only people with disabilities would have been a more peaceful and harmonious place. Moreover, many claimed that mainstream schools were not adapted to their learning needs, which was another reason why they would opt for special schools.

> *Pablo: I would rather have studied at a special school. I think that I would have learned more than I did at a mainstream school, because the subject matter would have been adapted to my needs.*

However, other participants who had studied at mainstream schools said they were satisfied with their experience. The reasons they gave included the normalisation of differences and the good relationships established between students with and without disabilities.

> *Lola: I think we should all be at the same school. We are all human and deserve the same opportunities. We must learn to interact with each other and get along.*

Some participants reflected on the need to accept differences as normal in the educational sphere, questioning the differentiation made by schools on the basis of students' capabilities.

> *Cristina: I would prefer all children to study at the same school, because we should not make distinctions between people. Some need more and some need less support. Only if a child finds they cannot adapt would it be appropriate to consider whether he/she would do better at a special school.*

Participants who had attended special schools for their entire school lives said they would rather have studied at a mainstream school, since they felt discriminated against for not being allowed to go to the same school as other children. They also claimed that sending children to special schools did nothing to help normalise disability, since these settings were a barrier to educational and social inclusion.

> *Lucas: I went to a special school, but I think it is better to attend a school that includes everyone, because there would be equality and we could learn to treat each other with respect.*

Lastly, participants who had started their compulsory education at mainstream schools and finished it at special schools said they had preferred the latter type. This was because not only

were these schools better adapted to their needs, they were also spaces free from discrimination by classmates.

> ***Nicolás****: I only attended the special school for one year. The war among classmates was ferocious at the mainstream school. At the special school, though, I was treated well, people understood me and I was never hit. I know I have an impairment, but I deserve the same opportunities as other people. I preferred the special school.*

Table 2 summarises participants' arguments in favour of or against special schools.

Please insert Table 2 here

Discussion and Conclusions

The main conclusions that can be drawn from this study are, firstly, that participants reported both negative and positive experiences at mainstream schools, although there was a general feeling of exclusion. Secondly, participants said that, given the choice, they would study at mainstream schools, despite the obstacles encountered in that environment. Indeed, the preferred model that emerges from this study is one of integration. Even when students with ID shared mainstream settings, they were often simply present and did not participate. The barriers identified in this study are related both to discrimination by classmates and to the poor adjustment of the curriculum by teachers. These barriers were also reported by Author (2010) and Mañas-Olmo et al. (2020). In the present study, although some testimonies highlighted the central role played by teachers in the creation of more welcoming, less hostile and, therefore, less excluding scenarios, many other participants were especially critical of their educational experiences with teachers. Teachers are a key element in the development of inclusive practices, as they can celebrate diversity, contribute to preventing prejudice and stereotypes, reject and condemn any segregation, discrimination or exclusive practice, develop high expectations for all students, and act as a point of connection between the

school and the family (Butt, 2016). We believe that education systems need to review their teaching, learning and curricular approaches. Teachers' praxis and competences greatly influence what students learn. As such, they should be required to be sensitive to ID and to acquire the resources and strategies they need to effectively teach all students in regular contexts (Schwab et al., 2016). It is especially vital to rethink initial and on-site training policies, which, in many cases, do nothing to help foster inclusive education (Membuhoglu & Altunova, 2020; Nes et al., 2017).

However, despite the barriers identified in mainstream schools, participants talked about the support provided in this context by both classmates and some teachers who adapted the contents of their subjects (Kassah et al., 2018; Scharenberg et al., 2019). This helped develop a sense of belonging among all students and made people with ID feel loved and valued at school. Previous studies with students with ID have drawn the same conclusion (Jaques et al., 2017; Wilson et al., 2017).

Among the participants in our study, resource rooms are seen an alternative support method for compensating for the difficulties encountered in regular classes, and a place where people with ID can feel safe from discrimination by their classmates. For a certain length of time during the school day, students with ID who attend a resource class share a space exclusively with their SEN peers, and the curriculum is adapted to their needs. They also have a strong ally in this room: the teacher, who provides essential assistance for people with ID. Participants described their resource room teachers as patient, motivating and empathetic. This teacher profile is similar to that reported by Boynton and Mahon (2018). However, Sandoval et al. (2019) and Nes (2017) highlight the danger of segregated classrooms in mainstream schools, since their presence means that students with disabilities spend most of the school day isolated from their classmates. In our study, although most participants recounted positive experiences, they did perceive these settings as a form of

exclusion, since they were isolated and unable to follow a normal routine like the rest of their peers. Indeed, it is risky to present this positive image of segregated education without also condemning it, since, although according to the participants in our study special contexts are the most integrating, they are still special and segregating; in other words, they are 'false' inclusive contexts. In this sense, mainstream educational contexts must change; the practices which take place in them must be revised and improved in order to turn them into places where everyone can feel safe and welcome and be part of a truly social and academic community.

Finally, most of the participants in our study regard special schools as a form of exclusion. Although their experiences in them were positive, they prioritise the existence of a school in which everyone learns together on the basis of respect and acceptance of differences. Indeed, previous studies attest to the success of students with ID at inclusive schools (Dessemontet et al., 2012; Nota et al., 2018).

We can therefore conclude that, nowadays, there are useful and valuable tools available to help us advance towards inclusive education, although in order to build these inclusive scenarios it is necessary to admit that this goal can be achieved in many different ways, as every classroom is different and each school is unique. Thus, the best way to start developing inclusive projects is to listen to the opinions of people with disabilities.

Limitations and further research

Some of the limitations of this study are related to the broad age range of our sample (18-63 years). However, we believe that all contributions were valuable for our research, although variables such as educational stage or education policy may influence the results. Another limitation is related to the editing of the transcriptions to render them accessible, since these changes may have affected the transparency and interpretation of the results. Nevertheless, we believe it was necessary as it enabled the results to be interpreted. The last

limitation is linked to the use of the ATLAS Ti program, which may have reduced the transparency of the coding performed by the co-researchers and the researcher.

Future research may wish to focus on improving the procedures of inclusive research and analysing other research topics proposed by people with ID. Despite the limitations outlined above, we believe that the present study contributes to the literature in the field of inclusive education by voicing the opinions of one of the most vulnerable and silenced groups in the education system: people with ID.

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