



## Article

# Experiences of Inclusive Action and Social Design Research with Social Workers and People with Intellectual Disabilities

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**Abstract:** In this study, we report on a two-year experience of inclusive participative action and social design research consisting of intensive collaboration between social workers, people with intellectual disabilities and researchers. Action research and design research are tunable and lend themselves to an inclusive approach aimed at knowledge development and change in practice. Social workers and people with intellectual disabilities were involved in a community of development. They became owners of the subject matter and the answers and solutions they designed. We conclude that an inclusive approach lends itself well to combining or even merging action research and social design research. Inclusive participative action and social design research cannot be standardized since it contains a particularly emergent process. Hence, it requires flexibility and creativity in finding ways to create an inclusive process of co-creation.

**Keywords:** action research; design research; inclusion; social workers; intellectual disabilities



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## 1. Introduction

In this study, we report on a two-year experience of inclusive action and social design research consisting of intensive collaboration between social workers, people with intellectual disabilities and researchers. The goal of this project was to deepen and nuance the knowledge on how social workers working with individuals with intellectual disability can promote social inclusion. In this article, we present this project as a case study to report on the experiences we gained applying an integration of inclusive research, action research and social design research. First, an elaboration on notions of inclusive research is provided. Then, we describe the research design and the methods we employed to give shape to inclusivity and the road towards desired outcomes.

### *Inclusive Research, Action and Design Research*

Inclusive research is gaining ground in Western countries, including in the Netherlands (Grant and Ramcharan 2007; Riches and O'Brien 2017; ZonMw 2021). Researchers have embraced inclusive research and policy and funding bodies increasingly demand stronger involvement and influence of people with disabilities; this is also influenced by advocacy organizations ("nothing about us without us") and the UN Convention on the Rights of People with Disabilities (UNCPRD) (Sherlaw and Hudebine 2015). Adopted on 13 December 2006, the UNCPRD considers "persons with disabilities should have the opportunity to be actively involved in decision-making processes about policies and programmes, including those directly concerning them" (United Nations 2006). In the Netherlands, this has been laid down in the implementation plan, which holds that people with disabilities in their role as citizens, consumers and stakeholders are actively involved in the formulation and evaluation of policies (VWS 2017, 2018). In the field of

scientific research, this movement has resulted in a wide variety of participative and inclusive research designs (Frankena et al. 2015; Nind and Vinha 2014; Strnadová et al. 2016). Milner and Frawley (2019) call this a third wave of inclusive research that moves beyond “research on” and “research with” to “research by” people with disability.

Inclusive research is associated with labels such as participatory, collaborative, and interventionist research, co-design, community design and social innovation (Chick 2012; Joore et al. 2021; Nind 2014, 2017). Inclusive research, participative research, participative action research and emancipatory research constitute an extensive family of overlapping approaches (Nind 2014).

Walmsley and Johnson (2003, p. 16) introduced the term “Inclusive Research” with respect to people with intellectual disabilities, which encompasses three principles upon which inclusive research is based:

1. The research must address issues that really matter to people with intellectual disabilities and that ultimately lead to improved lives for them.
2. The research must access and represent their views and experiences.
3. People with intellectual disabilities need to be treated with respect by the research community.

From these principles, derive distinguishing characteristics that research is owned, but not necessarily initiated, by people with intellectual disabilities, that research enables people to exercise control over the process and outcomes, that research furthers the interests of people with intellectual disabilities, that it produces accessible outputs, that researchers are on their side and that it is collaborative. Inclusive research embraces participatory and emancipatory approaches to research (Walmsley and Johnson 2003, p. 64).

Action research lends itself well to emancipatory processes and goals. With its many faces, action research holds inquiry undertaken by or with insiders to an organization or community, but never to or on them (Anderson and Herr 2015). It emphasizes people’s lived experiences, individual and social change and the co-construction of knowledge. In doing so, epistemic justice is effectuated (Byskov 2021). Ultimately, it leads to a more just situation for the stakeholders (Greenwood and Levin 2007; McIntyre 2008). In effect, action research presupposes an inclusive approach and, despite a dearth of clarity as to what exactly inclusive research is, much experience has hitherto been gained (Bigby and Frawley 2010; Frankena et al. 2015; Garcia-Iriarte et al. 2009; Morgan and Moni 2013).

We would like to add social design research to this family of approaches. Design thinking is an iterative methodology that inspires a human-centered approach to design and can be divided into five key steps: empathize, define, ideate, prototype and test. Social design research focuses on the design and testing of generic solutions to problems. It is driven by the desire to solve field problems in collaboration with those concerned. Social design research aims at social change, for instance: improving social work practice by means of designing solutions (Van Beest et al. 2017; Margolin and Margolin 2002). It does not primarily seek truth, however it endeavors improvement of the social work practice (Van Aken and Andriessen 2011). Hence, social design research principally departs from the perspective of the stakeholders, for instance that of the social worker and people with intellectual disabilities. Action research is by definition participatory and pursues knowledge development and social change in practice. This implies personal and collective “professionalization” of the participants that is akin to the emancipatory praxis—interaction action and reflection—and critical consciousness (Anderson and Herr 2015; Freire 1970; Hammen-Poldermans 1975).

Inclusive research involving people with intellectual disabilities has evolved from a focus on process and ethics to being more concerned with outcomes: first- and second-generation inclusive research (Nind 2016; Strnadová and Walmsley 2018; Walmsley et al. 2018). Both foci remain valuable and should be pursued.

Process, outcomes and research with and by people with intellectual disability can, and should, concur in action and design research. It is not a matter of research on, research with or research by, but rather a matter of allowing the mixture of and dynamic between

each three “waves”, since positionalities of the researcher and the modes of participation may vary during the project (Thomson and Gunter 2011).

The aim of our research was to bring about changes that contribute to a more inclusive social work practice. For the purpose of this article, we focus on the methodology used and share the experiences of carrying out inclusive action and social design research with people with an intellectual disability and social workers.

## 2. Materials and Methods

### 2.1. Study Design

We conducted a two-year inclusive approach merging participatory action research with social design research and using the theoretical lens of method configuration (Joore et al. 2018, 2021; Margolin and Margolin 2002; Nind 2014; Van Turnhout et al. 2017). As for the social design process, we were inspired by design thinking and the closely related double diamond model (Veer et al. 2020).

Participatory action research and social design research are brought together in the model of a *Community of Development* (CoD) (Wilken et al. 2021) that we applied in this project. The CoD is based on the model of community of practice (CoP) put forward by Wenger (Wenger 2010). A community of practice can be viewed as a social learning system in a social context in which a dual process of meaning making materializes. This duality consists of participation and reification. The first involves active involvement in activities, conversations and reflections. The latter involves producing physical and conceptual artifacts such as words, tools, concepts and methods. The community of development includes both participation and reification, but links this dual process to four goals, namely, producing knowledge, designing a solution, bringing about (social) change and personal and collective professionalization of the participants (Van Beest et al. 2017). The CoD further distinguishes itself from the CoP by highlighting (social) solution design and by substantiating the process and results—artifacts—with research. That is why the CoD constitutes a vehicle that fits seamlessly into what we call inclusive action and social design research.

In a CoD, one of the principles is that all relevant stakeholders are represented. In the case of this study, people with an intellectual disability and social workers were the key participants. CoDs are supported by a researcher and a facilitator. The researcher focuses on the research process (data collection), the facilitator is responsible for managing the group dynamics; both prepare the CoD meetings together, attend the meetings, provide (visual) reports of each meeting to participants and reflect on the meetings with each other as well as with the participants.

In our research project, we have embraced the idea of method configuration as it lends itself well to intensive participatory action and design research in which planning and emergence or, as Van Turnhout et al. (2017) call it, “spontaneity” coincide. The rationale behind method configuration is that enhancing validity requires more than applying one or a few methods. Woolrych et al. argue that methods consist of “loose incomplete collections of resources which you configure, adapt and complement to match specific project circumstances” (2011, p. 940). They explain method configuration by the analogy of culinary dishes: “The method, like a recipe, is at best a guide to action. As with culinary dishes, [action research projects] a focus is needed more on what gets cooked, and how it gets cooked, and not just on how recipes suggest that it could [or should] be cooked” (Woolrych et al. 2011, p. 940). The culinary dish and a recipe’s ingredients are a metaphor for the research goals and the resources. The methods we employed consisted of dialogues, unstructured interviewing, focus group sessions, participatory observations plus design thinking and double diamond principles. The resources included paper ball showers, musical chairs, prompting questions, scaling questions, brainstorm techniques, empathy mapping, collective analysis utilizing an ecological model of social inclusion, preliminary conversations with participants with an intellectual disability to support them in preparing for the CoD meeting and their participation, evaluation of group dynamics and the research

process with CoD participants, visualizations of each CoD meetings, pitches, et cetera. These resources derived from the design thinking method, the double diamond approach, participatory action and social design research methodology. The deployment of these methods and resources was contingent upon the process in which the CoD found itself.

The double diamond model is a variation on existing divergence and convergence models and is depicted as two tilted squares representing the four stages: discover, define, develop and deliver (Veer et al. 2020). The first diamond depicts the stages discover and define; the second diamond depicts the stages of developing and delivery. Both diamonds represent broadening or expanding possible solutions, defining the friction more precisely and making choices. After the defining stage, a number of directions for solutions are devised, followed by finally developing a solution with the highest potential for ensuring a promising and validated solution. The results section is outlined along the double diamond stages.

## 2.2. Involving People (Phase 1)

The first phase of the study lasted over a year and consisted of forming two separate CoDs, each located in a different region (Amsterdam and Wageningen), where people with intellectual disability, social workers and others involved in the local practice participated.

In Wageningen, social workers set up a sheltered employment project named The Football Workshop, which is accommodated in the local football club. People with intellectual disabilities called “football workers” support the volunteers, who perform maintenance work at the club; they organize training sessions and play weekly football home and away matches against teams from the local community and beyond. The Amsterdam context concerns a metropolitan area, where people with intellectual disabilities receive ambulatory support.

Snowball subject recruitment was used for participant enrollment. We were able to draw on a broad regional network of social workers and people with moderate to mild intellectual disability, including people trained as experts by experience. “An expert by experience is someone who has had direct experience of living with a diagnosis or status, and of receiving care, support and/or treatment as well as the potential exposure to restrictive interventions. As a result of this lived experience, they possess a unique insight and understanding that allows them to think, feel and act in ways that brings an ‘added value’ to whatever form of partnership working they are engaged in” (Hollins 2019, p. 3). In addition, we argue that their life experience is enriched by the experiences of others and that they have learned to transcend their individual life experiences. Generally, they have completed training to employ this knowledge, for example, as peer workers, consultants, lecturers or researchers.

Selection criteria for the recruitment of service users and experts by experience included being interested in the subject matter of social inclusion, being motivated to participate in the project, willingness to and being capable of sharing life experiences and being prepared to act as a “critical friend” to the other participants (Embregts et al. 2018). As far as the social workers were concerned, selection criteria for the recruitment were: (a) being employed as a social worker working with people with mild intellectual disability, (b) having an interest in the subject matter “inclusion” and (c) motivation to bring about change in the social work field aimed at promoting inclusion.

To communicate what the study entails, questions needed to be answered such as: what is the study about and what does a community of development entail, what activities take place in these CoD meetings, where and how often do we meet, who are the other participants, what is my role, what influence do I have, what is expected of me during and in between the CoD meetings and what is in it for me? To answer these questions, we offered a flyer in accessible languages, organized physical meetings—one to one or in small groups—and with the help of the feedback from social workers and people with intellectual disabilities we created a visual representation of the information for people with intellectual disabilities. The visualization needed to comply with accessible language

criteria and should not be childish. After several adjustments and the final approval of social workers and experts by experience it was ready for publication.

### *2.3. Execution (Phase 2)*

A total of twelve meetings per CoD were held over a period of two years, at intervals of seven to eight weeks. The CoD Amsterdam and the CoD Wageningen were composed of social workers and service users. The CoD Amsterdam and the CoD Wageningen comprised eight and five participants, respectively, each containing two experts by experience.

Data collection consisted of audio recordings of all CoD meetings ( $N = 24$ ), visual records of each meeting—each time these were shared with the participants for verification—and all tangible results produced in the meetings such as photos of activities during the meetings, photos of notes on white boards, empathy maps, mind maps, brainstorm papers, sketches and analyses. The visual reports also contained a limited amount of written language, which succinctly explained the observations of the researcher and facilitator.

### *2.4. Analysis, Sharing and Interpretating Data (Phase 3)*

Analysis was carried out in several ways. Firstly, data from audio recordings of the meetings of the CoDs were coded. Secondly, a descriptive analysis was made. This approach to data collection and sharing serves the hermeneutical process and ownership of those involved as well as democratic validity (Anderson and Herr 2015; Guba and Lincoln 1989). Due to COVID-19 measures, results from the first analysis were shared visually with the participants of the CoD during a digital meeting. The first analysis indirectly linked to designing a solution. It was principally aimed at answering an associated research sub question on the behavior of social workers that fits inclusion-focused performance of our central research question. However, the solutions designed by the CoD constitute interventions to support the inclusion-focused behavior of social workers. The second analysis contained a comprehensive description of the collaborative process of designing solutions and what conditions facilitated inclusion-focused social work utilizing the designed solutions; this was sent to the participants for reading and discussion in a physical meeting. The purpose of this approach was to supplement, refine and verify the analysis. A third analysis comprised the prototyping and testing of the designed solution. Each round of prototype testing yielded data that were evaluated with the CoD participants in order to make adjustments for the next round of testing.

## **3. Results**

Using the stages of Design Thinking and the Double Diamond model, we discuss what has been learned in this project.

### *3.1. Discover and Empathize*

Empathizing and discovery helps gain insight into the issue and articulate the questions that are central to the study. For obtaining approval and internal funding from the university, the researchers had to formulate a question prior to having it carefully discussed with social workers and people with intellectual disabilities. Hence, we deliberately formulated a broad research question that offered scope for further specification in collaboration with the social work practice, i.e., the management of service providers, social workers and people with intellectual disabilities. Although the general goal of the project (how can social workers working with individuals with intellectual disabilities promote social inclusion of people with a mild intellectual disability?) was formulated in advance, after the project started the CoD participants in Amsterdam and Wageningen had the opportunity to redetermine the research question. This revolved around questions like: What is the question? Whose question is it? How can we interpret the central question? Can we adapt the question to our own perspectives? Ultimately, the central question remained unchanged as participants felt that it had sufficient scope and that it fitted in with their own experiences. Refining the central research question to the context of social work and people



with intellectual disabilities occurred through self-enquiry by the social workers and was discussed with people with intellectual disabilities. In the CoD Amsterdam, this led to questions that were predominantly focused on record keeping and transferring information about the service user: Why is the record keeping and transfer we are carrying out good? What am I reporting and why? Since we are thinking about the form of record keeping and the transfer, how can it be improved? How can we enhance the service users' control over their records? Some life experts with intellectual disability nuanced this concern, saying: "Sometimes a service user does not want to think about his records and transfer. He likes it the way it is. Let him (social worker) do it." (quote from participant CoD meetings Amsterdam).

In this empathize and discovery stage, experiences were shared and assessed as practices and pathways to or from social inclusion (Simplican et al. 2015). In addition, conceptualizations of inclusion, exclusion, stigma, discrimination and equality were explored. This led participants to comment that they found themselves "to be a kind of destigmatizer when (they) consult with a private or government organization on behalf of or with a client." (quote from participant CoD meetings Amsterdam). To support the exploration, we deployed a mix of activities and tools:

- Practice assessment: having social workers assess their practices pertaining to service user documentation and records. The self-assessment focuses on whether their practice is inclusive or not.
- Ranking definitions regarding inclusion and based on these rankings conducting a discussion.
- Musical chairs: playing musical chairs so that participants experience and relive social inclusion and social exclusion.
- Paper ball shower: a shower of paper balls that ensures active and interactive discussion with equal input from all participants. Participants write down statements, questions, answers, words or make a drawing on a blank piece of paper, then crumple the piece of paper into a ball and throw it randomly in the air all at once.
- Empathy mapping with the aim of empathizing with those who deal with service user documentation and records.
- Pitch and sketch: individual pitches or sketches by the participants using one or more objects that symbolize their message. The purpose was to draw up an interim assessment of what the participants had practiced in promoting inclusion.

### 3.2. Define

Using the aforementioned activities and tools, we converged to a point where we formulated the collective concern. This was done by clustering and scoring discussed issues. In addition, the CoD defined the design criteria of the intended solution. These criteria were reconsidered several times. In the CoD Amsterdam the concern was formulated in a design proposition (Denyer et al. 2008): if you believe that service users should have control over their records, then reverse the act of who records and transfers information in the records to others. This was captured in the title "Reverse Records". In the CoD Wageningen, the concern was molded into the design proposition: If you want the football workers—people with intellectual disabilities in sheltered employment at The Football Workshop—to move on to regular workplaces where the football workers feel recognized and valued, then focus on a sustainable cooperation with profit and non-profit organizations so that mutual recognition and trust can grow. For that end have the football workers organize football matches against football teams from profit and non-profit organizations including all preparations and evaluation activities. This was captured in the title "Towards Sustainable Reciprocity".

### 3.3. Develop: Ideate, Prototype and Test

In this stage, the focus was on finding, shaping, reshaping and testing possible solutions. Different techniques were utilized in both CoDs such as: the one second brainstorm,

negative brainstorming, role play, organizing a “Goodies Exhibition” and collectively creating a timeline. Additionally, between the CoD meetings the participants collected examples of products that inspired them in the ideation. All these activities and brainstorm techniques were deployed to enhance creative thinking among participants and resulted in:

- Active and continuous engagement of all participants.
- Input from all participants.
- A vast array of ideas ranging from predictable and morally permissible to hilariously ineffective ideas (one second brainstorm and negative brainstorming). The understanding of interactions between social workers and service users and how this relates to feeling ignored or feeling excluded.

The development of the possible solutions was proceeded by an iterative process. By asking “how the Reversed Record Keeping complied with the European Union General Data Protection Regulation (EU GDPR),” life experts with intellectual disability notified us that we must be alert to privacy concerns (quote from participants CoD Amsterdam and Wageningen). Terminology was adjusted repeatedly until all involved could agree on the words used. The term “client” was rejected by social workers and most notably by people with intellectual disabilities. The following quotes came from participants of the CoD Amsterdam and Wageningen respectively: “We favor the expression Amsterdammer or service user” and “we address each other as football workers. We are all football workers”.

### 3.4. *Delivery: Testing, Adjusting and Implementing*

Through the inclusive process, both CoDs delivered tangible results.

The CoD Amsterdam delivered the Reversed Record Keeping Principles comprising:

1. The service user reports, not the social worker.
2. The service user decides what should be in the records. This principle is supplemented with allowing differences of opinion between the social worker and the service user and providing room for that in the records.
3. The social worker verifies with the service user whether what has been recorded is correct.
4. The content in the record is expressed in accessible language.
5. The social worker is evaluated, not solely the service user.

The first three principles are formulated in order from “the action is entirely performed by the service user” to “the action is performed by the social worker”, yet maintaining control with the service user as much as possible. The fourth is a basic principle and applies to every other principle. The fifth emphasizes the power relationship between the social worker and the service user. Strictly, service users ought to have personal plans and goals that must be periodically evaluated by the service user and the social worker. This principle seeks to reverse the situation, and thus equalize the power relation, by stating that social workers also have their learning goals to further professionalize. This evaluation is carried out in conjunction with the service user: “You evaluate my learning goals together with me, I evaluate your learning goals together with you.” These five principles were designed graphically into a poster.

The testing and fine-tuning of the Principles of Reversed Record Keeping yielded additional results. First, the service users stated greater involvement and control in what goes into their records. Second, service users reported more involvement in how content is added to their records; this was facilitated by applying various forms of communication such as drawing, photography, vlogging and audio recording. Third, the CoD participants gained three insights into the usability of Reversed Recording; it appears suitable in long-term professional relationships and for recording life events. The Principles of Reversed Records require intensive attention for and involvement with the service user and fits best with episodes in life that are of greater significance for a person. The principles seem less suitable for daily reporting as the assumption among CoD participants was that daily reporting should be objective, concise and specific.

The CoD Wageningen delivered a decision chart “Towards Sustainable Reciprocity”. It serves as a tool allowing the football workers—people with mild intellectual disabilities—to co-direct the organization of the football matches and surrounding activities and to assess which organizations offer good opportunities for sustainable reciprocal cooperation.

The decision chart complies with criteria set by the CoD participants. Criteria were:

- Comprehensibility that refers to language structure and design; language includes wording that people with intellectual disabilities recognize, unambiguous words and phrasing such as easy-to-read phrases. Structure holds the routing in the decision chart that should make sense in that it fits in with the way of thinking of the social workers at The Football Workshop and the football workers. Design revolves around layout, color, contrast, fonts, font size and visualizations. Are these appropriate for reading and understanding the decision chart?
- Applicability of the decision chart. Applicability was defined as providing insight and supporting decision making. Providing insight was achieved as the chart helps the social worker and the football workers gain insight into the underlying motives of the organizations and their visiting football team. Providing insight also includes self-reflection, since the chart also supports the social worker and the football workers gaining insight into their own underlying motives: Why do we play against teams from profit and non-profit organizations? What do we invest in the relationship between The Football Workshop and the visiting teams? Why do we invest in this relationship? With the insights, decision making is supported in order to determine which organizations are worth building a long-term reciprocal relationship with.

#### 4. Discussion

In all stages of the project, social workers and people with intellectual disability played a crucial role. As a matter of fact, we would assert that they were the lifeblood of the research project. When the blood is thick or flows slowly, the project is at risk of losing support, credibility and emancipatory impact. Challenges that came across in keeping the project vital required continuous alignment with the participants and are briefly discussed below in terms of ownership, power (im)balance, implementation and enhancing emancipatory practice through merging action research and social design research as the vehicles that ride the inclusive road.

##### 4.1. Collective Ownership: Establishing a Collective Concern

Since inclusion constitutes a comprehensive notion, in the discovery stage the biggest challenge was to explore inclusion and find agreement on its meanings. The research question, with inclusion as its central concept, was kept fairly open ended in order to give each participant the freedom to give meaning to inclusion from their own perspective. For all those involved, this required careful listening, patience, mutual trust and recognition and power sharing. For the researcher and facilitator, the challenge was to avert abstractions (use of words), too high paced discussions and to ensure that the meetings fit in with the culture of those involved; the latter holds taking into account the organizational culture, wishes of the participants concerning the design of the meetings and preferred learning styles.

Establishing the collective concern is a challenge in itself. With a view to ownership and thus a long-term commitment, it is crucial that every participant fully supports it. For that purpose, we additionally invited the participants to draw up a personal goal that is in line with the collective concern. In sharing knowledge—experience based, professional, scientific—emphasis was put on experiences from people with intellectual disability and social workers partaking in the CoD. In doing so, we attempted to accommodate and safeguard epistemic justice (Byskov 2021; Geuskens 2018; Schippers 2021).

##### 4.2. Power (im)Balance: Being in Control

Power dynamics are omnipresent throughout each action research, social design research and inclusive research project (McDonald 2021; Nind 2014; Stoudt 2007). With



respect to establishing a collective concern, setting personal goals, ideation and devising the outlines and content of the intended solutions, ownership was maintained with the participants. In the design stage, the challenge centered on who was in the lead concerning the production of the designed solution. Basically, the researchers wanted to keep these steps controlled and carried out by the participants and their network. However, the participants appeared to lack the digital skills—proficiency in Adobe Illustrator and Adobe InDesign—required for graphic design and materialization. This prompted a situation where the researchers, with proficiency in design software, complemented the participants' capacities in the design process. Although in consultation and with the consent of the participants—they even indicated they were happy that the researcher took on this task—the researchers experienced this as a breach in democratic validity since the participants relied too much upon the researchers' skills.

#### *4.3. Implementation of the Designed Solution*

With regard to delivery, our challenge was to get the intended solution implemented. In testing the intended solution as a CoD, we discovered weaknesses and threats (external factors) that hampered implementation. (Verhagen and Haarsma-den Dekker 2019) discern three dimensions of implementation: physical, mental and structural. Physical implementation concerns creating, developing and testing the design and winning support, for instance among service users and staff members. Mental implementation refers to informing, accepting and incorporating new ideas and new design. Structural implementation revolves around learning to utilize the design and letting it fit into the social work practice. Physical and mental implementation was accomplished. In particular, the participants disseminated the intended solution in their surrounding professional network; physical implementation and mental implementation effectuated. Structural implementation, however, was not achieved, for it demands harder nuts to be cracked. Structural implementation may have the consequence that a fundamental change in macro practices and macrosystems (for instance the Electronic Health Record systems) is required such as regulations that prescribe rules for keeping records. This moves beyond mere social change as it also demands political debate and amendments in national legislation. Furthermore, it presupposes a wider scope of the project, which, although we as a CoD cherished, was beyond our scope and possibilities.

#### *4.4. Merging the Inclusive Approach with Action Research and Social Design Research*

Merging action and social design research has led to insights into how to achieve a balanced approach to inclusive research. First, the application of method configuration allows the researcher to accommodate and match the needs and capacities of participants, both social workers and people with intellectual disabilities. As described in this article, we have demonstrated a multitude of methods and resources that have been deployed. Action and reflection processes—and the support of epistemic justice—in inclusive research with people with intellectual disabilities benefit greatly from the employment of a variety of creative and active activities such as drawing, photography and vlogging and kinesthetic activities such as walking, football exercises, musical chairs and so on. However, this is not exclusive to people with intellectual disabilities and social workers and the palette of activities should not be used arbitrarily. It foremost requires careful observation and a feeling for group composition, group culture and group dynamics.

Second, consistent employment of visualizations as an accessible form of communication contributes to understanding the subject matter and the project's progress and facilitates giving voice to each participant. Visual communication is in keeping with (social) design research. Third, ensuring the balance is part of all the research stages where the voices of people with intellectual disabilities invariably come to the fore, from the discovery phase—mutually empathizing with the social worker and the person with intellectual disability who receives services—up to the delivery phase, which includes testing and adjusting the designed solution and implementation. Fourth, maintaining balance lies

in closely monitoring the multiple objectives of action and social design research project, namely, to change a social practice, to collectively design an answer and to yield new or validate extant knowledge. Keeping these objectives continuously in mind needs to be a responsibility for both the researchers and the participants, since the project is a shared endeavor. Fifth, the CoD is a place that accommodates both research approaches. Moreover, the CoD appears to be an exquisite place, where the voices of social workers and people with intellectual disabilities are heard and, in fact, predominate.

## 5. Conclusions

The aim of our research was to bring about changes that contribute to a more inclusive social work practice. However, this article was dedicated to the methodology and what we can learn from executing inclusive action and social design research with people with intellectual disability and social workers in order to advance inclusive social work practice.

In the project, types of equal collaboration were explored in order to redress power imbalances between social workers and service users. We outlined the amalgamation of an inclusive approach with action research and social design research, which seems promising in involving people with an intellectual disability in a meaningful and empowering way.

We conclude that inclusive research can and should not be standardized, since it concerns a particularly emergent and iterative process. It requires flexibility and creativity in finding ways to inclusively collaborate with social workers and people with intellectual disabilities. The involvement of service users in all design thinking phases is possible. The performance of activities and the division of tasks can differ per phase.

Working in partnership with social workers and people with intellectual disabilities requires sensitivity to sharing power and the utilization of diverse communication modalities. A researcher should not eschew losing control over the process and allow the design process to generate unexpected or initially unintended outcomes. Furthermore, inclusive cooperation demands a safe and welcoming environment that offers space to think freely and speak up; for that, substantial attention is needed for group dynamics and learning strategies that encourage co-production.

The beauty and the great value of inclusive action and social design research is the cooperative quest you embark on that generates myriads of collective and individual returns along the way: visible, palpable, tangible, measurable and immeasurable. It all counts.

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