Transition to independent living: Signs of self-determination in the discussions of Mexican students with intellectual disability

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Accessible summary
- Self-determination means that people decide for themselves about their future. Self-determination is very important in people's transition to adulthood and independent living.
- Six young adults talked with peers and facilitators about their transition to living in an independent-living flat in Mexico.
- We wanted to learn what it was like for these young adults to transition to independent living.
- The young adults shared that: (a) It is their decision whether to move to an independent-living flat; (b) They feel that living independently is challenging; (c) Learning new things at independent-living contexts makes them feel good about themselves as young adults.
- Talking with young people about their independent-living experiences is important for planning transitions according to their own strengths and interests.
- Talking to others can help people decide where and with whom to live.

Abstract
Background: Young people with intellectual disability experience important transitions as they move towards independent adult living. Transition is supported by self-determination, comprising volition (making conscious choices) and agency (acting with intention). Dialogic interactions that legitimise students' voices potentially promote self-determination. Consequently, this project aimed to involve young people actively in talking together about their futures.

Methods: The research project took place in a university-based transition programme in Mexico: Building Bridges. Six Mexican young adults with intellectual disability participated. The research project focused on their experiences of self-determination in personal, social, and educational contexts. Data collection incorporated discussion sessions and participant observations. In discussions, students shared their experiences of transition to Building Bridges, and an independent-living flat. A thematic analysis was conducted.

Findings: The students' transition to Building Bridges was difficult, but they believed that they were learning and growing with support. Regarding their transition to the


1 | INTRODUCTION

“Transition” refers to experiences and changes that occur in young adults’ lives as they move from school to independent-living and work contexts (Wehmeyer, 2006). It brings changes in their roles, responsibilities and networks, and in turn, new challenges (Wehmeyer & Webb, 2011). Transition is particularly challenging for young adults with intellectual disability. Barriers include limited postschool options; insufficient support and guidance; scant interagency collaboration; and little student involvement – even if present at their transition-planning meetings (e.g. Grigal & Deschamps, 2011; Pallisera et al., 2018; Saad et al., 2017; Strnadová et al., 2016).

This study took place in Mexico. Mexico has advocated for equal opportunities and social participation of people with disabilities in international treaties (United Nations, 2006), and in national legislations (General Congress of the United Mexican States, 2011). However, in practice, Mexico lacks a strategy aimed to include people with intellectual disability in society and ensure their independent life (National Human Rights Commission, 2019). For instance, there are no specific recommendations, institutions and/or funding aimed at preparing and accompanying young adults with intellectual disability in their transition to postschool adult life, nor supported community-based living options. International research indicates that the lack of options compels people to live with relatives or in institutions (Fuliana et al., 2020).

In this context, a Mexican civil association called Capys (Centre for Personal and Social Autonomy, www.capysac.com) developed a university-based transition programme. The programme is called Building Bridges1 (Saad et al., 2017). It offers supported experience in independent living and employment. This paper presents the experiences of six Building Bridges students in their transition to independent living. We had a particular interest in understanding the students’ experiences in terms of their self-determination (Wehmeyer, 2005, as discussed below).

Investigating young adults’ transitions from their own perspective is important as historically they have lacked opportunities to participate in discussions that concern them (Björnsdóttir et al., 2015). While paradoxically, it is they as beneficiaries of the services who are in the best position to provide insight into their experiences. We drew on the potential of dialogic interactions (see Section 1.2) to provide a space in which students’ experiences were listened to and valued. This involved collaboratively exploring their understandings of self-determination and encouraging their reflection in interaction with others.

1.1 | Independent living

People with disabilities have the right to live independently (United Nations, 2006). “Living independently” does not mean living alone but having choices regarding where and with whom to live (Inclusion International, 2012). Everyone’s options are constrained by sociocultural, economic and other factors. Nevertheless, young adults with intellectual disability experience additional barriers including lack of options or support, poverty, exclusion from the labour market and low expectations (Inclusion International, 2012).

People with intellectual disability who have transitioned to living independently report that they have learned new independent-living skills and have experienced feelings of connection and companionship (Salmon et al., 2019). People have also indicated feelings of independence, freedom and responsibility (Inclusion International, 2012). However, in some cases, they have also reported not having choice about their transition to an independent-living context (Salmon et al., 2019). Other challenging experiences reported include authoritarian behaviours of professionals, feeling that others make their decisions and lack of information about recreational activities (Björnsdóttir et al., 2015). The reported benefits suggest the importance of experiencing independent-living contexts in order to make an informed choice about this option.

KEYWORDS
communication, empowerment issues, independent living, learning (intellectual) disabilities, social interaction

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1Building Bridges is the translation to English of the original name of the programme in Spanish: Construyendo Puentes.
The risks of moving to a context that may in practice hinder people’s experience of self-determination indicate the need to understand their perspectives.

1.2 | The socio-ecological nature of self-determination: a dialogic perspective

Self-determination is understood in this paper in terms of volition (making conscious choices) and causal agency (acting with intention) (Shogren et al., 2015; Wehmeyer, 2005). Environments also play an essential role in promoting self-determination (Abery & Stanscliffe, 2003). Therefore, self-determination can be seen to exist in the interaction of people’s intentions and conscious choices with a supportive context of opportunities and encouragement (Rubio-Jimenez & Kershner, 2020). Several interventions have aimed to promote students’ participation in their transition process to enhance their self-determination (e.g. Mazzotti et al., 2015; Shogren et al., 2017). This socioecological view of self-determination aligns with socioecological approaches to intellectual disability (ID) that focus on person-environment interaction and recognition that personalised supports enhance human functioning and quality of life (Shogren et al., 2018).

Consistent with the interactive nature of self-determination, the volition and agency on which self-determination is based can be promoted or hindered in the students’ interaction with other agents (Rubio-Jimenez & Kershner, 2020). In this framework, dialogue gains importance. “Dialogue” broadly refers to the interchange of ideas between various sources (Mercer & Littleton, 2007). In doing so, the teaching-and-learning process is enhanced by “dialogic interactions” (Alexander, 2008) which stand in opposition to monologic discourses (Bakhtin, 1981). In monologic discourses, the educator provides information, and the expectation is to arrive at a pre-defined correct response. Through dialogic interactions, in contrast, students are active and valuable participants in the knowledge production process, thus are encouraged to share their ideas (Skidmore, 2017). In their interaction with peers and educators, students engage in collective thinking by asking, reflecting and recalling experiences, thus enhancing their learning (Mercer & Littleton, 2007). Dialogic interactions that truly legitimise the students’ voices while promoting their learning draw attention to the ways in which educators respond to what students shared (e.g. informative feedback, follow-up questions). In this interaction, opportunities arise that can promote or hinder students’ self-determination (Rubio-Jimenez & Kershner, 2020).

2 | THE STUDY

2.1 | Contexts and participants

This project took place in Mexico City. Specifically, in a university-based transition programme called Building Bridges, which was developed by the Mexican civil association Capys. Capys adheres to the American Association on Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities’ definition of ID (Schalock et al., 2007) due to its interactive and contextual approach. However, medical diagnoses are not made to access the programme. Building Bridges is aimed at young people (18–25 years old) who require support to progress in their schooling (www.capysac.com/transition-vida-adulta/).

Building Bridges could be categorised as a mixed/hybrid post-secondary education (PSE) model (Hart et al., 2006). This PSE model is characterised by students who participate in social activities and university classes with peers with and without disabilities, attend life-skills classes with Building Bridges peers, and have employment experiences. Moreover, Building Bridges prepares its students as self-advocates and provides independent-living experiences in flats with Building Bridges peers and facilitators during weekdays. The flats are intended to provide learning opportunities of independent-living skills in real-life, safe, and supportive environments. Upon graduation, Building Bridges offers lifelong support services for independent living, referred to as: SAVI.

Building Bridges is a fee-paying service implemented in five universities in Mexico, three of them in Mexico City. Therefore, most students come from middle and high socioeconomic classes. In the absence of a national strategy that facilitates access to universities for students with specific support requirements, Building Bridges students are part of a select group of young adults with intellectual disability that have accessed Mexican universities. This points to disparities in access to educational opportunities associated with social class in Mexico. Consequently, Building Bridges directives are working on strategies for low-income students to access this programme.

The participants were recruited via the programme coordinator according to the following criteria: verbal communication, availability, and student consent. The requirement for students to be able to communicate verbally was because of the project’s focus on students’ verbal dialogic interactions in different contexts. The field of dialogic research is beginning to focus more on different ways of communicating dialogically (e.g. Teachman et al., 2018). In the future research with students identified with intellectual disability, it will be interesting to analyse dialogic interactions that include students who communicate differently.

The participants’ academic backgrounds varied (Table 1). Aaron and Gabriel graduated from high school in an education programme developed by Capys. The programme consisted of attending some

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Semester</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Maria</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nicole</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gabriel</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sebastian</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Aaron</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jupiter</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Names were changed to pseudonyms.

1Building Bridges has a maximum duration of 10 semesters but the average is 8.
integrated classes in mainstream classrooms and others at a support classroom. Maria and Nicole attended mainstream high schools although Maria left it unfinished. Sebastian and Jupiter studied in mainstream high school classrooms with individualised supports and curricular adjustments. Students were also at different stages in their transition to the independent-living flat. Sebastian and Nicole had been flat residents for several months. Maria and Jupiter moved in during the data-collection period. Aaron and Gabriel had been invited to move but were reluctant.

2.2 | Ethics

Having a disability diagnosis does not translate into “vulnerability” nor “impaired capacity” to make decisions (Economic & Social Research Council, 2018; Nuwagaba & Rule, 2015). Therefore, efforts were made to ensure that potential participants had time and access to support in their decision-making. To recognise participants’ agency and their right to say “yes” to research participation (Santinele & Fudge, 2018), we proceeded as follows. This process incorporates and extends the required ethical research procedures in the authors’ institutional context, including consent required from staff, parents, and students.

- Programme coordinator’s consent to invite teachers and students to participate in the study.
- Teachers’ consent to participate.
- Students’ consent to participate. To invite the students, the first author met with them to discuss the project. She explained that she wanted to record the sessions and what the usage of their data would be. The researcher gave them printed information sheets and consent forms that consisted of short and illustrated sentences. Documents were previously approved by the psychologist and the coordinator of the programme. Students were asked to think about and discuss their participation with whoever they wanted. Students were familiar with the term “research” as they had participated in research projects before.
- Parent information statements and consent forms were sent to parents to: inform parents about the research, encourage them to discuss the student consent form with their son/daughter, ask for their consent to be invited to a parent discussion group and ask for their consent in relation to the usage of their son/daughter’s data, as their legal guardians. The usage of the students’ data did not prejudice the students’ participation in the study.

All invited students gave their consent to participate, which was consistent with their interest expressed at the meeting.

2.3 | Data collection

The findings presented below come from a larger research project. Its objectives were to explore the students’ self-determination experiences, and investigate how self-determination could be co-constructed through dialogue between students, peers and teachers (see Rubio-Jimenez & Kershner, 2020). This project was developed as an educational intervention that prompted reflection by students and researchers in relation to the students’ transition to adulthood. At this time, it gains relevance to engage students in listening and reflecting collaboratively on the decisions they wish to make regarding this new stage of their lives. The project drew on emancipatory research paradigms that aim to fight against “disabilism” by establishing a dialogue with people identified with disabilities. This is in order to discover those aspects that are relevant and valuable to them in order to develop social understanding of their experiences and promote the reflection of everyone involved (Oliver, 1992). In this context, the project incorporated participatory elements (Stack & McDonald, 2014) by placing the students’ experiences at the core of the development of the educational intervention (Figure 1) and involving them actively in planning and assessing the project as it continued.

The first author conducted participant observations for eight months of the students’ interactions with different agents in university, job, and independent-living contexts. From the third to the eight month, the researcher facilitated discussion groups with the students. Three Building Bridges teachers joined the discussions in the role of facilitators at different times throughout the semester. There was never more than one teacher in the discussions and in some discussions no teacher was present. All sessions were video and audio recorded, transcribed verbatim, and translated from Spanish to English for analysis.

The researcher met with the students once per week in sessions that lasted between 60 and 90 min. Students were encouraged to choose the topics to be discussed following an iterative process (Figure 1). After a discussion group, the researcher reviewed
the session recordings and identified topics mentioned by the students that could be further discussed. In the following session, the researcher would share a list of possible topics of discussion. The students could either select one of these topics or propose another one; nevertheless, they always chose one from the list. After agreeing on a discussion topic, students created materials of their liking to facilitate the discussion of the topic selected (usually PowerPoint presentations). Teacher and researcher were available to help students in the creation of materials. In the discussion group, students would share their materials. Teacher and researcher would ask questions for students to expand on their understandings and experiences. Some questions were prepared in advance to clarify/expand on specific issues. However, most questions originated during the discussion. Peer interactions were promoted by asking peers to comment on each other’s experiences.

The set of sessions in which students created materials and discussed the selected topic are called here “Activities” (Table 2). A topic could be discussed in more than one session. Activities two, five and six were proposed by the researcher taking advantage of other Building Bridges activities. Activity seven was recurring in the sessions.

2.4 | Research questions and data analysis

2.4.1 | How did students say they experience their transition from parents’ home to the independent-living flat?

A thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2013) was conducted on the data assuming that spoken language works as a window to explore people’s experiences of a phenomenon. To capture the wide range of students’ experiences, we took an exploratory and iterative inductive approach to code generation (Mason, 2002; Timmermans & Tavory, 2012). In other words, in the creation and refinement of codes we moved back and forth between what students expressed and existing theoretical accounts together with relevant knowledge of the context. From coding, we identified topics that students spoke about in the discussion groups (Figure 2). The code, “Independent living,” was then further analysed to identify themes (as discussed below). We selected this code as it brought together the students’ experiences regarding their transition to the independent-living flat.

We aimed to establish trustworthiness during each phase of thematic analysis (Nowell et al., 2017) as follows:

- **Data familiarisation phase**: engagement with the data for over a year, and triangulation of data collected through the diverse collection methods (i.e. recordings and field notes).
- **Coding and theme development phases**: critical and continuous discussions between authors regarding codes and themes in relation to key examples of the data. Discussions led to numerous rounds of code and theme refinement. This way we aimed for themes to accurately reflect the meanings evident in the data set, thus also enhancing the validity of the analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006).
- **Production of the report phase**: provide as much detailed descriptions of the analysis as possible within the space constraints of a journal publication.

To illustrate the findings, we describe the activity in which conversations developed and present short segments of conversations and single quotes where appropriate for two main reasons. Firstly, to make transparent the context in which these conversations developed. Thus, the reader could have a sense of both what was claimed and how these claims emerged (Palmer et al., 2010). Secondly, following the socio-constructivist approach on which this project is based, conversation extracts best indicate how individuals develop their learning and understandings in interaction with other people (Mercer & Littleton, 2007).

The following transcription conventions are used (Jefferson, 2004; VOICE, 2007):

- [] Anonymised names and institutions replaced with aliases or descriptions.
- () Words/phrases added by the authors to enhance clarity.

(italics) Other details of the conversation.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>TABLE 2</th>
<th>Student activities and focus of discussions</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Activity</strong></td>
<td><strong>Students</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1. Goals for the future</td>
<td>Shared their goals at the short, medium and long term.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Challenge of the Month</td>
<td>Selected a short-term goal; proposed and carried out strategies to achieve it.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. This is me</td>
<td>Talked about themselves. For example, what made them happy/angry, things they would like to learn, their decisions.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Ideal romantic partner</td>
<td>Discussed what it was for them to have a romantic relationship, what they were looking for in a partner, challenges perceived/experienced.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Living in an independent-living flat</td>
<td>Participated in activities related to their transition to the independent-living flats: a focus group, an interview to peers living at the flat.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. End-of-semester presentation</td>
<td>Prepared materials regarding our discussion groups and presented them to peers, teachers and parents.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. Key concepts</td>
<td>Shared their experiences/understandings of: “self-determination”, “self-knowledge”, “self-advocacy”, “everyday choices”, “life project”; and linked these concepts to the activities carried out. The students were familiar with these concepts from their lessons.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
3 | FINDINGS

The set of refined codes is illustrated in Figure 2 to represent the topics that students talked about in the sessions. “Decision-making” is given as the central organising concept as it is key in the definition of self-determination elaborated on in this study. The three groups of codes are as follows: first, topics that the students mentioned making/wanting to make decisions about. Second, people that the students mentioned being involved in their decisions. Third, other processes that students referred to be involved in their decision-making. Close analysis of what students said in relation to “Independent living” resulted in construction of the following themes. Themes are phrased in first person aiming to express the students’ voices:

- To move or not to move to the flat is my decision
- I found it challenging to live independently
- The things I am learning make me feel good about myself as a young adult

Although the focus of the paper is on their transition to the independent-living context, it is relevant here also to share the students’ experiences in their transition from previous educational contexts to Building Bridges. This is to provide perspective to the students’ experiences of self-determination in their transition to the flat.

3.1 | Transition to Building Bridges

The students’ educational experiences before Building Bridges varied. However, their testimonies suggested their limited participation in the decision-making process regarding their educational life post high school.

Nicole aspired to pursue a bachelor’s degree after graduating from mainstream high school. However, without curricular support, she ended up withdrawing from it. In her words:

I tried (studying) in several universities and in none I could achieve it (laughs)... When I entered universities, I did reach a point where I didn’t understand anything at all, I got desperate, I got angry with myself, I did despair until I reached a point that I gave up.

Sebastian studied in a mainstream high school where he received individualised support from an educational assistant. Sebastian was not comfortable with this situation: “I kind of got angry because... I (did) have a person who can help me (educational assistant), but I wasn’t doing what the teacher was doing.” After graduation, his parents sought educational contexts, thus coming across Building Bridges. Sebastian reported not having much knowledge about the educational context to which he was being enrolled:

We (parents and Sebastian) tried in many schools and I think my parents found out that there was a programme here at [university]. First, I saw [another university] and I didn’t like it. So I went here where there was Building Bridges and it was for young people with disabilities... the truth is that I didn’t expect it, it was knowledge little by little but while I was already in the programme. I mean, before I didn’t know that I was in the programme, but later I realised that I entered a programme.
Maria had not finished high school yet when a bullying situation led her family to seek for another educational context. In her words:

In the first year of high school, I remember that I was bullied a lot... every day I woke up with fear or pretended to be sick so as not to go to school... At first, I tried to tell the principal but he ignored me. Sometimes I was wrong because I was silent... I lost my appetite, I was never hungry... I told my dad and one day I remember that we went to my school and we talked to the principal and my dad said: “I don't want you to say anything, I just want you to listen to my daughter” and well, we saw that the principal didn't believe me at all... My dad began to look for... schools and then he found [a university where Building Bridges is implemented] I think. And well, he made an appointment with Lily [programme coordinator], told her about me...

Gabriel studied high school at an educational programme developed by Capys. His transition to a new educational context made him feel sad and angry as it meant separating from his friends:

I was very sad and very angry because I didn't want to leave [high school] and I missed it a lot... I said that I was not going to get used to [university] until I hit rock bottom on this. And until the end of third or fourth semester, I've hit rock bottom, I mean I'm used to it (now)... I wanted to go to [a different university] with the others, to have the same career.

In sum, the students reported having felt led or pushed to continue their education in Building Bridges. The change was difficult and made them confused, sad and/or angry, especially when they did not know or understand what their options were. With time, students got used to the new circumstances, felt that they found the supportive space they were looking for, and that they have grown. In Maria's words:

The fact is that I was at [high school] and I was thinking of a school where there could be more support because in [high school] I didn't receive as much support as here (university) so I didn't know about anything... And also I feel that I am growing more here (university) than when I was there (high school).

Within this context, the students joined Building Bridges. After a few semesters, they got invited to move into an independent-living flat.

3.2 | Transition to the independent-living flat

3.2.1 | To move or not to move to the flat is my decision

After a few semesters of learning independent-living skills within university contexts, the coordinator invites students to the independent-living flats to strengthen and/or learn new skills. Students perceive that it is their decision whether to accept this invitation (Table 3).

Unlike Jupiter and Nicole, not all students are motivated to move. Nevertheless, they also feel that it is their decision. This is Gabriel’s case who shared: “(my parents say) that it’s my decision, that it’s not by force. And Lily [coordinator] told me the same.”

From the students’ perspective, the transition process starts when they receive the coordinator’s invitation to move. Not all students accept this invitation straightaway, and they are not forced to. They can keep on discussing this option with peers, family, teachers, and coordinator. Once they feel confident to move, students and coordinator talk to parents and agree on the transition details. For instance, Nicole agreed with her aunt and coordinator that her transition would be gradual. Staying initially one night per week. This way, the programme opens up a self-determination opportunity by promoting students to make this significant decision. The transition details can be negotiated to enhance the students’ confidence to take this step, but the students’ will is always respected. Thereby, students perceive that their decision is key to undertake this transition.

In a focus group about the flat, Jupiter and Nicole shared their moving process.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Facilitator</th>
<th>Who made the decision? How did you decide to move?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Jupiter</td>
<td>I, of course. I was the one who went to them (parents) and they accepted that I had the opportunity to see other places. Other reasons to make me (feel) proud.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Turns later

| Nicole | Well, Lily [coordinator] invited me (to move in) and she told me that she was also going to have a meeting with my aunt. But first she asked me if I wanted to, so she could talk to my aunt. And well I said yes, that I did want to try it, and (Lily) said: “oh well then let me talk to your aunt.” She spoke with my aunt and then she (aunt) and I had a talk at my house. (My aunt) told me: “if you want, so you don’t feel overwhelmed, we try it once a week, Lily told me that we could do this so that we don’t put too much pressure on you staying all week”... and well, I accepted. |

TABLE 3 Segment 2
3.2.2 I found it challenging to live independently

Deciding to move is not easy. Aaron and Gabriel had participated in some activities at the flat but were reluctant to move (Table 4).

Students’ opinions are consistent with previous literature in that transition to living independently is challenging (e.g. Björnsdóttir et al., 2015). Aaron and Gabriel contribute two challenges: fear of seeing their parents less often, and rejection to changes in their lives. The first weeks at the flat can be difficult too (Table 5).

Students who had been living in the flat longer also recalled sad feelings when they first move. Nicole, shared:

I did miss my house, my grandmother, my brother, but... between Erika [flat facilitator] and the girls, they made me feel at ease, comfortable, happy. They supported me. When I told them I was sad, they consoled me. And yes, with their support, I got used to the flat

Nicole’s comment highlights the importance of a supportive and happy environment during this transition. Nicole added that she began her transition by staying in the flat one day initially: “only on Wednesdays to see if I liked it or not... I liked it so much that I told my aunt that I did want to stay all week.” Similarly, having a good time in the flat began to convince Aaron to spend a night over (Table 6).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>TABLE 4 Segment 3</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Facilitator</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gabriel</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Facilitator</td>
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<td>Gabriel</td>
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<tr>
<td>Facilitator</td>
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<tr>
<td>Gabriel</td>
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</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>TABLE 5 Segment 4</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Facilitator</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jupiter</td>
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<tr>
<td>Facilitator</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jupiter</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>TABLE 6 Segment 5</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Facilitator</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Aaron</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nicole</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>TABLE 7</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>This conversation occurred in a focus group about the flat, after Aaron had spent an afternoon of recreational activities there.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Facilitator</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Aaron</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nicole</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Turns later, the researcher drew a line and asked students: “Where are you?” The students drew themselves on the line (Figure 3). Aaron first drew himself on number four, then on number five (Table 7).

Deciding to move to the flat is not easy. Students experience feelings of fear, sadness, and sacrifice. However, their peers’ testimonies, and published studies showing the benefits of independent living (e.g. Salmon et al., 2019), may arise questions on how to motivate them to take this step while respecting their self-determination. Nicole and Aaron said that they got motivated by participating in recreational activities at the flat and/or spending one night per week, initially. Their testimonies suggest that experiencing a supportive and happy environment has potential to influence their volition.

Once they live at the flat, students face other challenges. For instance, in relation to disagreements with flat facilitators regarding
In this segment, Sebastian and Derek reported a disagreement regarding what was appropriate to consume for breakfast. Sebastian seems to acknowledge that his decision-making process is intrinsically contextual by mentioning that he knows that there are rules. Nevertheless, Sebastian questions and defends his autonomy by telling Derek that he wanted to do things by himself. Derek explained to Sebastian that in the flat young adults learn to become more independent and he is there to support Sebastian’s process. When this conversation occurred, Sebastian had just started an internship at a children’s museum. This job required constant physical activity and therefore a higher energy expenditure that Sebastian was not used to. Additionally, Mexican culture promotes the intake of a breakfast that includes more than fruit (e.g., Health Secretary, 2015). These reasons may have motivated Derek’s opinion on Sebastian’s breakfast. Nevertheless, young adults usually have the freedom to decide on their food. Being in a space where students are learning to be more independent, Sebastian would be expected to be the one to choose what to eat. Consequently, Derek’s intervention could be interpreted as authoritarian or paternalistic. In situations like this, it would be important to remember the right of people with disabilities to experience risks (Santinelle & Fudge, 2018) and decide based on the consequences of their actions. Additionally, in case of disagreements, there are strategies that could be followed such as researching with students about options, reflecting, and reaching agreements. All these through dialogic interactions that do not seek for a pre-defined correct answer, but for genuine negotiations and agreements (Mercer & Littleton, 2007).

This episode reflects a socioecological view of self-determination in that students’ goals and actions are always embedded in a broader social context that indicates standards and norms particular of a culture (Abery & Stancliffe, 2003). Educators have a responsibility to guide students towards community valued practices. However dialogic interactions may allow more horizontal relationships (Freire, 1970). Specifically, because dialogic interactions open the opportunity to listen, discuss and reflect on different points of view (e.g., that of the teachers, students, and other experts on the internet or other sources). Based on the discussion, students could make informed decisions subject to changes along the way. This instead of recognising the facilitator’s opinion as the only valid one (i.e., monologic discourses).

3.2.3 The things I am learning make me feel good about myself as a young adult

Learning new independent-living skills also impacts the students’ identity. Nicole and Sebastian shared feeling more independent and patient (Table 9).

Students feel that they are also growing in maturity and self-sufficiency, and are “not giving up” (Table 10).

Moreover, experiencing independent living makes the students feel accepted. In the focus group about living in an independent-living flat, the Facilitator asked: “what does it mean to you to think about the independent-living flat?” Jupiter shared:

Well a flat, I think, more than just a house I see a huge and great fortune, independence, because we are preparing ourselves to be the best, the best employees and students... Previously, at that time, we were not being...
accepted by society and they saw us as phenomena and the truth has changed a lot since I entered the flat... I no longer feel any rejection or exclusion or any discrimination. I can already feel the calm...

As part of their development as self-advocates, students learn about the history of marginalisation and discrimination that people with disabilities have experienced. Some students have even been victims of bullying or rejection themselves. Jupiter’s testimony shows how independent living made him experience the acceptance that other people with disabilities have not.

In summary, it seems like the flat not only promotes the development of independent-living skills but positively impacts the students’ identity.

4 | DISCUSSION

In this project, we explored the experiences of self-determination of six young adults in their transition to adulthood, as expressed in their discussions.

Their transition to Building Bridges took place two to four years prior to data collection. Some students remembered this experience as a step towards a more supportive environment, others as a sad period. Although students had some input into this transition, it appears that parents took the lead in finding educational contexts and deciding to enrol them. This may be related to lack of opportunities and guidance for individuals and their families to embark on early transition planning that promotes students’ participation, as has been recommended (e.g. Wehmeyer & Webb, 2011). Once students joined Building Bridges, they seem to take more active roles in their decision-making processes. This reflects one of the Building Bridges educational goals.

In this paper, we mainly addressed students’ transition to an independent-living flat, which students were currently experiencing. Students said that to move or not is their decision, that independent living is challenging, and that the things they are learning make them feel good about themselves as young adults. Referring back to principles of self-determination, students’ views prompt consideration of how transition programmes could allow them to exercise their agency and volition within supportive contexts that are responsive to their wishes. For instance, by collaboratively investigating,
Students prepared an interview for their peers living at the flat. First, Sebastian answered his peers’ question: “How have you been, at the flat?”

Sebastian
Very well... I also learned many things about maturity... Things that I didn’t do at (parents’) home. So let’s say it’s like an alarm thing, second alarm, third alarm, fourth alarm... I’m already getting up at the second alarm. I’m getting used to making my bed, then going to the women’s independent-living flat and booking an Uber. And well, before they (parents) wouldn’t let me ride Uber when I was at home. (Now) they let me. I already know how to ride an Uber.

Facilitator
So do you mean that because you left your home and are independent, your parents also began to give you more freedom? That your parents began to see you as a more independent person?

Sebastian
Maybe yes, I mean or I don’t know. It seems that things that I didn’t expect was maturity, right? Something like that. Clean the dishes always, getting used to it during the week.

Turns later, Sebastian answered his peers’ question: “What are your goals for independent living are?”

Sebastian
For me, get used to the flat, I mean, stay here... because if I go (back) to my (parents’) house, it’s like I gave up. So better then to continue learning how to live in a flat. That I have to wash dishes, or also, like things that I didn’t do before, like take my dishes to the kitchen, I already do it in the flat, I already do it at (parents’) home... I even cook my eggs before the housekeeper wakes up (at parents’ house).

negotiating, and reflecting on rules; and giving them options to gradually experiment new contexts. A supportive and happy environment at the flat helps to establish the foundations for them to feel more confident in deciding to take this next step in their lives.

Self-determination is exercised within the context of relationships, which influence opportunities for and the exercise of self-determination (Wehmeyer & Aber, 2013). In dialogic terms, a lack of communicative support to express their ideas and intentions may prevent students from exercising their self-determination (Björnsdóttir et al., 2015). If our interest as teachers and/or researchers is to truly know and learn about the students’ experiences; legitimise their experiences, ideas and knowledge; and plan transitions based on their strengths and interests, we must favour dialogues that allow us to learn with them and promote reflection on all those involved through dialogic interactions. Given that this is easier said than done, there are support tools such as the reflective inquiry method (Lyons et al., 2013) and resources aimed to support educator’s inquiry in relation to dialogic teaching practices (e.g. T-SEDA, http://bit.ly/T- SEDA). We recognise that as educators, we have a guiding role in the transition process, however working with students through dialogic interactions may allow more horizontal relationships by not always seeking for pre-defined correct responses, but also engaging in genuine negotiations and agreements with students (Freire, 1970; Mercer & Littleton, 2007).

This project has some limitations. Firstly, achieving independent living requires intervention at different levels, including policy, institutions, families and people with intellectual disability themselves. In this paper, we focused on students and their interactions with other agents but research exploring other levels is equally necessary. Secondly, the experiences here reported come from only six students, who are also part of an elite group that have accessed Mexican universities. Therefore, their opinions cannot be generalised to the population of young people with intellectual disabilities in Mexico or internationally. Nevertheless, it does point to the fact that in Mexico, as is the case in other countries, educational opportunities reflect class inequalities, with greater opportunities for people on the highest socioeconomic levels (Inclusion International, 2012). It also prompts reflection on the relationships between social class and the socioecological nature of self-determination. Specifically because people's socioeconomic level may allow choosing educational opportunities that are not economically achievable for the entire population. Thirdly, the current research project focused on students’ verbal dialogic interactions. Future research on dialogic ways of communication should consider including students with different communication support needs. Doing so would ethically represent their accounts in research and provide an opportunity to reconsider and expand our views on dialogic relations and communication (Teachman et al., 2018).

Despite the limitations, we believe that the findings reported here contribute to the field in the following ways. Firstly, the findings are a testimony to the benefits that students with intellectual disability perceive in experiencing independent living, the challenges they experience, and the suggestions they propose to overcome those challenges. Secondly, the findings uphold the importance of opening spaces for dialogic interactions that encourage the students’ participation and reflection, and the development of their self-determination in interaction with others. Finally, there is a continuing need for publications in the field of educational services for people with intellectual disability residing in middle- or low-income countries (Katz et al., 2008). In this paper, we present Building Bridges, a Mexican transition programme that integrates learning opportunities in university, job and independent-living contexts.
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DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT
The data that support the findings of this study are available on request from the corresponding author. The data are not publicly available due to privacy or ethical restrictions.

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