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Assessing the interests of students with disabilities in vocational education

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Abstract. In the current context of inclusive education, assessing the interests of students with disabilities is crucial for their effective professional integration. This study explores how personal autonomy influences the professional and personal interests of these students, providing a foundation for the development of tailored educational strategies. The study focuses on exploring the relationships between different types of autonomy – cognitive and value-based – and how they affect the interests of students with intellectual disabilities in specific sectors: investigative, artistic, and entrepreneurial. The study sample included 30 students from the "Albatros" School Center, all diagnosed with intellectual disabilities. Data were collected using two main tools: the Interest Assessment Questionnaire (CEI) and the Personal Autonomy Assessment (PA) questionnaire, which allowed for the accurate measurement of interest and autonomy variables in various contexts. The main objective of the research was to identify the links between cognitive and value-based autonomy and the professional and personal interests of students with intellectual disabilities, thereby supporting the development of personalized educational strategies. The research hypotheses assumed the existence of positive relationships between: 1) cognitive autonomy and investigative interests; 2) value-based autonomy and artistic interests; and 3) cognitive autonomy and entrepreneurial interests of students. Data analysis indicated a significant positive correlation between cognitive autonomy and students' investigative interests, confirming the hypothesis that students with higher cognitive autonomy tend to show an increased interest in investigative domains. A positive relationship between value-based autonomy and artistic interests was also found, demonstrating that students with a more developed value-based autonomy are more likely to engage in artistic activities. Additionally, the results showed that cognitive autonomy supports students' entrepreneurial interests, suggesting that they are better able to explore and engage in entrepreneurial initiatives. The results of the study emphasize the importance of autonomy in the professional and personal development of students with intellectual disabilities, suggesting that facilitating autonomy can play a crucial role in guiding and motivating them towards areas of specific interest. The conclusions provide valuable insights for educators and policymakers in creating inclusive educational environments that support the development of autonomy and the professional integration of students with disabilities.

Keydords: value-based autonomy, cognitive autonomy, artistic interests, investigative interests, entrepreneurial interests, intellectual disability, professional education

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1. Introduction

1.1 Definition and classification of intellectual disabilities

Intellectual disability (ID) is a term used to describe significant limitations in intellectual functioning and adaptive behaviour, originating before the age of 18 (Hutzler & Korsensky, 2010). The term ID has gradually replaced the term “mental retardation” and is defined in the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, Fifth Edition (DSM-5), and the International Classification of Diseases, Eleventh Edition (ICD-11). DSM-5 characterizes ID by significant deficiencies in intellectual functioning and adaptive behaviour, requiring the evaluation of an individual's competencies in three domains: conceptual, social, and practical. ICD-11 addresses ID under the term “developmental intellectual disabilities” and emphasizes the severity of deficiencies in adaptive functioning (World Health Organization, 1998).

The prevalence of ID is estimated to be between 1% and 1.25% of the global population (Baroff, 1991). The causes of ID are varied, including biological, environmental, and social factors. Studies suggest that both mild and severe intellectual disabilities can be caused by biological factors (Pawlyn & Carnaby, 2009).

1.2 Psycho-social development of adolescents with intellectual disabilities

Adolescence is a critical period for identity development, marked by physical, cognitive, and social changes. Conger and Galambos (1996) emphasize that both the environment and biology play important roles in the development of adolescent behaviour. However, existing literature on adolescence often overlooks aspects related to intellectual disability. For adolescents with intellectual disabilities, the path to autonomy and independence can be longer and more complex (Shepperdson, 2001). Self-confidence, essential for realizing one's potential, can be difficult to achieve in the context of the stigma associated with ID (Shepperdson, 2001).

1.3 Particularities of developing personal autonomy in adolescents with intellectual disabilities

Personal autonomy is vital for the development of adolescents with intellectual disabilities. Research shows that many adolescents with ID require support in fundamental daily life activities such as dressing, using the toilet, and bathing (Shepperdson, 1994). Developing self-care skills is essential not only for physical independence but also for the safety and social adaptation of these young people. Studies indicate that improving these skills contributes to a better perception of autonomy and personal responsibility (McGrother et al., 1996).

1.4 The “Albatros” School Center for Inclusive Education in Constanța - A Model of Support

The “Albatros” School Center for Inclusive Education in Constanța represents a model of personalized and inclusive education, promoting autonomy and professional development for students with disabilities. Founded in 1965, the center offers educational programs tailored to the individual needs of students, with a focus on professional qualifications relevant to the local labor market (Centrul Şcolar pentru Educaţie Incluzivă „Albatros” Constanţa, 2023). The mission of the

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center is to ensure quality education, promoting values and principles of inclusive education, and developing educational partnerships with families, the community, and economic agents.

The center adopts interactive teaching methods, such as brainstorming and role-playing, to stimulate active student engagement in the learning process (Centrul Şcolar pentru Educaţie Incluzivă „Albatros" Constanţa, 2023). Additionally, the centre's initiatives in monitoring and professional counselling support students' transition to the labor market, facilitating internships and professional training in essential fields.

1.5 The role of interests of students with disabilities in professional preparation

Interests and motivation play a crucial role in the professional development of students with intellectual disabilities. Interests are persistent predispositions and concerns that influence individuals' activities and preferences (Roșca, 1938). In the context of vocational education, it is important to cultivate a variety of interests to guide students' future careers. Motivation is the internal force that drives a person's actions and decisions (Wigfield & Eccles, 2001). The development of self-determination and active involvement in transition planning are essential for the post-school success of young people with disabilities (Sheppard & Unsworth, 2011).

Vocational interests are fundamental for guiding students with intellectual disabilities towards careers that capitalize on their potential. Roșca (1938) suggests that interests represent persistent predispositions and concerns towards certain aspects of the environment. In vocational education, cultivating diverse interests is essential to help students discover and develop the skills needed for future careers.

Motivation plays a crucial role in engaging in educational and professional activities. Wigfield and Eccles (2001) define motivation as the internal force that drives our actions and decisions. In the context of vocational education, young people with disabilities who benefit from opportunities to actively participate in their transition planning and develop self-determined behaviours tend to achieve better outcomes in employment and quality of life (Sheppard & Unsworth, 2011).

In vocational education, it is essential to provide young people with intellectual disabilities the opportunity to explore various careers and gain practical work experience. Paid work experiences in the community, participation in activities that enhance labor market knowledge, and active involvement in their transition planning are recommended strategies to support the development of professional interests and motivation (Sheppard & Unsworth, 2011).

Studies indicate that motivation plays an essential role in engaging in educational activities, being closely linked to success in learning and progress in skill development (Guthrie et al., 2004). For students with intellectual disabilities, learning tasks must be useful and enjoyable to encourage continuous learning and long-term motivation (Gunn, 1993). Teachers working with these students need to integrate real-life relevant activities and interactions to increase their motivation and engagement in the learning process (Morgan & Moni, 2008).

1.6 Level of aspiration and involvement in career choice

Student-centered planning through self-determination is considered a foundational practice in professional preparation. Williams-Diehm and Lynch (2007) emphasize the importance of involving the student in all decisions related to transition planning, allowing the plan to be more

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meaningful and relevant. Students who have implemented their own transition plans have achieved higher employment rates and experienced more independent living (Williams-Diehm & Lynch, 2007).

Self-determination, defined as the ability to make decisions and control one's own life, is essential for post-secondary success. Research shows that adults with higher levels of self-determination have achieved better post-secondary outcomes than those with lower self-determination skills (Williams-Diehm & Lynch, 2007).

For student-centered planning to reach its full potential, it is necessary for students to be active in the transition planning process. Active involvement in educational planning through "Individualized Education Plan" is crucial for developing decision-making skills and other self-determination abilities (Martin, Marshall, & Sale, 2004). Active participation of students can include leading their own meetings and guiding decisions related to their transition, improving their chances of employment and long-term success.

1.7 Professional integration and the labour market

The professional integration of individuals with intellectual disabilities is a complex challenge influenced by environmental, cultural, economic, and personal factors. Channon (2014) emphasizes the importance of managing transitions and developing occupational skills to improve the employment rate of these individuals. McCausland et al. (2020) highlight that, although many of these individuals participate in non-traditional occupational activities, formal employment plays a crucial role in enhancing their quality of life.

Previous studies indicate that young people with intellectual disabilities face significant difficulties in integrating into the labor market, often being limited to unskilled or semi-skilled jobs (Ferguson & Kerr, 1955). These difficulties are amplified by the lack of occupational skills and motivation (Orentlicher, Schefkind, & Gibson, 2015).

In the current context, access to tailored education and vocational training is essential for improving employment outcomes for individuals with intellectual disabilities. Initiatives in vocational training and counselling offered by institutions like the "Albatros" School Center play a crucial role in preparing young people for labor market integration and contribute to a more inclusive and diversified society (Totolan, Colasiz, & Cioranu, 2023).

2. Research

This study uses a quantitative research design to examine emotional distress and burnout among parents of children with ASD. Data were collected through a structured interview and standardized questionnaires. The analysis involved statistical techniques to identify significant correlations and predictors of parental stress and burnout.

2.1 Research objectives

Identifying the profiles of interests and autonomy of students with intellectual disabilities in order to facilitate the development of personalized educational and professional integration strategies.

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2.2 Research hypotheses

1. Students with a higher degree of cognitive autonomy are presumed to exhibit stronger interests in the investigative domain.
2. There is presumed to be a positive relationship between value-based autonomy and students' artistic interests.
3. There is presumed to be a positive relationship between cognitive autonomy and students' entrepreneurial interests.

2.3 Participant sample

The sample consists of 30 students from the "Albatros" School Center, all diagnosed with intellectual disabilities. The selection of participants was based on availability and informed consent. Measures were taken to ensure confidentiality and respect for the rights of each participant, including the right to withdraw from the study without any consequences.

2.4 Research tools

The **Interest Assessment Questionnaire (CEI)** can be used to identify the interest domains of students, which include artistic, conventional, entrepreneurial, social, realistic, and investigative aspects. Each response is scored as follows: 2 points for the "Like" (P) option, 1 point for the "Indifferent" (I) option, and 0 points for the "Dislike" (D) option. The total score is calculated for each of the six dimensions, with a maximum possible score of 20 and a minimum of 0 for each dimension. The person achieves the highest score for their most crystallized interests. The personality model is determined by the similarity profile with each of the six dimensions, including a dominant type and secondary types, ordered by the degree of similarity. Identifying these interests helps guide educational and professional decisions for each student, providing valuable directions for further development.

The **Personal Autonomy Assessment (PA) Questionnaire** is structured to evaluate different dimensions of personal autonomy: cognitive, behavioural, emotional, and value-based (Albu, 2008). Each item is rated on a scale from 1 to 5. For items with direct scoring, the scores corresponding to the responses are as follows: 1 = "very little," 2 = "little," 3 = "neither too much nor too little," 4 = "much," 5 = "very much." For items with reverse scoring, the correspondence between scores and responses is as follows: 5 = "very little," 4 = "little," 3 = "neither too much nor too little," 2 = "much," 1 = "very much." The score for each scale is obtained by summing the scores of the component items. The PA questionnaire score represents the sum of the scores of all items, equal to the sum of the scores of the four scales. Evaluating personal autonomy is crucial for understanding students' capacities to make independent decisions and self-regulate in different contexts.

3. Presentation and analysis of results

3.1 Hypothesis 1

The Kolmogorov-Smirnov test indicates a normal distribution for investigative interest with a significance value (sig.) of .079, suggesting that the data for this variable can be considered normal for further analyses. For cognitive autonomy, the significance value of .200 confirms the normality of the distribution, allowing the use of statistical tests that require this assumption.

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Table 3.1 - Test of Normality

Tests of Normality

	Kolmogorov-Smirnov[a]			Shapiro-Wilk		
	Statistic	df	**Sig.**	Statistic	df	Sig.
investigative_interest	.151	30	**.079**	.924	30	.034
cognitive_autonomy	.102	30	**.200***	.974	30	.651

*. This is a lower bound of the true significance.

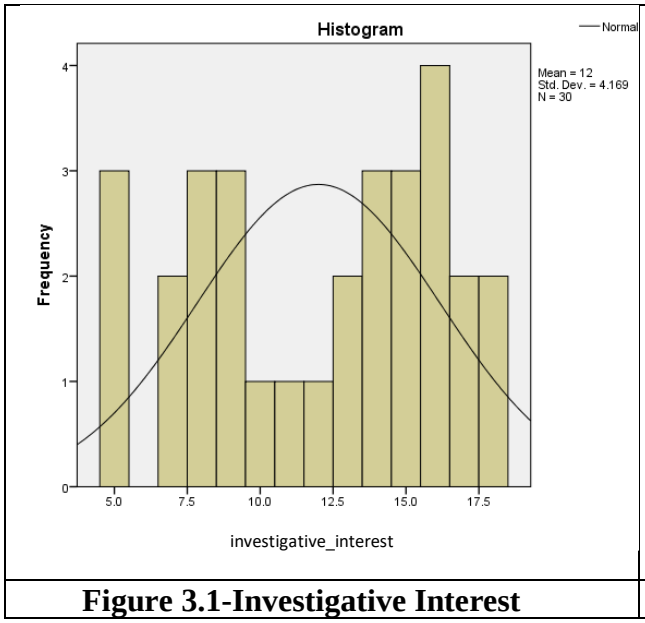

Figure 3.1-Investigative Interest

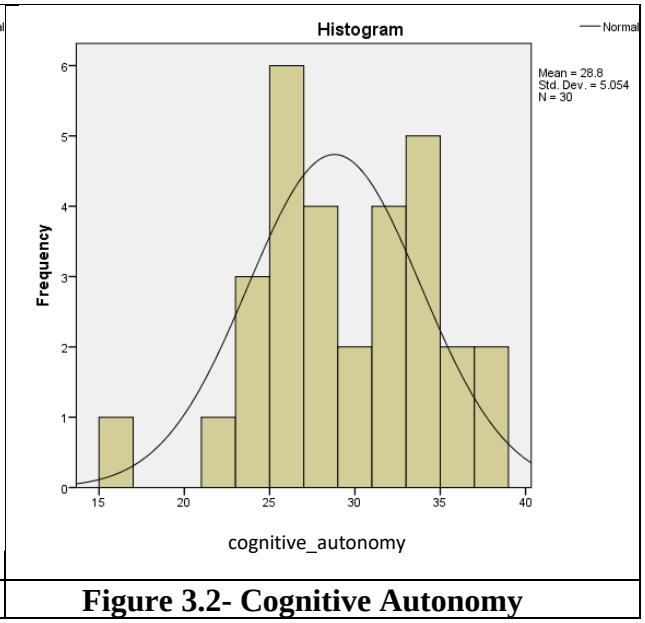

Figure 3.2- Cognitive Autonomy

The Pearson correlation between "investigative interest" and "cognitive autonomy" is .442, indicating a moderate positive relationship between the two variables, which is statistically significant (sig. = .014). This result confirms the initial hypothesis, suggesting that a higher degree of cognitive autonomy is associated with an increased interest in investigative activities.

Table 3.2- Correlation between investigative interest and cognitive autonomy

Correlations

		investigative_interest	cognitive_autonomy
investigative_interest	Pearson Correlation	1	.442*
	Sig. (2-tailed)		**.014**
	N	30	30
cognitive_autonomy	Pearson Correlation	.442*	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	**.014**	
	N	30	30

*. Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).

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Autonomy plays a crucial role in promoting intrinsic motivation and student interest, having a significant impact on learning processes and long-term knowledge acquisition (Ryan & Deci, 2017; Schiefele, 2001). The sense of autonomy is considered a key characteristic of successful learning processes and can significantly influence student interest (Prenzel, Seidel, & Drechsel, 2004; Vogt, 2007).

The concept of the person-object relationship emphasizes the specificity of interest in a particular field, such as the investigative domain, and highlights the importance of cognitive autonomy in encouraging in-depth and authentic exploration of subjects of interest (Renninger & Hidi, 2016). Students who feel autonomous are more likely to engage in complex cognitive processes and value the study object, which can lead to the development of deep and long-lasting interest (Krapp, 2005; Krapp, 1999).

Positive interactions between a person and the study object, facilitated by meeting fundamental psychological needs—relatedness, competence, and autonomy—are essential for long-term knowledge retention and voluntary reactivation of this knowledge (Ryan & Deci, 2017). States of interest, whether individual or situational, are influenced by the degree of autonomy perceived by students, and teacher behaviour can directly influence this perception (Renninger & Hidi, 2016; Assor, Kaplan, & Roth, 2002).

Students with intellectual disabilities who experience a higher level of autonomy in decision-making related to their learning tend to be more motivated and engaged, which directly contributes to the development of skills necessary for the labor market (Wehmeyer, 1999; Shogren et al., 2015). Cognitive autonomy includes abilities such as decision-making, expressing opinions, and self-evaluation, which are essential for preparing young people with disabilities for professional education and employment opportunities (Deniz, 2022).

Perceived organizational support and career adaptability play a mediating role in students' career exploration. Recognizing and encouraging individual initiatives in a supportive environment can facilitate students' engagement in activities that promote professional and personal development (Ma, Bennett, & Chen, 2022).

The involvement of stakeholders in the education and social integration of students with disabilities is crucial to maximizing their potential for integration and success. An inclusive and comprehensive approach that recognizes and values the contributions of various interest groups is essential for the educational and professional pathways of students with disabilities (Kujala, Sachs, Leinonen, Heikkinen, & Laude, 2022).

Promoting autonomy in education, including through activities that allow students to make decisions and manage their own learning processes, can lead to greater retention of information and application of knowledge in real-life situations (Palmer, 2009). Programs that implement adaptive technologies and group projects based on personal interests are promising in this regard (Reeve, 2002). However, challenges such as insufficient educational resources or resistance from teachers to changing traditional teaching methodologies must be effectively addressed to ensure the success of students with disabilities in the labor market (Reeve, 2002).

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3.2 Hypothesis 2

The results of the Kolmogorov-Smirnov test indicate that the data distribution for "value-based autonomy" has a significance value (sig.) of .200, and for "artistic interest" has a significance value (sig.) of .051. Consequently, we can consider that the data for both variables appear to be approximately normally distributed. However, it is important to note that the Kolmogorov-Smirnov test may be less sensitive to deviations from normality in small sample sizes. Therefore, the Spearman coefficient will be used for the correlation between the two variables.

Table 3.3- Test of normality

Tests of Normality

	Kolmogorov-Smirnov[a]			Shapiro-Wilk		
	Statistic	df	**Sig.**	Statistic	df	Sig.
value_based _autonomy	.118	30	**.200***	.921	30	.028
artistic_interest	.159	30	**.051**	.935	30	.067

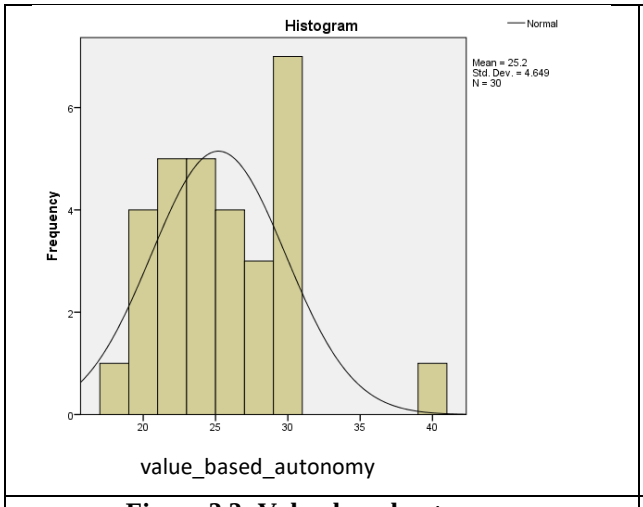

Figure 3.3- Value-based autonomy

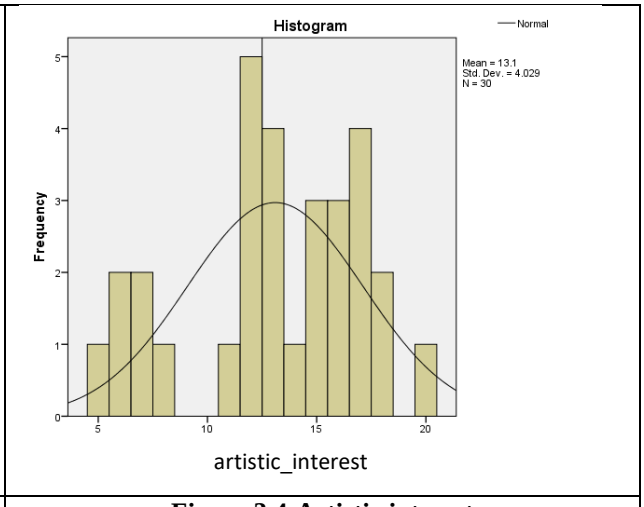

Figure 3.4-Artistic interest

The Spearman correlation between "artistic interest" and "value-based autonomy" is .363, which is significant at the 0.05 level (sig. = .049). These results confirm the hypothesis that there is a positive relationship between value-based autonomy and students' artistic interests.

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Table 3.4- Correlation between artistic interest and value-based autonomy

Correlations

			artistic_interest	value_based_autonomy
Spearman's rho	artistic_interest	Correlation Coefficient	1.000	.363*
		Sig. (2-tailed)	**.**	**.049**
		N	30	30
	value_based_autonomy	Correlation Coefficient	.363*	1.000
		Sig. (2-tailed)	**.049**	**.**
		N	30	30

*. Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).

There is a significant connection between value-based autonomy and the development of artistic interests among students with disabilities, which can positively influence their professional engagement. Value-based autonomy, defined as the ability to make decisions based on one's own values without external influence, is essential for cultivating a sense of control and confidence, which are critical for exploring and engaging in creative fields (Sandberg, Hurmerinta, Leino, & Menzfeld, 2021).

Autonomy in the workplace and personal values related to creativity significantly contribute to engaging in creative work activities. Promoting value-based autonomy among students with disabilities facilitates artistic expression and integration into creative careers or other professional fields that value innovation and independent thinking (Chiu, Lun, & Bond, 2018). According to Lubart (1999), creativity is context-dependent, and value-based autonomy can support the manifestation of artistic interest in students with disabilities.

Students with intellectual disabilities can learn and develop through activities that stimulate cognitive, social, and emotional skills. Learning music and participating in dance activities contribute to improving self-esteem, emotional state, attention, and concentration, facilitating decision-making and problem-solving (Matallana & Paredes Velasco, 2023).

Implementing technology in artistic education supports the autonomy of students with disabilities by allowing easy access to educational content adapted to their needs. Multimedia devices, such as tablets and iPods, facilitate interactive and engaging learning, improving students' independence and autonomy (Matallana & Paredes Velasco, 2023).

Educational institutions and career support programs should recognize and promote value-based autonomy to improve the engagement and career satisfaction of students with disabilities. This can be achieved through educational programs that encourage the exploration of personal interests and the development of a sense of personal value and direction in life (Chiu, Lun, & Bond, 2018).

Developing support programs that promote creative engagement among students with intellectual disabilities is essential. These programs should include art workshops, access to adapted resources, and mentorship from professionals in creative fields (Chiu, Lun, & Bond, 2018).

Students' preferences can change over time, suggesting the need for frequent assessments to support the educational process. In artistic education, this means continuously adjusting

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materials and projects to align with the evolving interests of students, thereby promoting greater autonomy in the learning process (MacNaul, Cividini-Motta, Wilson, & Di Paola, 2021).

Adopting an approach that integrates frequent evaluations of preferences and personalization of artistic education can significantly improve students' autonomy and engagement. This strategy respects the diversity of students' interests and provides them with an active role in shaping their own educational path (Tincani, Brodhead, & Dowdy, 2024).

3.3 Hypothesis 3

The results of the Kolmogorov-Smirnov normality test for the variable "entrepreneurial interest" indicate a significance value (sig.) of .048, while for the variable "cognitive autonomy", the significance value is .200. These significance values suggest that the data for entrepreneurial interest do not follow a normal distribution, whereas the data for cognitive autonomy can be considered normally distributed.

Table 3.5- Test of normality

Tests of Normality

	Kolmogorov-Smirnov[a]			Shapiro-Wilk		
	Statistic	df	**Sig.**	Statistic	df	Sig.
entrepreneurial_interest	.160	30	**.048**	.961	30	.327
cognitive_autonomy	.102	30	**.200***	.974	30	.651

*. This is a lower bound of the true significance.
a. Lilliefors Significance Correction

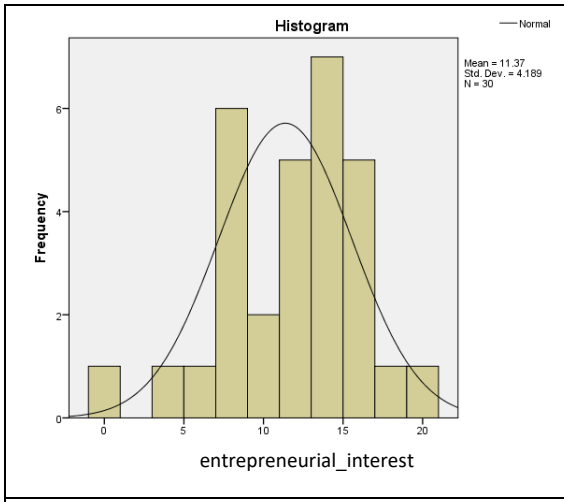

Figure 4.5- Entrepreneurial interest

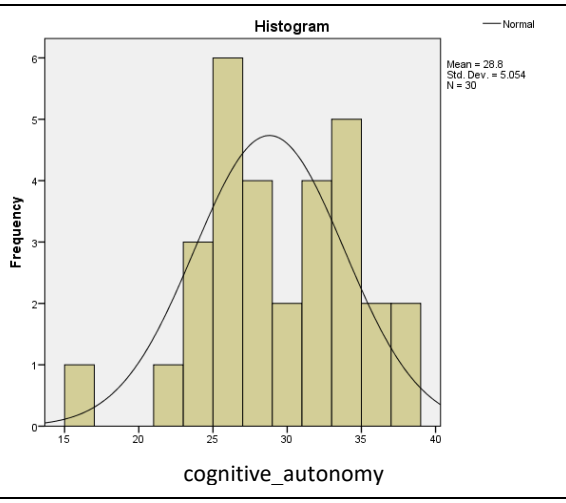

Figure 4.6- Cognitive autonomy

The Spearman correlation between "cognitive autonomy" and "entrepreneurial interest" is .465 and is significant (sig. = .010). This result indicates a positive relationship between the two variables, suggesting that students with a higher level of cognitive autonomy tend to have a greater interest in the entrepreneurial domain.

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Table 3.6- Correlation between cognitive autonomy and entrepreneurial interest

Correlations

			cognitive_autonomy	entrepreneurial_interest
Spearman's rho	cognitive_autonomy	Correlation Coefficient	1.000	.465**
		Sig. (2-tailed)	**.**	**.010**
		N	30	30
	entrepreneurial_interest	Correlation Coefficient	.465**	1.000
		Sig. (2-tailed)	**.010**	.
		N	30	30

**. Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

Recent research highlights a positive correlation between the development of cognitive autonomy and entrepreneurial interest among students with disabilities, having significant implications for supporting their professional pathways. Cognitive autonomy, defined as the ability to think independently, make decisions, and solve problems creatively, is essential for entrepreneurial aspirations (Deniz, 2022). For students with intellectual disabilities, developing cognitive autonomy can be crucial in stimulating personal initiatives and interest in autonomous activities, including entrepreneurship. This involves an educational process that supports and values independent thinking and action in both learning and professional activities (Ortiz & Olaz, 2021).

Educational interventions that promote autonomy and self-direction are essential for enhancing students' ability to actively participate and make decisions in an entrepreneurial environment. Educational programs should include pedagogical strategies that facilitate autonomy, such as tasks that allow for choice and personal initiative (Nicholls, Lawlor, Neitzert, & Goodspeed, 2012).

The study by Dovganets (2020) shows that implementing a teaching model that facilitates the formation of cognitive autonomy can improve students' ability to think critically and make independent decisions, which is vital for entrepreneurship. Additionally, learning based on cognitive control can provide students with disabilities the necessary tools to navigate autonomously through challenges encountered in business environments (Vamvoudakis & Kokolakis, 2020).

Entrepreneurship is seen as a path to economic independence for individuals with disabilities. A solution to the problems of low participation rates in the labor market lies in the potential of people with disabilities to become self-employed or to start and run their own businesses (Kitching, 2014). Career support and the development of an entrepreneurial culture in schools can positively impact the career satisfaction of students with disabilities, giving them the feeling that they can have an active and valuable role in society (Wickramaratne, 2021).

Entrepreneurship can play a vital role in the social integration of students with disabilities, offering them the opportunity to contribute to the community and improve their self-esteem and independence. Entrepreneurial activities not only create jobs but also promote greater social inclusion through active participation in the economy (Porter & Kramer, 2011).

There are significant barriers to the participation of people with disabilities in the workforce and entrepreneurship (ODISMET, 2020). Removing these obstacles and creating opportunities

tailored to their specific needs can facilitate their economic and social participation. Strategies such as personalized vocational training and access to adapted resources and technologies are essential to support the entrepreneurial aspirations of students with intellectual disabilities.

Education has a significant impact on the entrepreneurial attitudes of students, including those with disabilities. Improving access to entrepreneurial education and supporting the development of relevant skills can help people with disabilities start and develop their own businesses (Muñoz, Salinero, Peña, & Sanchez de Pablo, 2019).

Promoting cognitive and value-based autonomy is essential for developing the artistic and entrepreneurial interests of students with disabilities. Educational programs and specific interventions that support independence and personal initiative can significantly impact the engagement and professional success of these students.

Conclusions

This study highlights the importance of autonomy in the development of professional and personal interests among students with intellectual disabilities, demonstrating that it can significantly influence their engagement and success in various fields. Cognitive and value-based autonomy are crucial factors in stimulating investigative, artistic, and entrepreneurial interests, suggesting the need for educational interventions that promote and support these forms of autonomy.

The research results confirmed the hypotheses, showing a positive correlation between cognitive autonomy and investigative interests, as well as between value-based autonomy and artistic interests. Additionally, a positive relationship between cognitive autonomy and entrepreneurial interest was evidenced, underscoring the essential role of autonomy in preparing students for creative and autonomous careers. These findings suggest that students who feel more autonomous are more likely to engage in activities that value their potential and stimulate their creativity and critical thinking.

Active involvement of students in the educational process, through strategies that encourage personal initiative and decision-making, can significantly contribute to the development of skills necessary for success in the labor market and personal life. Adapted educational programs that integrate technology and provide adequate support can significantly improve the quality of life and independence of students with disabilities.

In the context of inclusive education, it is crucial for policymakers and educators to recognize and promote the importance of autonomy in the professional and personal development of students with intellectual disabilities. Creating an educational environment that supports autonomy can facilitate not only the efficient integration of these students into society but also the development of a deep sense of personal value and direction in life. Thus, well-designed and implemented educational interventions can play a vital role in guiding and motivating students towards specific areas of interest, contributing to a more inclusive and diverse society.

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