

Friendship barriers and supports: Thoughts of young people with intellectual disabilities

A great deal of research has been undertaken during the last few decades regarding the life experiences of young people with intellectual disabilities (ID). However, not much has specifically focused on the friendships of people with ID. This article aims to present the friendship experiences of young people with ID who are in their transition process to adult life. It focuses on their reflections on their own friendships, the presence these friendships have had and still have in their lives, and the strengths and difficulties –if any- in managing their friendships. 11 people aged 17-19 with ID were interviewed individually. This article also intends to identify and analyse those elements that have influenced in the establishment of friendships in the lives of young people with ID, focusing on the role that both professionals and families have had from the perspective of the young people with ID. It also presents the influence that the educational context has had on the friendships of young people with ID.

Key words: intellectual disabilities, friendship, young people.

INTRODUCTION

Friendship is as important for the well-being of people with disabilities as it is for anyone (Foley, Blackmore, Girdler, O'Donnell, Glauert, Llewellyn & Leonard, 2012). Research shows that friendship is an area of concern for people with intellectual disabilities (ID) (McVilly, Stancliffe, Parmenter & Burton-Smith, 2006; Simpican, Leader, Kosciulek & Leahy, 2015), and it has an impact on social participation (Browne & Millar, 2016). Friendship can positively affect people's lives, and people with ID who have participated in research believe that having meaningful friendships is crucial for their well-being (Knox & Hickson, 2001). Friends can be an important source of support (Korkiamäki, 2016), which can help people with ID who experience loneliness than the rest of society (Gilmore & Cuskelly, 2014).

People with ID have to cope with a lack of opportunities to develop and maintain friendships (Callus, 2017). Research has already shown that some of the obstacles people with disabilities face regarding friendship are the lack of time they can spend with their friends (McVilly *et al.*, 2006), the lack of privacy (Knox & Hickson, 2001), transport problems and not having enough money to go out (Welsby & Horsfall, 2011).

It is important to consider the point of view of people with ID concerning friendship (Knox & Hickson, 2001), rather than just discussing the topic from what is interpreted by researchers without disabilities. The purpose of this article is to identify the strengths and needs of young people with ID regarding friendships, on the basis of their own perceptions.

BACKGROUND

A great deal of research has been undertaken during the last few decades regarding the life experiences of people with ID. However, not much has specifically focused on the friendships of people with ID. Several studies carried out between 1996 and 2006 concluded that the participants with ID had an average of 3.1 friends comprising their social network, one of them being a member of staff (Verdonschot, de Witte, Reichrath, Buntinx & Crufs, 2009). Another study by Knox & Hickson (2001) showed that the best friend of the four participants with ID was another person with ID. Pallisera, Fullana, Puyaltó and Vilà (2016) concluded that the participants with ID who participated in their research had almost no friends, and they spent most of their free time in front of a computer. People with ID are less likely to engage in social and leisure activities; and when they do so, professionals often accompany them (Verdonschot *et al.*, 2009).

Young people with ID declared that they felt lonelier after starting secondary school, as they were assigned to specific classes set apart from the mainstream of the school, and therefore separated from their classmates during several periods of time (Pallisera *et al.*, 2016). Classmates are an important factor to feeling included in the school context (Ciénaga, Patiño & Alcántara, 2014). Some of the benefits of friendship mentioned by people with ID during a study conducted by Knox & Hickson (2001) were the feelings of sharing a story with their friends, the possibility of sharing hobbies or interests, and reciprocity regarding help and support. On the other hand, some of the aspects people with ID considered crucial in order to maintain their friendships were the possibility of meeting, the need to respect each other if seeing other friends, and having common memories (Knox & Hickson, 2001).

Research shows that people with ID are automatically excluded (Ojeda & Mateos, 2006), so they are denied their social inclusion and the opportunities to experiment social and emotional relationships with others. This is disturbing, as it has been demonstrated that loneliness can be related to depression (Aanes, Mittelmark & Hetland, 2010) while, on the contrary, participation in society is related to low levels of depression, stress or anxiety (Ward, Atkinson, Smith & Windsor, 2013). Moreover, young people with ID usually have less developed social and communicative skills than their counterparts without disabilities (King, Shields, Imms, Black & Arden, 2013), and this can increase their difficulties in establishing social relationships (Del Prette & Del Prette, 2013; Frostad & Pijl, 2007).

During adolescence, there is a high risk of experiencing loneliness (Gilmore & Cuskelly, 2014). Therefore, it is necessary to promote the establishment and maintenance of sustainable and powerful social networks for young people with ID (Small, Raghavan & Pawson, 2013). However, prior to taking action, it is important to identify the strengths and the needs of young people with ID regarding friendship. Therefore, it is necessary to involve them in the research and consider their thoughts and opinions (Knox & Hickson, 2001) as regards their friendship experiences. According to Hatzidimitriadou and Milne (2005), the incorporation of the perspectives of people with ID permits effective planning of support for them.

Since 2000, many researchers have focused on identifying the thoughts and experiences of people with ID regarding their friends, examining the challenges they face and what helps them in their friendships. Callus (2017) formed a focus group with 7 self-advocates to understand what friendship means for people with ID and how they experience it. Bane *et al.* (2012) asked 97 people with learning disabilities about their thoughts regarding friendships, relationships and the supports needed to have them.

Similarly, Tipton, Christensen and Blacher (2013) interviewed 103 adolescents with and without ID to talk about their own quality of friendship. With regard to young people with ID, Morrison and Burgman (2009) interviewed 18 children attending a mainstream school to explore their experiences of friendship, and Sigstad (2017) interviewed 11 adolescents to determine how they defined friendship qualities. Knox and Hickson (2001) explored the views of 4 people with ID on their close friendships, considering them as experts on their own experiences. In addition, Pottie and Sumarah (2004) examined the friendships between people with and without developmental disabilities through interviews with 4 existing pairs of friends.

Even though researchers have recently been taking the views of people with ID into consideration, people with ID still participate little in research processes (Pallisera, Fullana, Puyaltó, Vilà & Diaz-Garolera, 2017) and they are hardly ever included in major disability studies (Goodley, 2004), although they “have the right to be involved in issues that affect their lives” (Bigby, Frawley & Ramcharan, 2014, p.3).

This article aims to present the friendship experiences of young people with ID who are in their process of transition to adult life, focusing on their reflections on their own friendships, the presence these friendships have had and still have in their lives, and the strengths and difficulties –if any- in managing their friendships. This contribution also intends to identify and analyse those elements that have influenced the establishment of friendships in the lives of young people with ID, focusing on the role that both professionals and families have had from the perspective of the young people with ID. It also seeks to point out the influence that the educational context have had on the friendships of young people with ID.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

This investigation follows a qualitative approach with the aim of understanding the perceptions of the participants regarding their friendships. Incorporating the experiences and opinions of people with ID enriches both the research process and the results that are obtained, and increases the chances of significantly affecting the improvement of their living conditions (Johnson *et al.*, 2014; O'Brien *et al.*, 2014). To do so, semi-structured interviews were held with people with ID, as they allowed the collection of the participants' perspectives individually, made it possible to give open-ended responses, and also to include follow-up questions that depended on the responses given by each participant (Gagnon & Barber). The interviews were aimed at discovering the perception of people with ID in relation to the following aspects: A)

What were, according to the opinion of young people with ID, the main difficulties that they themselves experienced when establishing and maintaining friendships, and B) What were the elements or factors, according to young people with ID, that enhanced the establishment of friendships between peers in the context of the educational system, the family context, and the community context.

Participants

Eleven adolescents (8 boys and 3 girls) with ID aged between 17 and 19 years old participated in this study. They were attending a supported employment social service in Girona (Catalonia, Spain). They were identified as having mild or moderate intellectual disabilities, which means that most of them had intermittent support needs in some areas of their daily life. They had finished compulsory education, although not all of them had the leaving certificate. At the moment of their recruitment, they were enrolled in a 1-year vocational programme focused on improving personal skills, such as social and autonomy skills for their daily life. This programme preceded a working skills training programme, which aimed to facilitate their labour inclusion.

The authors contacted the 11 participants through the previously mentioned social service, which agreed to facilitate contact with all the participants in the vocational programme. They were personally informed about the investigation by the first author, and asked to participate in it. They all agreed to participate in the research, although 3 of them did not accept the interview to be recorded, and therefore some notes were taken during those interviews.

Before the interviews took place, the interviewer handed the participants some accessible documents with information about the research. These documents were explained in detail to the participants, ensuring they were clearly understood.

The participants signed an accessible consent form acknowledging their right to anonymity and including their permission for the interview to be recorded (except the three mentioned above), and later transcribed. They were also informed about their right to withdraw at any time if they wished. Furthermore, the authors notified the participants that they would return the general results of the research to them once finished.

Instrument

Data was collected through semi-structured individual interviews (Leech, 2002; Gagnon & Barber, 2018), which consisted of 14 main topics (distributed into 88 questions), as well as a table that participants had to complete with the names of the friends they had had throughout their lives. The 14 topics proposed in the interviews were based on the

main objectives of this research, and were specifically aimed to identify how the participants built their friendships, how these friendships have helped them in their social participation, and the difficulties and supports they have encountered when building and maintaining friendships, paying special attention to the educational, the family and the community contexts.

The table used during the interview consisted of a DIN-A4 sheet with three columns that respondents had to complete with the names of their close friends during the 6-12 years old period (primary school), 12-16 years old period (secondary school), and current friends. Each of these three columns was divided into two, as the respondents were asked to differentiate whether their close friends were from the educational centre or from other contexts. Completing the table at the same time as the respondents were asked the interview questions helped discover the friendship trajectory of the young people with ID and facilitated the development of the interview, as it encouraged the respondents to talk about their own experiences regarding friendship.

Table 1 shows the topics put forward during the interviews and some of the questions asked.

[Insert table 1 around here]

Using semi-structured interviews allowed the respondents to be recognized as active individuals who had built their own lives and stories (Hollomotz, 2017). Due to this interview technique, the guiding topics and questions established by the researchers varied as the conversation continued, because the respondents were able to introduce topics that were relevant to them, but may not have been raised by the researchers (Haya *et al.*, 2014). Consequently, the topics and questions mentioned above were used as a guide although each interview was orientated according to the answers from each respondent.

Procedure

The instrument and its questions were validated by 11 professionals from the disability studies and the youth fields. The instrument was sent to the professionals and they were asked to give some feedback. Additionally, an Advisory Committee made up of 7 people with ID who met monthly at the University of Girona were also involved in the instrument validation as consultants. They gave their opinion about the importance –or not- of the main topics to be put forward during the interviews with the young people with ID, and added some topics that the authors had not taken into consideration. They also advised on vocabulary or sentences they considered too complex. Taking the

advice given by professionals and people with ID into account, the instrument was redesigned by adding or removing some topics and rewriting some of the questions.

Before starting the research, the authors applied for and were granted ethics approval by both the University of Girona and MINECO (Spanish Public Science Foundation), authorising this research (ref. EDU2014-55460-R) to be undertaken.

Prior to the interviews, the respondents were met several times by the first author during participant observations at the social service centre they were attending. She attended the vocational programme as a support educator working with the group of participants for two weeks. This was a way of becoming familiarized with their needs and their ways of communicating (Hollomotz, 2017). The individual interviews were carried out by the first author in the social service which the respondents were attending on a daily basis, ensuring the interviews did not take longer than 45 minutes. Participants were informed that their reference educator could support them during the interview at any time. They also had the option to ask for a pause.

Although the interview questions were designed by the researchers, the respondents were reminded of their right to not answer any question they did not want to. Simple language was used by the interviewer and the style of conversation was adapted to the preferences of each respondent, avoiding metaphors and ambiguous expressions (Hollomotz, 2017).

Parallel to the interviews, the respondents were asked to complete a table with the name of the friends they had had throughout their lives. Specific reference tools can lead to a more tangible conversation (Hollomotz, 2017), so the respondents were asked about their friendship experiences starting with their real friends.

Data analysis

The transcripts of the individual interviews consisted of 31.553 words (249 minutes recorded). They were analysed through thematic content analysis, searching across the data corpus to find repeated patterns of meaning (Braun & Clarke, 2006) and developing a thematic content codification process (Gibbs, 2012). Specifically, the data analysis process was as follows:

To begin with, an initial list of codes based on the objectives set for the individual interviews was generated by the first author. Secondly, by reading the transcripts of two interviews and identifying the first established codes, some new codes were generated (thus producing a provisional list of 23 codes). Thirdly, the two encoded transcripts were revised by the second author, some new codes being proposed. After this process, a list of 39 codes (to be applied to the data corpus) was agreed by

researchers. Fourthly, the whole data corpus was encoded by the first author while some new codes were generated (adding 21 codes to the previous code list). Finally, the entire data corpus was re-encoded based on the final list of 60 codes.

When all data was encoded and collated, some main themes and subthemes that included all codes were established by the authors, and relationships and connections established among them (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

Table 2 shows the different subthemes established for each of the four main themes used to classify the information that emerged from the data corpus.

[Insert table 2 around here]

Findings

The findings of the thematic content analysis are classified by the themes and subthemes established in Table 2 (*what is valued in a friend, educational context, family context, community context, and social skills*), and accompanied by quotes from the participants (using pseudonyms). These are presented below, organised into the same subthemes established in Table 2.

Valued in a friend

Regarding what it was the participants valued in their friends, what they most focused on was the importance of having friends, and the positive or negative attributes a friend may have. Here there is some information about their interview responses regarding these topics.

From the interviews, it was possible to identify what the most *valued features were with regard to having friendships*. Participants agreed on the great value of having friends, as they could be providers of help, someone to talk to and someone to do things together with, to have fun, to provide companionship and to prevent loneliness.

He (a friend) has to give you company, be there at the worst moments, help you, and also be next to you. (Andreu)

(...) friends help you in those things you need. And also if you are lonely or sad, and they can help you solve your problems. (Yolanda)

As for the *positive attributes a friend may have*, the participants wanted someone who treated them well as friends, someone nice, funny, respectful, a good person, and someone who enjoys what they enjoy and someone who could always be with them. So, in addition to the company that friendships could provide, the participants emphasized the fun moments they shared with their friends. Therefore, it's not just

about being with friends, but about having fun and avoiding negative feelings like boredom, for instance.

It's good (friendship)! Because if you're bored at home (...), you can say: 'Let's go! Let's meet today!' And we go out, and we do things.
(Júlia)

On the other hand, regarding some of the *negative attributes a friend may have*, the participants did not appreciate it when someone insulted or bothered them, made unpleasant jokes about them, fought or got angry, told them lies or talked behind their back, was too “cool” or was involved in criminal activity.

With regard to ***what it is that influences friendship***, four different areas have been identified as being influential regarding the development and maintenance of friendships: educational context, family context, community context and social skills. The main results of this study are presented below, separated into these areas.

Educational context

The educational context –including primary and secondary school as well as social services that offer training and job placement to people with ID- is where respondents mentioned different factors that influence the development of friendships. Specifically, they gave relevant information about primary and secondary school, the transition process between schools, the organisational and methodological strategies implemented in schools, and the social services they attended. The most relevant data collected from the interviews is presented below.

With regard to the evaluation of their own experience related to friendship in the school context, it is observed through the interviews that the experiences described by the participants are both positive and negative. Some participants (4) reported having better memories of relationships in *primary school* than in *high school*, while others (7) had better memories of high school friendships. Nevertheless, they all agreed that, at the time of the interview, they were happier and felt more satisfied with their friendships - compared to the stages of both primary and secondary education. Specifically, what they positively valued of their current friendships was that they felt well treated by their friends. A participant stated the differences between the friends he had before and after attending the social service.

It has changed (after attending the social service). Because until I was 16 I didn't have any friends. And now, I have some good ones, yes. (Manel)

With regard to the *transition from primary to secondary school*, 9 of the 11 respondents mentioned having lost friends during the change of school due to their transition from primary to secondary school. Thus, they recognized that it was an important moment in their lives. However, although the participants were aware that the change of school involved a loss of contact between them and some of their friends, they positively valued meeting new people once some time had passed after they had started going to their new secondary school. It takes some time to establish friendships, to feel comfortable and satisfied with them. In this sense, a participant expressed how long it took for her to feel comfortable enough to start talking to people from his new school.

(...) When I arrived at secondary school, it was difficult. But then, at the end of the first year, I started talking to people. But the first days, I was alone. (Julia)

In relation to some of the *organizational strategies* of the educational centres and the classrooms attended by the participants, the majority emphasized that in order to get to know a greater number of people, it was more favourable to be in a classroom with a large number of students than being with a small number of students. One of the participants, for instance, mentioned that being placed in a special classroom at high school was one of the reasons why he developed few friends at the educational centre.

During high school, I didn't meet so many (friends). Just my skate park friends. I was in a special classroom... And it's for this (reason)... There were just 10 of us. (Kim)

Regarding the *methodological strategies* of the educational centres, all the respondents said they were very grateful for having been able to carry out school work in groups. They related this type of school work with social relations between classmates. Specifically, the participants valued doing school work in groups both inside the classroom and outside. In addition, those young people who during their time at the secondary school had been in different class groups and/or had worked in mixed groups according to the curricular subjects, also valued group work in a positive way, as they assured it was a good way to meet more boys and girls of the same year and the same age. Thus, one of the participants stated the benefits of mixed groups (students of the same course but from different classes) according to her experience.

It was good, because they put us in mixed groups, and (at first) I didn't know anyone from other groups, so (then) I could meet new people, and they also helped me. (Julia)

Regarding the role that *social services* that offer training and job placement to people with ID played in the friendships of the respondents, it should be mentioned that the majority of people who they considered as being their friends at the time of the interview attended the same social service as they did. Thus, all participants had a friend from the social service, and they determined that attending such social service was positive for them in terms of their friendships. In this sense, a participant mentioned how she felt better regarding her friends at the time of the interview compared with the friends she had had in the past.

I feel better now with the friends I have now (of the social service), not with those I had in primary or high school. Because now they all treat me well, they speak well to me, we do things together... (Julia)

They considered their transition from the secondary school to the social service as a positive change in their lives, referring to the number of friends they had at the time of the interview. And according to the respondents, it did not only benefit them in terms of number of friends, but also regarding the quality of their friendships. Therefore, regularly attending a social service may favour friendship. Therefore, the focus should be on the few opportunities they had to establish relationships outside the social service, as well as the perceptions of people without disabilities regarding people with ID, since it can be one of the reasons why people with intellectual disabilities find interaction with people without disabilities so difficult.

Family context

According to the respondents, the family context was another determining area in terms of developing and maintaining friendships, differentiating between who gave them support –if there was any- and the sort of support they received.

The participants in this study valued support from their relatives regarding friendships. All participants recognized their families agreed with the need for friendship. But they also mentioned having received little support from family members. So, as a general rule, they did not usually have the support of their families and, therefore, they turned to professionals when they needed support in their friendships.

Five of the participants claimed to be able to talk with their *parents* about the conflicts and/or doubts that may arise related to their friendships. This can be a form of *emotional support* for them, as well as a source of resources for the management of friendships. One of the participants, for example, verbalized that he liked her mother being sincere with him when talking about his friends.

(I like it) Because she (mother) is very sincere (...). (Andreu)

On the other hand, 6 of the respondents affirmed not having the support of their families in aspects related to friendship.

No (I don't talk to my parents), because they say they don't like my friends... (Kim)

Therefore, most participants appealed to *educators* when they needed support in their friendships.

Besides, the participants who were the older sibling were the ones who gave support and/or advice to their younger siblings in terms of friendships.

It is me who helps my (younger) sister (with her friends). (Ricard)

Thus, although few young people specified what support their families provided, those who had it appreciated and positively valued the fact that they could count on family support in terms of friendships.

Community context

The data collected regarding the community context included the benefits of participating in extracurricular activities and the participants' involvement –or not- in such activities.

Regarding the *benefits of participating in extracurricular activities*, although the majority of the participants did not carry out extracurricular activities during childhood nor did they carry out leisure activities regularly at the time of the interview, they all agreed that participating in activities with other people could be a good way to meet people and, therefore, to make new friends. So the lack of opportunities for community participation could be an element that hinders the establishment of relationships that could lead to friendship.

In relation to the *extracurricular and leisure activities that the participants carried out* during their time at the primary or secondary school, only 5 of them had practised some sports during that period. These participants agreed in relating the sports they practised with friendships.

A friend played volleyball. And I tried it. And now we're still playing volleyball (together). (Julia)

The rest of the respondents mentioned that they did not carry out any activities once the school day was over. When asked about the possible reasons, some of the respondents said that they were not aware of them, or they attributed it to their own laziness.

As for the activities the respondents were carrying out at the time of the interview, 7 of them practised their hobbies alone and at home. Some examples of the activities they performed were listening to music, drawing, or playing with video games.

On the other hand, 4 of the 11 young people interviewed practised their favourite hobbies with other people. Specifically, they carried out sports activities (volleyball, tennis, soccer, skating) and other leisure and free time activities (scouts).

Social skills

Social skills are another aspect that, according to the participants, plays an important role in the development and maintenance of friendships. In relation to this topic, respondents contributed with data about the ease –or not- with which they made friends, actually seeing friends, their own satisfaction with current friends, abuse situations suffered, conflict solving resources, and use of online social networks. Below, the main ideas regarding these areas are presented.

In relation to the *ease or difficulty* that respondents described when making friends, 6 of the 11 participants considered it was easy for them to make friends. Specifically, they referred to their communication skills as a method to establish friendships.

(Making friends) It's like... talking to them. And that's it! And I'm good at talking... (Kim)

On the other hand, 5 of the 11 respondents said they had difficulties managing friendships and, therefore, considered making friends to be a difficult task. Specifically, one of the difficulties experienced was the interpretation of the intentions of those with whom they interacted. In this sense, when asked about difficulties experienced regarding friendship, a participant described her trouble when trying to establish a new friendship.

The person... If he is a good person, or a bad person... If he wants to be your friend, or not. Or if you want him to be your friend (...), but he does not want to talk to you... (Yolanda)

And those respondents who claimed to have difficulties, blamed their lack of communication skills as a possible reason for their difficulties.

I do not know... I do not know what I do (wrong). Well, it's hard for me to talk to people, you know? It's hard for me to talk, you know...? (Andreu)

Therefore, according to the respondents, communication skills were fundamental for the establishment of friendships. In any case, participants also expressed the importance of context when managing friendships with better or worse results.

Here (in the social service) it is easy (to make friends). But in real life it's much harder... (Alex)

They also showed the role that other people have when establishing a friendship with someone. Specifically, these people can favour the first contact and thus facilitate the establishment of the friendship. With that in mind, a participant explained how her classmates invited her to be with them during a break time.

But then, two or three (classmates) came to me and said: "Come with us, we are talking there, you do not stay alone". (Julia)

With regard to *seeing those people who they consider friends*, some participants referred to the possibilities they had to see each other -or not. Specifically, they referred to the distance between their homes, which conditioned their meeting chances.

With Kim and Omar, no (we don't see each other outside of the social service). Because one lives in City A and the other in City B (47km apart), so we see each other here (in the social service). (Julia)

Therefore, living close to one's friends is something beneficial for the maintenance of friendships, and living far away and not having the resources to see each other can be an obstacle.

When asked if they considered themselves *satisfied with their friendships*, all respondents mentioned feeling satisfied and at ease with their friends at the moment of the interview. One of the reasons for this was the good treatment they received from their friends. Likewise, the frequency with which participants could see their friends also influenced their satisfaction level regarding their friendships.

During the individual interviews, 7 of the 11 respondents assured that they had never seen or suffered any kind of *abuse*. On the other hand, 5 of those interviewed affirmed that they had suffered some type of abuse from friends and/or classmates.

Therefore, even if they had experienced abuse in the first person, not all respondents declared it during the interview. This may be due to a feeling of shame, to the desire of forgetting such bad experiences, or to the fact that there was not enough confidence in the interviewer to raise an issue that affects their intimate life.

Regarding the resolution of conflicts that participants may have had with their friends, the respondents affirmed having used different resources and strategies. Specifically, there were some who prioritized talking with their friends to try to solve the conflict. While there were some who confessed using violence on occasions.

*I'm calm and all that, and I do not like to fight. But if they bother me,
I... (shakes a fist symbolising fighting) (Jordi)*

Additionally, some of the respondents also claimed they turned to the educators of the social service when they had problems with their friends. In addition, the friends themselves were also perceived by the respondents as people who could give them support in the resolution of possible conflicts they may have had.

On the other hand, online social networks were used by all the respondents. They all agreed on using them to talk to those who were already their friends. Therefore, they did not use online social networks to meet new people.

*(...) I have WhatsApp to talk with my friends, or to arrange meetings
with them. (Julia)*

DISCUSSION

It is necessary to recognize the subjective nature of friendship (Forrester-Jones, 2001), since the quality of friendship responds to the perceptions of each individual. Therefore, in the present study, in order to determine who the participants' friends are, the individual perceptions of each one have been valued more than the quantitative amounts that they entered in the table during the interviews, as done before by Guralnick, Connor & Hammond (1995). Consequently, this study shows that the aspects that people with ID relate to the term "friendship" are obtaining help, having fun, preventing the feeling of loneliness, and being able to talk about aspects of an intimate and personal nature. These results coincide with the idea of subjectivity proposed by Forrester-Jones (2001), and also with the research of Gaertner, Fite & Colder (2010) in which they affirm that friendships contribute to low levels of loneliness.

Specifically, the participants in this research consider having friends as something important, mentioning the different benefits that this entails. And this coincides with the testimonies gathered in other studies (Cooney, 2002; Tarleton & Ward, 2005) in which young people with and without ID express, as an expectation for their future, a desire to have friends with whom to relate. What the participants value is knowing that they can count on their friends in any situation in which they may need them. And this may be

related to the idea of omnipresence highlighted by the participants in the research of Knox & Hickson (2001) and Mason, Timms, Hayburn & Watters (2013), which describe the importance of friendship in the different environments of their lives. This perception coincides with other investigations, which affirm that friends are a source of support when needed (Bane *et al.*, 2012), and that these also provide support in difficult situations (Traylor, Williams, Kenney & Hopson, 2016). An example of the support that friends provide, according to the participants in this study, is to be able to talk with them about issues that concern them, and to get their advice. It is, then, a kind of support with a high emotional component. On the other hand, another aspect that participants positively value about their friendships is sharing hobbies with them. This coincides with the view of the people who participated in the studies by Knox & Hickson (2001) and Bane *et al.* (2012).

In relation to the evaluation of their own experience related to friendship in the school context, the participants in the present study described both positive and negative experiences. Some of the young people interviewed valued their passage through primary school more highly, in the same way as young people in a study (Pallisera *et al.*, 2016) who expressed having negative memories of their days in secondary school. On the other hand, some of the participants in this research valued their days in secondary school more positively, since they felt more satisfied with their relationships compared to those of primary school, which agrees with the testimonies of adolescents from a previous study (Ciénaga *et al.*, 2014). Thus, it cannot be inferred that neither the stage of primary education nor that of secondary education, per se, are better in terms of favouring interpersonal relationships or friendships.

Still in the educational context, the testimonies of people who claim to have suffered discrimination and have negative memories of their days in school or high school are relevant if one takes into account that the most important work to counteract the social exclusion of young people is carried out in schools (Ristolainen, Varjonen & Vuori, 2013, in Korkiamäki, 2016), and that the relationship established with classmates is one of the main elements when it comes to feeling included or not in the school context, as described by people with disabilities interviewed in the study of Ciénaga *et al.* (2014).

In regard to the transition process from one school to another, the study of Matheson *et al.* (2007), which states that children with ID generally find it difficult to find and maintain friendships during their transition to adolescence coincides with the 9 participants in this study who mention having lost friends during their transition from primary to secondary school.

In addition, the organizational and methodological strategies of schools can influence friendships too. The respondents in this research were aware that the students of the special classrooms in ordinary schools were part of a stigmatized group. This coincides with those obtained in a study (Pallisera *et al.*, 2016) in which young people with ID who had already finished secondary school mentioned that one of the most differentiating aspects that they experienced in their educational centres was being separated from their usual group-class.

Regarding the family context, this research shows that people with ID value the support their relatives give them regarding friendships. But the participants in this study also mention that, as a general rule, they do not usually have the support of their families. Instead, they turn to professionals when they need support in their friendships. This shows a possible poorly covered need. This is relevant considering that different studies (Bane *et al.*, 2012; Pallisera *et al.*, 2016) have shown the need for people with ID to receive support to maintain and manage their friendships. Likewise, McVilly *et al.* (2006) also assure that people with ID greatly appreciate support related to friendships. Therefore, in this sense, this investigation shows a possible need which is poorly covered for the young people interviewed.

From another point of view, the participants of this study explain having received, above all, emotional and instrumental support from relatives. In relation to this last aspect, the studies of different researchers (Bane *et al.*, 2012; Forrester-Jones, 2001; Mason *et al.*, 2013) show the importance of the instrumental support represented by the access to transport that allows friendships to start, and above all, to be maintained.

On the other hand, the present research coincides with other studies that affirm that young people with ID participate in fewer activities in the community than their counterparts without disabilities (Solish, Perry & Minnes, 2010). However, the present study contrasts with other research studies that affirm that people with ID have reduced opportunities to establish friendships (Jenner & Gale, 2006), or that they have few opportunities to participate in leisure activities (King *et al.*, 2013; Pallisera *et al.*, 2016). The participants in the study here presented did have opportunities to enrol in extracurricular and/or cultural activities, but some of them did not do it, or finally quit them. This is of concern considering the premise that participation in extracurricular and/or leisure activities increases opportunities for friendships (Kleinert, Miracle & Sheppard-Jones, 2007). In addition, the present study is also of particular interest because of the consequences of participation in leisure activities in the social development of children. Therefore, not enjoying leisure opportunities and participating in extracurricular activities may have influenced in the formation of a smaller social

network by the participants in this research. Therefore, it is considered interesting and necessary to further promote the participation of people with ID in activities with other people of the same age. Although this is an aspect that, depending on how it is addressed, may lead to some specific results or very different ones, since as some researchers state, the friendships of people with ID is usually only originated in specific scenarios such as social service, jobs (Welsby & Horsfall, 2011) or groups of self-advocates (Borg & Pellicano, 2015, in Callus, 2017). Therefore, this would entail a high probability that friendships would only be built between people with ID. Likewise, and to achieve a maximum promotion of the participation of people with ID in activities with both non-disabled and disabled people, it is also necessary to bear in mind that the mere fact of being in contact with others and participating in leisure activities does not necessarily imply a high level of interaction with the community, since, as the existing literature demonstrates, the majority of people with ID hardly interact with people without ID (Dusseljee, Rijken, Cardol, Curfs & Groenewegen, 2011). Consequently, although it can be stated that engaging in leisure activities together with both non-disabled and disabled people favours the establishment and maintenance of friendship, it cannot be assured that such participation in activities strictly implies establishing friendships with the other participants.

On the other hand, regarding hobbies, this research concludes that the great majority of the participants develop them alone and at home. This situation coincides to a large extent with the results of other studies that conclude that people with ID spend most of their free time involved in solitary hobbies (McConkey & McGinley, 1990; Pallisera *et al.*, 2016).

With regard to the facilities and/or difficulties for making friends, according to the participants in this research, communication skills are essential for the establishment of friendships. Having low communication skills can negatively affect friendships. Therefore, the importance of providing the support and/or training required for people with ID to develop the personal skills needed to develop and manage friendships (Overmars-Marx, Thomése, Verdonschot & Meininger, 2014) is clear.

On a different note, there is an aspect that has not been addressed throughout this research which, therefore, constitutes a possible line of future research. Some results obtained by previous research regarding people with disabilities indicate that they claim to prefer establishing friendships with people without disabilities (Knox & Hickson, 2001). However, other research indicates that people with disabilities prefer establishing friendships with people who also have ID (McVilly *et al.*, 2006). These findings have not been contrasted with the participants of this investigation.

Moreover, this study has some limitations. The first one is the limited number of interviews developed, which does not allow a generalisation of the findings. Secondly, the age range (from 17 to 19) of the interviewed people was so narrow that it did not allow the participation of more mature young people. Some of the respondents had not previously thought about some of the topics put forward during the interview, which occasionally lead to poorly developed answers. Another limitation is related to the use of semi-structured interviews. The thematic questions included in the interviews could have influenced, somehow, the results obtained, as the participants may have adjusted their responses to the sort of information required. Although the data analysis here presented is based on the data collected from the participants and on the new topics that emerged from their contributions, a less structured interview or using more prompts (such as visual elements) would have probably given each participant more choices to express what he considered more crucial in terms of their friendships, as well as the factors that influence their establishment and maintenance the most.

But on the other hand, the strengths of this study are the description of the social participation processes developed by young people with intellectual disabilities throughout their transition to adulthood, and the role of friendships in these processes. In this way, it has been possible to confirm some aspects already existing in the literature, such as the low degree of participation in society by people with ID, or that friendships can contribute to social inclusion. This is a study strictly focused on the voices of young people, so it acquires a high value if you take into account that the findings are based on the visions and perceptions of young people with ID, who are often studied, but hardly ever listened to. Moreover, a description of the difficulties experienced by young people with ID, as well as those supports that help them establish and manage friendships, has been developed. This allows making diverse proposals to foster the friendship chances of people with ID.

CONCLUSIONS

In order to identify and analyse those elements that influence the establishment and management of friendships of young people with ID, 11 semi-structured interviews were carried out, through which the processes of social participation that they develop during their transition to adulthood was analysed. Additionally, the supports and barriers that young people with ID encounter when establishing and maintaining friendship were identified.

As regards the supports and barriers that young people with ID encounter when establishing and maintaining friendships, according to the participants in this research, what become supports are continuing education/training beyond compulsory education, methodological educational strategies that promote interaction among peers, practising sports or other leisure activities together with other people, the fact of living near friends, that both the family and professionals promote friendship, and finally, the use of online social networks. On the contrary, the barriers to friendship are segregated schooling –even if it is segregation in an ordinary school, for example in a special classroom-, home schooling, suffering from social invisibility or bad experiences with classmates and/or friends, losing contact with old friends or developing different interests when growing and getting older, and last but not least, having little developed social and/or communicative skills become a barrier.

These aspects that constitute supports or barriers to the establishment and maintenance of friendships should serve as advice and guidelines for families, teachers, educators, social service professionals, as well as for people with ID, in order to increase the chances of establishing and maintaining friendships in a satisfactory way.

Disclosure statement

The author(s) declare there are no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

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