



## Developing Inclusive Pedagogy with Students with Intellectual Disabilities as Co-Researchers

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### Abstract

*Ratification of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) [1] in 1989 initiated academic interest and commitment to advancing advocacy and support for children's rights, voice and participation in all decisions affecting them [2]. Consequently, children's policy developments in national and international contexts now insist that the inclusion of children and young people's voices are necessary to ensure their lives are better understood and their rights upheld. Yet the perspectives of children, and in particular of children with disabilities, are rarely consulted and children with disabilities largely remain invisible [3]. Children's participation in research, particularly children with disabilities, can pose methodological and ethical challenges [4]. However, researchers have a duty to include children with disabilities as it is both their right and because findings can potentially be different when they are included [5]. This paper presents an overview of a participatory research methodology which uses photovoice as the main method of data collection. This study seeks to explore the perceptions and experiences of students with intellectual disabilities (ID) in mainstream post-primary schools in Ireland. Employing photovoice repositions students with ID as co-researchers. Photovoice supports students to document their lived experiences using photography. It's use operationalises Lundy's Model of Participation [6], which serves as the theoretical and methodological framework for this study.*

**Keywords:** Children's Rights, Inclusive Participatory Research, Student Voice, Photovoice

### 1. Introduction

Ratification of the UNCRC [1] served as the driving force for reimagining and repositioning the role of children in society and in their own lives. Children's rights, voice and participation in all decisions affecting them are evidenced in their increasing visibility in children's policy developments in national and international contexts. Despite the recognised benefits, incorporating the voices of children, particularly children with disabilities remains a challenge for policy makers, researchers and educators. This paper presents an overview of how a participatory research methodology termed photovoice, overcomes some of the methodological and ethical challenges which can arise when researching with children with ID.

### 2. Research Aims

This research situates students with ID as key informants who can support and shape our understanding of inclusive practice across national and international contexts. This study sets out to explore the educational experiences of students with ID in mainstream post-primary schools in Ireland. It aims to understand if these experiences are barriers or facilitators to participation in the life of the school, including decision-making. Furthermore, it aims, to use the experiences and perceptions to inform school policy and practice to advance inclusive pedagogy in post-primary school in Ireland. Student voice is the focus on this study throughout. The challenge therefore, is to design a methodology, which is rooted in a theoretical framework which supports the participation of students with ID in the research process. Lundy's Model of Participation [6] serves as the theoretical and methodological framework guiding the research design. This model identifies four conditions; space, voice, audience and influence, which are necessary for students as right bearing citizens to express their views and have their views heard in an inclusive participatory manner. Consequently, participants in this study are co-researchers as they chart their educational experiences and construct meaning using Photovoice.



### 3. Photovoice as a Participatory Research Methodology

Photovoice is a participatory visual research method developed by Wang and Burris (1994) to promote empowerment, and give voice to vulnerable communities [7]. This method uses photography to document the lived experiences of participants. It is a flexible tool which can be adapted for specific participatory objectives, for use with different groups and diverse needs. Wang and Burris [8] used the term Photovoice to link the use of photographs (documentary evidence) to VOICE 'voicing our individual and collective experience' (p.381). It is this insider epistemology that enhances the use of Photovoice as a means of understanding the perspectives and lived experience of participants. Furthermore, the multimodal representation of the process evidenced by combining visuals (photographs) with discussion (voice), supports the inclusiveness of such an approach. Photovoice as a data collection tool and methodology can successfully be utilised to overcome some of the methodological and ethical challenges associated with researching with children. It potentially provides the space, voice, audience and influence identified in Lundy's Model of Participation [6]. In this sense it is ideal for use in schools for seeking the perspectives of students in order to facilitate change. The images represent the subjective reality of the lived experience which students can interpret verbally and which reduces the cognitive and linguistic demands that are found in other types of qualitative research. The need to supplement language as the main method of data collection in conducting research with children with learning disabilities is widely recognised [9]. Therefore, photovoice is a suitable methodology for researching with children and young people with ID.

The use of photovoice repositions the role of children in the research process. This repositioning necessitates a reflexive approach which requires that researchers consider and take responsibility for the impact of the research on children, including potential risks [10]. Ensuring informed assent is freely given, particularly with children with ID is a complicated issue and an ethical challenge. Cognitive differences may influence children's ability to provide assent that is truly informed [11]. As a result, children should be consulted and informed in an accessible manner regarding the research aims, methods and potential outcomes [12]. Time must be given for children to assimilate information, ask questions and consult with others, before deciding if it is in their best interest to participate and collaborate in the research process [13]. Informed assent is ongoing in photovoice projects. Opportunities to seek assent is built into various stages of the process. Confirming assent shifts power and control into the hands of participants. Photovoice gives ownership not only to people on how or if they would like to participate, but rather how they would like to represent themselves and how they would like to depict their reality [7]. Participant ownership, control and empowerment challenge the traditional politics of representation typically located in the research process. This shift in power, repositions the roles of the participant and the researcher. The researcher moves from the status of privileged voyeur looking in or on, while making value judgements to the role of facilitator of change. Participants and researchers in photovoice projects are co-researchers and the collaborative nature of the process provides a bilateral power structure thereby addressing ethical concerns. Critically, photovoice provides an opportunity to utilise the voice of students who are experiencing the post-primary school system to provide insights and enhance our understanding of inclusive practice.

### 4. Data Collection

As photovoice projects require time spent in the field a mix of convenience and purposive sampling will select schools who utilise the Level Two Learning Programme (L2LP), an alternative, accredited curriculum for students with an upper mild to lower moderate ID in their schools. Rates of attrition in photovoice projects need to be considered as they can be high [14] therefore, a sample size of 12 will be selected to participate in this study. Booth and Booth [7] originally outlined seven steps involved in using photovoice as methodology which have been adapted and modified for this study. An eight-step, five-day approach will be utilised to collect data with participants and answer the research questions (Table 1). A research journal and fieldwork/ data collection memo will support a reflexive approach throughout the data collection period.



**Table 1.0** Steps in the Photovoice (PV) Process

Phase One Data Collection			
Data Collection Tools	When it will be used	Description	Research Question Answered
PV Step 1&2 Identification and Invitation	First Meeting	Inform students of the purpose. Re-seek assent to participate. Interview to gather demographic details. Develop research question with students.	What barriers or facilitators influence students' participation in post-primary schools?
PV Step 3 Education		Photography basics, rules and guidance for taking photographs	
PV Step 4 Documentation		Provide prompts of photographs to be taken	
Phase Two Data Collection			
Interview (semi structured)	Second Meeting	Meet students after taking photographs to collect cameras discuss their experiences of taking the photographs	What barriers or facilitators influence students' participation in post-primary schools?
PV Step 5 Narration (Photo-elicitation)	Third Meeting	Photo-elicitation interview. Photographs will be used as prompts for the student to describe their experiences. Copy of photographs will be given to participants. Students sign a Photograph Release Form	How do students with ID describe their educational experiences in mainstream post-primary schools In Ireland?
PV Step 6 Ideation (Participatory Visual Analysis)	Fourth Meeting	Students select photographs which best reflect their experiences. Codify and create themes with students which tell their stories via a visual presentation.	What insights can students with ID give to improve/enhance the educational experiences of students with ID in Ireland?
Phase Three Data Collection			
PV Step 7 Exhibition (Show and Tell)	Fifth Meeting	Students present the photographs and their findings to members of the school community via a medium of their choice (video, poster, presentation).	How do students with ID describe their educational experiences in mainstream post-primary schools In Ireland?
PV Step 8 Confirmation	Fifth Meeting	Impact survey on audience (principal, teachers, parents).	What insights can students with ID give to improve/enhance the educational experiences of students with ID in Ireland.

One of the dangers of participatory research with vulnerable populations is authenticating participants' involvement [9]. Although participant involvement varies in photovoice projects, students in this study are an integral part of each stage, from developing research questions, to taking photographs which represent their experiences, to assigning meaning and choosing images to best represent their reality. The final two steps, exhibition and confirmation provide opportunities for participants to tell their stories using a medium of their choice to members of their school community who traditionally hold the power.



An impact survey at the confirmation stage will gauge initial responses and possible changes that schools may make to enhance inclusive practice.

As this study seeks to explore the perspectives and experiences of students with ID, interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) will be used to analyse the data. IPA is phenomenological, idiographic, and hermeneutic, thereby facilitating a granular exploration of the lived experiences of each student in the study. The narrative account is presented and supported by the voices of the participants. Utilising IPA honours and completes the journey of the voices of students in this research process.

## 5. Conclusion

Since the ratification of the UNCRC there has been growing academic and political interest and commitment to advancing advocacy and support for children's rights, voice and participation in decisions which affect them [2]. These rights apply to all children without discrimination [15]. However, in reality the voice and perspectives of children and in particular children with disabilities are rarely sought or consulted. Unquestionably, children's participation in research presents ethical and methodological challenges. In this paper photovoice is presented as an inclusive participatory methodology which transcends and embraces these challenges by repositioning children with learning disabilities as co-researchers. Photovoice operationalises Lundy's Model of Participation [6] by providing the space, voice, audience and influence for students with ID to have their voice heard to develop inclusive pedagogy in their schools.

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