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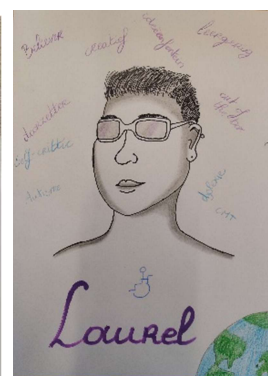
MASTER DE SPECIALISATION EN ETUDES DE GENRE

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CLAIMING PRESENCE

In an urban environment not designed for us



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1. Introduction

Abstract

This study explores how young women with diverse support needs in relation to neurodivergence and cognitive differences experience feeling at ease and belonging when moving in and around the city and examines how participatory inclusive research can be developed in practice in ways that are meaningful for them.

The research is grounded in a participatory co-research approach, working together with four young women with lived experience.

The findings show that feeling at ease and belonging are shaped by infrastructural and relational conditions. Yet, as structural responsibility for responding to care needs is not taken up, this responsibility is shifted onto young women with diverse support needs, who are left to bridge this gap themselves through their own agency. As a result, they take on a significant mental load to sustain their mobility and participation, while at the same time experiencing this effort as a source of pride and a valued expression of their autonomy.

Methodologically, this study shows that participatory inclusive research emerges through the continuous co-creation of conditions that enable shared ownership of both the research process and knowledge production. As the process starts from unequal power positions, this requires ongoing engagement with these asymmetries. Caring practices helped navigate these asymmetries and created a safe environment in which experiences could be shared and explored collectively, contributing to qualitative knowledge production.

Meaningful participation required an ongoing balance between structure, creating safety and orientation, and flexibility, allowing responsiveness to lived experience, difference, and changing forms of participation. Inclusive research cannot simply stop at the end of a project, as the relationships, responsibilities, and commitments it generated extend beyond academic timelines and project boundaries. Inclusive research therefore does not require the resolution of tensions and uncertainties, but the capacity to work with them collectively.

Personal motivation

My interest in disability studies and inclusive research practices is rooted in my early professional experiences. My first job was in an organization working with and for people with predominantly physical disabilities. Collaborating daily with colleagues and participants who navigated the world differently - my supervisor was quadriplegic - profoundly shifted my perspective. Before that, as I had never engaged in a shared activity with people with disabilities, I unconsciously positioned disability as belonging to “the other,” and feared I would not know how to relate. Direct engagement showed how artificial such binaries are. The principle “nothing about us without us” has guided me ever since.

Later, working with people in a situation of intellectual disability deepened this commitment. For individuals with limited access to language, participation is not straightforward. Yet I facilitated strategic organisational workshops where their presence and contributions were central. This required time and adapted methods, but the insights were invaluable. One young woman described “cushion-thinking” - being so protected that she never had the chance to make mistakes or learn.

Moments like these highlighted both the potential of inclusive practices and the persistent underestimation of people with a support need.

My academic background in gender studies sharpened my awareness of structural inequalities. While gender, race, and class were widely discussed during this master, disability appeared only sporadically. This absence strengthened my resolve to address disability as a central dimension of exclusion and belonging.

Living in an urban environment informs my motivation. Cities regulate who is welcomed and who is excluded. The perspective of how women with intellectual disabilities experience the city is rarely researched. This research is an attempt to explore that question together with these young women with diverse support needs.

It was an intensive process: first we did not know how or where to begin, and now we do not know how-or if-we will ever stop. Yet it was absolutely worth it: we learned together, we were inspired, and we had fun along the way.

I would not hesitate for a second to do it again, and I hope this work encourages readers to try doing something inclusive themselves, in whatever context, and to discover that inclusion can be challenging, but above all meaningful - and, why not, even fun.

2. Contextualisation

Disability as a Widespread Societal Reality

This research focuses on the everyday lives of young women with diverse support needs, also referred to as having a disability. Disability is not a marginal phenomenon but a widespread societal reality. The World Health Organization defines people with disabilities as “those facing barriers to participation in any life area, owing to a long-standing health problem and/or a basic activity difficulty,” and estimates that approximately 16% of the global population falls within this category. (WHO, 2021) Within the European Union, 24% of the population aged 16 and over reports “long-standing activity limitations”, with comparable figures reported for Belgium. (Eurostat, 2024)

Within this broad category, people with intellectual disabilities constitute a distinct subgroup. In Flanders, official figures about disability are based on registration within formal support systems. Data from the Flemish Agency for Persons with Disabilities indicate that in 2022 more than 100,000 individuals were either receiving support or on a waiting list. Among them 44% were registered with a mild, moderate, or severe intellectual disability and 19% with an autism spectrum condition, 11% is in the age range 18-25. (VAPH, 2024)

Young adulthood as a key life phase to grow independence and engage in public urban space

This study focuses on young women, aged 18 to 30. This period can be conceptualised as ‘emerging adulthood’, characterised by identity exploration, growing independence, and gradual transitions into adult roles. A transitional life phase usually marked by increasing autonomy, exploration, and engagement with public and social space. It often coincides with the completion of compulsory education and the transition into higher education, employment, and independent social participation. (Arnet, 2000)

For many young adults, the urban environment functions as a central setting for daily life. Cities provide access to education, work, leisure, and social networks. They are spaces where independence is practiced, where every day routines unfold through movement, interaction, and presence in public space.

Young adulthood with a disability: a context structured by unequal access to key life domains

For young people with disabilities, transitions through young adulthood often follow different pathways.

Even prior to adulthood, **educational trajectories** frequently diverge from mainstream routes. Across Europe, people with disabilities are more likely to leave school earlier than their non-disabled peers. (Council of the European Union, n.d.) In the Flemish context, a relatively large proportion of children (6%) attend specialised education, resulting in daily environments that are spatially and socially distinct from those of their non-disabled peers. (VRT NWS, 2022) This situation contrasts with the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, which calls on member states to promote inclusive education. While Belgium formally supports this principle, educational patterns remain largely unchanged. (United Nations, 2006)

These inequalities continue into young adulthood. People with disabilities show lower participation in tertiary education compared to non-disabled peers (23% versus 44%). (Council of the European Union, n.d.) They also demonstrate lower labour-market participation: in Belgium, only 23% of people with disabilities are employed. (Statbel, 2022)

In addition, they face a **higher risk of poverty** (Statbel, 2022) and **reduced access to key life domains such** as healthcare. (Eurobarometer, 2023; Council of the European Union, n.d.)

Engagement in **hobbies and recreational activities** are restricted by factors such as social barriers, financial limitations, inaccessible infrastructure and mobility-related challenges. (Unia 2020)

Compared to young people in youth care, young people with a (suspected) disability report lower levels of social participation and autonomy, suggesting greater difficulties in building an independent and socially connected life. (De Clercq et al., 2025)

Within this context, studies focusing on people with intellectual disabilities have shown that many report feelings of social exclusion and a lack of connection to broader social and cultural life. (Atkinson et al., 1997; Scior & Werner, 2016, as cited in Sergeant, 2021)

Young women with support needs in relation to cognitive difference - overlooked perspectives

Within research on social inequality, disability has long received limited attention and has been described as one of the least examined forms of inequality in sociology. (Frederick & Shifrer, 2019, as cited in Wilde & Fish, 2025) More broadly, disability is often referred to as the “Cinderella topic” of the social sciences and humanities. (Wilde & Fish, 2025, p. 535)

When disability does become the focus of research, the scale and urgency of structural barriers such as access to education, employment, mobility often dominate the analysis. In this context, gender dynamics tend to move into the background, with disabled men frequently functioning as the implicit norm. The experiences of women with disabilities often

remain marginal within both academic research and policy debates on disability. (Wilde & Fish, 2025, p. 539) In addition, scholars have pointed out that people with intellectual disabilities have historically been less often included as contributors to knowledge production, with research more frequently conducted about them rather than with them. (Walmsley & Johnson, 2003).

Yet women with disabilities experience specific and intersecting forms of disadvantage. Girls and young women with disabilities are estimated to be up to ten times more likely to experience violence than their non-disabled peers. (WHO & World Bank Group, 2011) In addition, women with disabilities face a substantially increased risk of sexual violence compared to women without disabilities (Paulus, 2020) with particularly high risks for women with cognitive or multiple disabilities. (Ledingham et al., 2022; Fomenko et al., 2023) Women with disabilities are also disproportionately affected by poverty, further compounding their marginal position. (Wilde & Fish, 2025)

This study therefore centres on young women with cognitive support needs, acknowledging that, without an explicit focus, their experiences risk remaining overlooked in both research and policy.

Everyday urban mobility as a lens

Everyday urban mobility constitutes a key domain in which social inequalities become visible during young adulthood. Mobility refers to routine movement through cities and their surroundings, including walking, using public transport, and navigating streets, neighbourhoods, and public spaces. Access to education, employment, leisure, and social life is closely linked to the ability to move through urban environments. (Neven & Ectors, 2023) For people with disabilities, everyday mobility is often constrained by inaccessible infrastructure, limited support, and organisational barriers. Limited access to and reduced autonomy when **using public transport** in Belgium is a problem. Accessibility remains inadequate for wheelchair users as well as for travellers with sensory or cognitive impairments. Mandatory assistance booking, insufficient support during unexpected changes, limited availability of assistance, and inaccessible infrastructure create significant barriers. In addition, a lack of staff awareness, overcrowded vehicles, and insufficient seating make public transport difficult or unusable for many disabled travellers. (Unia, 2020; Neven & Ectors, 2023) Situating this research within the domain of everyday urban mobility therefore allows attention to a concrete and socially relevant context in which young women with disabilities navigate their transition into adulthood under conditions of structural inequality.

3. Theoretical framework

3.1 Conceptualizing Disability

The medical, social and relational political model

Conceptualisations of disability vary widely and have shifted significantly over time. Rather than one dominant definition, contemporary debates are characterised by the coexistence of multiple frameworks that understand disability in different, and sometimes conflicting, ways.

The medical model conceptualises disability as an individual condition located in the body or mind, understood as deviation, pathology, or deficit. Within this framework, disability is treated as something to be corrected, managed, or cured. As Kafer notes, this perspective often links the future of disability to scientific progress, including prenatal screening and individualised medical intervention. (Kafer, 2013)

Although the medical model is frequently presented as outdated, medical logics remain influential in policy and practice. Access to support often depends on medical assessment and certification, while public debates on disability are regularly framed through questions of prevention, euthanasia, or abortion. As Van Ertvelde argues, such debates raise broader questions about whether disabled lives are fully recognised as valuable and legitimate. (Van Ertvelde, 2024; Wendel, 1989)

In response, **the social model** distinguished between impairment and disability. Impairment refers to bodily or cognitive difference, while disability refers to exclusion produced by social, physical, and institutional barriers. Disability is therefore understood not as an individual problem, but as a failure of environments and systems to accommodate human diversity. (Kafer 2013)

This distinction has, however, been further refined. Wendell argues that disability is socially constructed from biological reality, drawing attention to **embodied experiences** such as pain, fatigue, dependency, and vulnerability. Disability cannot be understood solely through external barriers, since lived bodily and cognitive experiences also shape everyday life. (Wendel, 1989)

Kafer extends this critique by questioning **the stability of both impairment and disability** as categories. She argues that the meaning of bodily or cognitive difference is historically contingent and shaped by social norms, technologies, and institutional expectations. Kafer does not reject medical intervention as such but challenges the normative assumptions through which some bodies and minds are positioned as deficient or undesirable. (Kafer, 2013)

From this perspective, disability is **relational and political**. It emerges through interactions between bodies, minds, environments, and normative ideas of what counts as normal. These

debates matter because they shape how disability is recognised, supported, and valued in everyday life.

→ While disability theory has often centred on bodily difference, this study foregrounds everyday experiences of cognitive diversity and differently valued ways of thinking, sensing, and navigating urban life. The analysis adopts a relational understanding of disability, in which exclusion emerges through interactions with environments, institutions, and normative expectations that are not designed for cognitive diversity. This perspective is particularly relevant to everyday mobility, where feelings of ease, stress, etc. often arise through the interaction between embodied and cognitive experiences on the one hand, and urban environments on the other.

Ableism as a source of oppression limiting who “belongs” in public space

In this study ‘ableism’ is used to refer to the social, cultural, and institutional privileging of certain bodies and minds as normal, capable, independent, and valuable, while positioning others as deficient, dependent, or less legitimate. (Kafer 2013, Masson 2013)

While much of this theory initially focused on bodily norms, Kafer extends this to cognitive normativity by showing how societies **also privilege particular forms of able-mindedness**. Expectations regarding rationality, emotional control, speed, autonomy, and cognitive conformity shape who is perceived as legitimate participants in public space. (Kafer, 2013)

Ableism questions the **ideals of independence and self-sufficiency**. Despite interdependence being a fundamental condition of social life, dependence is often framed as a personal failure. This can make requests for support appear burdensome or illegitimate, while structural responses remain absent. (Tronto, 2017; Knight 2020; 2021)

Modern societies have largely been organised around the needs of healthy, strong, able-bodied men, while the needs of disabled people -alongside those of women, children, and older adults- are often overlooked or relegated to the private sphere. (Wendell, 1989) Ableism operates not only through explicit discrimination, but also through **taken-for-granted norms about who public spaces**, institutions, and everyday routines are designed for.

→ For this study, ableism is relevant because it shapes not only who can move comfortably through the city, but also whose experiences are anticipated, recognised, and taken seriously in public space. Everyday urban mobility is therefore not only a question of transport or accessibility, but also of recognition, belonging, and the negotiation of norms of ability.

3.2 Feeling at ease during everyday mobilities in urban environments

Inclusion and belonging in everyday life

In this study, inclusion is treated as a desired condition, while belonging is used to understand how such inclusion is experienced in everyday life.

Social inclusion in the context of disability is often defined as the extent to which people are able **to participate** in shared activities and relationships with others, including people without disabilities. (Wilton et al., 2018) The United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities further emphasises that such participation should be linked to **dignity**, autonomy, freedom of choice, and full participation in society. (UN, 2006)

This perspective is deepened by the Capability Approach of Amartya Sen and Martha Nussbaum, which centres on a key question that a just society should ask itself: “*What is each person able to do and to be?*” Rather than focusing only on formal access, it draws attention to the real opportunities people have to shape their lives. (Nussbaum, 2011, p. 14)

Building on these perspectives this study understands inclusion as more than access to services or participation alone. It also concerns whether people **feel recognised and valued** within social and public life. In this study, these experiential dimensions of inclusion are understood through the concept of **belonging**. Research describes belonging as feeling recognised, valued, and at ease in a place or social setting. (Wilton et al., 2018) Studies with young people show that belonging involves feeling comfortable and safe in places, being appreciated for one’s capabilities, feeling included and accepted, and having a sense of fitting in. (Robinson, 2014)

→ This study therefore focuses on how people experience being part of a place or social environment. Belonging refers to an experiential and relational dimension that goes beyond formal access or participation alone. The question “Do you feel at ease?” is used as a way to explore this dimension of belonging.

A just city as a place of living together in difference

In urban studies and sociology, the city is widely understood as a key site for examining social inequalities in everyday life, being a place that brings together diverse groups within limited material spaces and unevenly distributed resources. Cities reflect broader societal dynamics and actively produce both exclusion and opportunities for inclusion. (Santos, 1981, as cited in Donnen, 2025)

Iris Marion Young offers a normative framework for rethinking justice in these urban contexts. Rather than equating justice with consensus or sameness, she argues that a just city

is one in which people can **live together in difference, without being forced into assimilation or exclusion**. (Young, 1990) One important aspect of living together in difference concerns everyday encounters with strangers in shared urban spaces. Such encounters can contribute to positive effects and a sense of belonging, particularly when people are not reduced to a single identity or normative category. (Wiesel, 2013)

→ In this study, attention is paid to how young women with diverse support needs experience such encounters and how these interactions shape their sense of belonging.

Re- thinking public space away from gendered norms

Feminist urban scholars have long argued that cities are not neutral environments. Urban space, infrastructure, and mobility systems are shaped by gendered relations, norms, and expectations, which influence who can move freely and whose daily practices are considered. Public space and transport systems are often **designed around a dominant norm**: the able-bodied, full-time worker who commutes between home and work, most often by car. Other forms of mobility -such as short, fragmented trips, accompanying others, combining travel with care tasks, or relying on public transport- are treated as secondary or exceptional. As a result, the everyday mobility patterns of certain groups are insufficiently considered in urban planning and transport policy. (Criado Perez, 2019; Kern, 2020) Leslie Kern argues that creating more just cities requires **rethinking urban planning from the lived experiences** of diverse groups, paying attention to how gender, care, and inequality shape everyday movement through urban space. (Kern, 2020)

→ In this study, we turn to the lived experiences of a group whose everyday mobility patterns and care-related movements are rarely taken into account in urban research and planning.

Taking responsibility for care as part of being a citizen

Feminist scholars often define care as “an activity that includes everything we do to maintain, continue, and repair our world so that we can live in it as well as possible”. (Fisher & Tronto, 1990, p. 40) Fisher and Tronto consider four interconnected phases of care: “caring about,” recognising the existence of a need; “taking care of,” assuming responsibility for responding to that need; “care giving,” the actual work of providing care; and “care receiving,” evaluating whether care adequately responded to the need in question. Later, Tronto added the concept of “caring with,” referring to practices of mutuality and solidarity that challenge unequal power relations between care giver and receiver. (Tronto, 2013) Good care, from this perspective, emerges when the phases are considered as part of a holistic process.

Care is essential, as everyone depends on it for both individual and collective survival, to be in the world is to be dependent on others at some point in the course of our lifetime. (Tronto, 2017) Yet care remains unevenly recognised and valued and is often treated as an individual responsibility rather than a collective one. (Tronto, 2013; 2017)

A care perspective on urban environments draws attention to how responsibilities for care are distributed (Tronto, 2013) and how cities do -or do not- support people in living “as well as possible” worlds. (Puig De La Bellacasa, 2017, as cited in Williams, 2009) This invites reflection on how we take responsibility for one another and whether caregiving -and care receiving- can be seen as part of everyday citizenship. (Till, 2012, as cited in Williams, 2019) → This study explores the experiences of young women with support needs, remaining attentive to whether and how the presence or absence of care may play a role in shaping their sense of belonging and feeling at ease.

Urban everyday mobility as a way to explore inclusion and belonging

In urban contexts, mobility is closely connected to participation, as it shapes access to places, relationships, and everyday life. However, mobility is not neutral. The ability to move through the city is shaped by social, institutional, and environmental conditions, and cannot be taken for granted for people with disabilities. (Wendell, 1989; Prince, 2008)

Mobility is not only about access, but also about how movement through urban space is experienced. Do people feel at ease, recognised, and welcome to move through the city? Do they feel like they belong? These questions guide what is explored in this study.

4. Problematisation and research question

Young adulthood is often associated with growing independence, exploration, and participation in public and urban life. **Mobility** plays an important role in this process, as it shapes access to education, work, leisure, relationships, and public space.

Yet these opportunities are not equally accessible. Urban environments and mobility systems are often organised around normative assumptions of independence, gender, and ability.

Young people with disabilities continue to face **unequal access** to services, barriers in mobility, and **experiences of ableism** and exclusion in public space.

In this study, inclusion is approached as a desired social condition, while belonging and “feeling at ease” are used to explore how inclusion is experienced in everyday urban life.

While research on mobility frequently focuses on accessibility and infrastructure, this study takes the angle of lived experiences of moving through the city, including questions of recognition, belonging, and feeling at ease in public space.

While disability has often been described as the “Cinderella topic” of the social sciences, perspectives of young women -and particularly those of people with intellectual disabilities- have been noted as receiving less attention within disability studies.

By **foregrounding the perspectives of women with diverse support needs** in relation to neurodivergence and cognitive differences, this study aims to contribute to a more nuanced understanding of everyday urban life and mobility within the concrete and socially relevant context of transitioning into adulthood under conditions of structural inequality.

Following feminist argument that cities are shaped around dominant social groups, this study assumes that research itself risks reproducing similar normative perspectives when the voices of those most affected remain marginal. For this reason, the study adopts a participatory and inclusive research approach. However, because there is limited practical insight into how such approaches can be meaningfully implemented - particularly with groups whose perspectives are often overlooked, such as people with intellectual disabilities and young women - the development of the research methodology becomes part of the research question itself.

Understanding how young women with diverse support needs experience everyday mobility requires their meaningful involvement in the research process. This study therefore contributes both experiential knowledge about everyday urban mobility, belonging and methodological insights into how more inclusive forms of research practice can be developed.

This study focuses on young women with diverse support needs in relation to neurodivergence and cognitive differences, hereafter referred to as “diverse support needs”.

Main research question: How do young women with diverse support needs experience feeling at ease and belonging when moving in and around the city, what obstacles do they face, and how do they navigate them?

Methodological sub-question: How can participatory inclusive research be developed with young women with diverse support needs in ways that are meaningful for them?

5. Methodology

5.1 Research design

This study aims for a qualitative, inclusive co-research design, grounded in lived experiences and informed by principles from inclusive disability research, decolonising methodologies and feminist and care-oriented research traditions. I first give an overview of theories and then explain the choices made for this study.

Theoretical framework of the methodology

Inclusive research in disability studies

Definition of inclusive research

The slogan “Nothing about us without us” typifies the disability movement and increasingly shapes inclusive research practices. But what does inclusive research mean?

Inclusive research “involves those being researched in the decision-making and conduct of the research, including project planning, research design, data collection and analysis, and/or the dissemination and application of the findings”. (Bourke, 2009, cited in Sergeant, 2021)

Walmsley and Johnson outline five guiding principles for inclusive research involving people with disabilities: participants have ownership over the research question; they collaborate in conducting the research; they exercise some degree of control over the research process and outcomes; they have access to research questions, reports, and findings; and the outcomes of the research aim to advance participants’ interests, reflecting participatory or emancipatory paradigms. (Walmsley & Johnson, 2003)

Co-research as a practice - creating an inclusive research design

While the importance of inclusive research is increasingly recognised there remains limited practical experience. A co-research approach, in which researchers with experiential knowledge and a researcher with an academic background work together is one concrete practice. Sergeant identified six themes from a co-researcher approach for creating an inclusive research environment. (Sergeant, 2021)

- Belonging: all researchers should feel ownership of the study, be part of the group, and take responsibility.
- Self-awareness and competence building: recognising one’s own knowledge and competencies, as well as their limits, supports the research process.

- Communication: alternative communication methods should be sought to make the research accessible to all participants.
- Sharing power: striving for balance between academic and experiential knowledge.
- Time: allowing sufficient time for processes, dialogue, and reflection.
- Vulnerability: acknowledge messiness and uncertainty in the research process.

Inclusive research methods – how to get access to experiences in a meaningful way

Research with young women with intellectual disabilities -who may have limited verbal or literacy skills- presents specific challenges. Both intersectional and inclusive disability research encounter dilemmas in how best to represent experiences without imposing hierarchies on different forms of marginalization.

Creative research methods, such as imagery, narrative, photovoice and poetry, are often employed to navigate these challenges, allowing participants to express experiences that are difficult to capture through conventional language-based approaches. (Peterson, 2012; Sergeant, 2021)

In addition, “**Verstehen**” is an important concept, it emphasizes understanding participants’ intentions, motives, and the meanings they assign to their actions. It supports flexibility in interviews –no pre-described process– and encourages attentiveness to how participants make sense of their own experiences. (Smith, 1989, p. 196, as cited in Peterson, 2012)

Feminist epistemological criteria and the importance of caring research

Epistemological criteria

The study positions itself within feminist research and follows feminist epistemological criteria such as reflexivity, situated knowledge, attention to power relations and the importance of language. It uses a post-positivist framework as it does not assume the existence of a single truth nor claims researcher neutrality. Rather than aiming to define a single model for inclusive environments, the study foregrounds voices that are rarely heard. (Degavre & Lassère, 2024)

Caring research as a methodological framework, investing in research relationships

Kaarina Määttä and Satu Uusiautti (2016) describe ‘caring research’ as a concept that operates from two interconnected perspectives. It refers to research that aims to promote well-being. Second, it refers to a caring research community, in which attention is paid to reciprocal and respectful relationships between those involved in the research process, and where research is

manifested by mutual support, encouragement and collaboration between researchers. This dual perspective positions care not only as an ethical orientation toward research participants, but also as shaping how research itself is conducted.

The one-world perspective, offers a way of understanding a caring research community. (Sander, 2021) It rejects a strict separation between those who give and those who receive care. Researchers and participants are understood as co-inhabiting an interconnected interdependent world, in which roles are not fixed but shift across time, space, and context. Care is not about one side protecting another but about paying attention to how research and knowledge-making affect everyone involved.

Adding to this is the concept of **working the hyphen**. When applied in research, this idea highlights how the identities of researchers and participants and knowledge are mutually constructed through interaction. Fine describes working the hyphen as an invitation “to see how these ‘relations between’ get us better data, limit what we feel free to say, expand our minds and constrict our mouths, engage us in intimacy and seduce us into complicity, make us quick to interpret and hesitant to write”. (Fine, 1994, p. 72, cited in Sergeant, 2021)

Investing in the research relationship creates space for knowledge that emerges in this shared space between researchers, while remaining attentive to power and difference. This includes acknowledging moments of discomfort, uncertainty, or messiness as meaningful data about the research process itself. (Sergeant, 2021)

Decolonizing methodologies: what knowledge is produced, who can produce it, who benefits?

The book *Decolonizing Methodologies* (Smith, 2022) adopts the perspective of those being researched, namely Indigenous peoples and critically examines how knowledge is produced by asking who is allowed to produce knowledge, about whom, and for what purpose. It offers methodological tools for conducting research both within one’s own community and, as an outsider, in communities to which one does not belong. These insights are cautiously translated in this study to the context of disability by drawing parallels between both ‘researched groups’ in how unequal power relations shape knowledge production and whose knowledge is valued.

Who benefits from research?

Smith notes that research is often experienced by marginalized groups as valuable primarily for researchers, rather than for those being researched. “Indigenous peoples say that research is worthless for them but valuable for the researcher. It tells them things they already know, suggests solutions that do not work, and builds careers for people who already have jobs.”

In this study, this raises questions about whether research should primarily increase knowledge *about* people with disabilities for non-disabled researchers or institutions, or whether it should contribute to increased knowledge, awareness, and agency *among* people with disabilities.

Smith links social change to conditions such as critical consciousness and the ability to imagine alternative futures for marginalized groups. By engaging in collective reflection, this study seeks to foster critical consciousness among the co-researchers.

Smith stresses that sharing knowledge is a long-term commitment and that researchers cannot remain neutral or invisible. Research outcomes are not neutral products but carry ethical responsibility. This aspect will be considered.

Who is recognised as a legitimate producer of knowledge?

The position of people with intellectual disabilities within academic knowledge production remains problematic. Limited access to academic language, writing practices, and institutional norms means that they remain dependent on research initiatives led by non-disabled researchers. Moreover, the idea that marginal positions can function as spaces of agency, resistance, and agenda-setting (hooks, 1990; Stuart, 1992, as cited in Smith, 2021, p.260) becomes more complex when translated to the context of intellectual disability. Reliance on support structures, combined with often fragmented living situations, means that the formation of collective communities is not self-evident and frequently requires facilitation.

Collective knowledge and epistemic assumptions

Smith challenges dominant Western epistemological assumptions that position the individual as the primary unit of knowledge production. Drawing on Māori epistemologies, she conceptualises knowledge as something that is held collectively, with different forms of expertise distributed across people, relationships, and social roles. (Smith, 2021) From this perspective, focusing on individuals in isolation may obscure important forms of knowledge that emerge through collective practices. This relational understanding of knowledge offers a useful lens for reflecting on research with people with intellectual disabilities, whose everyday lives are often organised through interdependent and collectively supported arrangements.

Methodological and epistemological choices

A co-research approach: a combination of academic and experiential knowledge

We work with a **co-research approach** in which a researcher with academic knowledge and co-researchers with experiential knowledge collaborate and co-create throughout the research process. We use **experiential knowledge for** knowledge production.

In contrast to existing co-research practices, this study works with **multiple co-researchers** with support needs and one academic researcher. The choice for a single academic researcher follows from the academic context, as one student is responsible for writing and submitting the thesis. The choice to work with multiple co-researchers is informed by how knowledge is understood within decolonising methodologies. Rather than treating the individual as the primary unit of knowledge production, this study understands knowledge as relational and as emerging through interaction within a group. Working with several co-researchers allows experiences to be shared, recognised, and developed collectively.

An emergent and reflexive research practice

An important implication is that this study enters relatively new and less explored terrain. Due to the limited practical experience, the research process inevitably **takes on an experimental and exploratory character**. While guiding questions and theory inform the study, the inclusive ambitions and research design mean that the process cannot be fully predefined. **The research process becomes part of the research** acknowledging that such work is necessarily iterative and complex. Ongoing reflection on the research process, on my own role and positionality as a researcher and on the dynamics within the group is therefore essential.

Caring research

This study deliberately adopts a **caring research approach**. Central to this approach is an investment in research relationships while remaining attentive to power relations and difference, in line with the idea of “working the hyphen.”

Caring research foregrounds reciprocal and respectful interactions among (co-) researchers fostering a working environment characterised by mutual support, encouragement, and collaboration between researchers while at the same time recognising that knowledge emerges through interaction rather than through extraction alone.

Within this framework, moments of discomfort, uncertainty, or messiness are not treated as obstacles to be resolved, but as meaningful data that offer insight into the research process itself.

Caring research also functions as an epistemological principle: by attending to comfort, stress, and embodied experience, it exposes forms of experiential and relational knowledge that are often excluded from more extractive research practices.

Caring research is furthermore often understood as research that contributes to improving the lives of those involved. This aspect will also be considered in the analysis.

Guiding questions for shaping an inclusive research environment

Informed by the theoretical framework, a set of guiding questions supported the academic researcher in making choices, reflecting on interactions, and adjusting the research process throughout. These questions are treated as an ongoing orientation aimed at working towards a more inclusive research environment, without assuming that this can be fully achieved.

- How can co-researchers be meaningfully involved in each phase of the research process?
- How can relationships be actively cared for, so that knowledge can emerge in the shared space between researchers and co-researchers and among co-researchers themselves, while remaining attentive to power differences?
- How can methods be selected that place meaning and lived experience at the centre, including through creative research methods?
- How can language be used in ways that respect how people define themselves and ensure that everyone can participate in an informed way?
- How can sufficient time be taken for trust, reflection, and shared sense-making?
- How can this research contribute to increased knowledge and awareness among those involved, and what can be done with it?
- How can power differences be engaged with?

Inclusion is therefore not defined in advance but explored throughout the research process together with the co-researchers. Researcher and co-researchers jointly build the research setting while generating insights into how, when, and under what conditions inclusive research can take shape in practice. These guiding questions function as a reflexive framework for the academic researcher, particularly in moments of uncertainty or doubt during the research process.

5.2 Set up and recruiting co-researchers

Overview of the research process

The research process started with an exploratory phase in November 2025, involving individual conversations with one co-researcher. This phase aimed to explore the relevance of the research topic, to invest in the research relationship, and to identify meaningful ways of working and communicating.

Based on insights from this exploration, as well as theoretical considerations and academic requirements, the research focus was narrowed, and the decision was made to work with a research group rather than an individual co-researcher. Individual introductory conversations were held with the additional co-researchers to build trust and gain initial insights into their everyday experiences of moving through the city (which also functioned as initial data collection moments).

The core of the study consisted of a series of group sessions between February and April 2026. Rather than following a fixed sequence, the plan of action allowed for adjustment based on what emerged during the research process.

Table 1 *Overview of the Research Process*

Phase	Period	Format	Main focus
Exploratory phase	November 2025	Individual conversation	Exploring relevance of the topic, relationship building, Testing working together
Group composition	January 2026	-	Formation of the co-research group
Introductory conversations	February 2026	Individual semi-structured interviews	Getting to know each other, trust building, Experience sharing of everyday mobility
Group session 1	February 2026	Group session	Introduction and sharing initial experiences of mobility in the city Joint process design
Group session 2	February 2026	Group session	Discussing everyday mobility Joint process design
Group session 3	February 2026	Group session	Reflection on disability Drawing a routine trajectory Process design
Group session 4	March 2026	Group session	Drawing portrait Reflection on inclusive research practice
Group session 5	March 2026	Group session	Reflection and identification of recurring themes on everyday mobilities
Group session 6	April 2026	Group session	Informal moment, Reflection on the research process, outcomes, and feedback

Note. This table provides an overview of the research process and the main topics addressed in each phase. Details on data collection and analysis are presented in the following sections.

Research context: Konekt and Brake out as the context

The co-researchers were recruited through **Konekt**, a Flemish organisation that strives for everyone to live fully in an inclusive society. This choice was primarily pragmatic, as the

researcher works at Konekt in the domain of Inclusion and Innovation. This position provided access to a group of young adults with support needs. While the researcher does not work directly with the co-researchers and has no formal or informal authority over them, this positionality is not neutral. The researcher therefore explicitly reflects on how working within the same organisation, familiarity with its vision, and holding an academic role may influence interactions, expectations, and interpretations.

The co-researchers participate in **Brake Out**, a multi-year programme supporting young people with support needs in their transition to adulthood. The programme strongly emphasises **talent development, self-reflection, and active participation**, providing a shared language and orientation around growth and belonging. This inevitably shapes the research context and creates a starting position in which experience, reflection, and self-development are already foregrounded.

The co-researchers involved in this study are young women with mild intellectual disabilities and or neurodivergent profiles; one also has also a physical disability. At the time of the research, participants were at different stages of the programme, including current participants and alumni. This diversity in position and experience informed the collective research process.

Recruitment and involvement of co-researchers

The research project was introduced to the staff of Brake Out Leuven. Initially, several names were suggested as potential co-researchers. Only one of these young women could be contacted, which led to a **short explorative phase** with her. This exploration informed the subsequent recruitment approach.

The project was then presented to all participants of Brake Out Leuven during a meeting. Young women were invited to take part in a study on their experiences in the city, on a voluntary base. Staff discussed the invitation individually with interested young people. The final decision rested with the young women themselves. Rather than applying formal selection criteria, emphasis was placed on motivation and willingness to engage in all research sessions. Talents explored within the Brake Out Leuven programme offered a shared language to support diverse forms of contribution, without functioning as requirements. The final research group consisted of **four co-researchers with experiential knowledge and one academic researcher**.

5.3 Data Collection

Data collection focused on experiences of everyday moving in and around the city through **multiple complementary methods**. This methodological choice was informed by the principles of **Universal Design for Learning**, which recognise that individuals differ in how they process information and express meaning. (Meyer, Rose, & Gordon, 2014) Using varied methods aimed not only to reduce methodological barriers, but also to gain insight into which forms of data generation were feasible and meaningful within this research context.

Following the composition of the co-research group, **individual introductory conversations** were held with each of the three additional co-researchers in the form of **semi-structured interviews**. These conversations gained initial insights into participants' everyday mobility experiences, while also informing how subsequent group work could be shaped.

Throughout the research process, decisions about which methods to use **were taken jointly**, based on what felt meaningful, feasible, and appropriate at each stage of the process, rather than being fixed in advance.

During the first group session, a **shared observation task** was introduced, inviting co-researchers to observe their everyday trajectories over the course of one week. Participants documented these experiences in different ways, depending on what was possible for them. These differences were explicitly discussed in the following session. Both the experiences themselves and the task became topics of collective reflection.

A planned group excursion was not realised because of bad weather. Instead, co-researchers were invited to **draw a routine trajectory** (from home to the training centre) and reflect on moments of comfort and discomfort while navigating the city. Participation varied, revealing practical constraints that were not treated as missing data, but as part of understanding how inclusive data collection unfolds in practice.

In a later session, participants were invited to share a **self-selected experience** they considered meaningful. A **needs- and feelings-based reflective method** was used, supported by visual cards. This approach highlighted emotional and relational dimensions of mobility experiences and supported collective meaning-making.

Taken together, these methods contributed to **methodological triangulation**. (Flick, 2018) Approaching the same research question through different methods enabled verbal, embodied, emotional, and visual forms of knowledge, while also generating insight into what worked, what did not, and under what conditions.

Data related to the question of how participatory and inclusive research can be developed, and what was experienced as meaningful, was collected continuously throughout all research sessions. This occurred both through questions I prepared and through spontaneous remarks and reflections raised by the co-researchers.

The data corpus consisted of **verbatim transcripts** of interviews and group conversations, as well as **visual data** produced during the sessions, including drawings, and other participant-generated materials. In addition, following each meeting, the researcher created both a **summary** and an **audio-recorded account**, drawing on the recorded discussion, the visual materials produced, and the collective decisions made during the session. These reflective summaries were included in the dataset, reflecting the **iterative and reflexive character** of the research process, in which data production, shared sense-making, and collective decision-making were closely intertwined.

Use of Language, Transcription, Referencing and Annexes

All conversations were conducted in Dutch. Consequently, all transcriptions and reports included in the annexes are presented in Dutch. To ensure anonymity while maintaining transparency, quotations in this thesis are referenced using a coding system indicating both the co-researcher and the session in which the statement was made. “R” refers to the co-researcher, and “S” refers to the research session (e.g., R3 in S2).

Overview of the Annexes

- **Annex 1:** Notes and full transcripts of the individual interviews (S01_04).
- **Annex 2:** Notes and transcripts of the group sessions (S1_6).
- **Annex 3:** Overview: the results; activities; visual data.

Data collection and consent

Consent was treated as an ongoing and collective process throughout the research. At the start of each session, participants were asked whether the session could be audio-recorded. In addition, individual conversations were held with each co-researcher to discuss whether and how they wished to be represented in the research. These discussions took place both in group settings and in one-to-one conversations. Together with the co-researchers, decisions were made regarding forms of representation, including the use of first names, the anonymisation of transcripts and quotations related to personal experiences, and the use of visual material. These choices were revisited over time, recognising consent and representation as negotiable and responsive to participants’ comfort and preferences.

5.4 Data Analysis

Data analysis was approached as an **iterative and, as much as possible, collaborative process**. Data collection and analysis were closely intertwined, with preliminary interpretations emerging throughout the research rather than being postponed to a final analytic phase.

At the same time, analysis proved to be the **most challenging phase** of the research, particularly in relation to power dynamics. Analytic work is often experienced as definitive and requires time, conceptual familiarity, and interpretive skills that were unevenly distributed. While the academic researcher had greater access to time and analytical resources, the co-researchers' availability and engagement were necessarily limited by the research setting, consisting of 6 sessions of approximately one and a half hours.

To address this tension, different analytic moments were incorporated into the research process

Continuous collective reflection

First, collective reflection was part of each session. Participants were invited to reflect together on their experiences of mobility and on the research process itself, identifying what they considered important, recurring, or meaningful. These reflections functioned as a form of ongoing, co-researcher-led *pre-analysis* and were systematically documented in accessible formats (visual and audio summaries), which were shared with the group.

Dedicated sessions

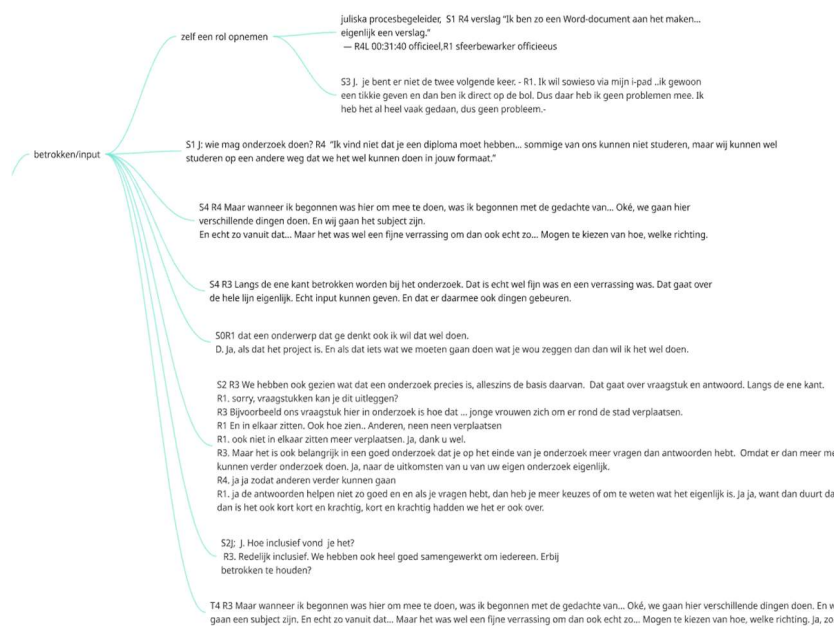
In addition, two dedicated sessions focused explicitly on thematic reflection. One session was devoted to themes related to everyday mobility experiences, while a second session focused on themes related to inclusive research practices. In each session, themes were further developed based on co-researcher input. The following sections present selected examples to illustrate how this analytical process unfolded in practice.

Example of how thematic analyses was formed

One session was **on inclusive research practices**. Co-researchers were asked: *When do you feel included in this research process, and when not?*

Responses were written on post its and discussed collectively. (figure 1) These co-researcher-generated formulations formed the basis for subsequent analytic work by the academic researcher, who revisited the verbatim transcripts and visual materials to identify passages aligning with the themes articulated by the group. The wording used by the co-researchers played a guiding role in later thematic clustering.

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Note. Post- its generated by co-researchers during a reflective session, illustrating participant-led identification of recurring themes.

Note. Visual overview created during the research process, combining participant contributions and researcher facilitation to support shared sense-making.

The development of the theme *managing crowding and sensory overload* illustrates how the thematic (pre-) analysis unfolded as a **continuous and iterative process**. Throughout the research trajectory, preliminary analysis took place alongside data collection. Each time a session report was produced, the researcher updated a digital board (Miro), clustering **literal**

excerpts and formulations used by the co-researchers. This ongoing pre-analysis remained closely tied to participants' language and experiences.

During a dedicated group session on everyday mobilities, co-researchers were invited to identify recurring elements across their experiences. This resulted in an initial, **co-researcher-generated clustering of themes**, expressed in everyday terms such as "*drukte en prikkels*" (crowding and sensory stimuli), describing discomfort, frustration, and loss of control in busy or unpredictable situations (Figure 3).

In this session, the researcher also presented the **preliminary themes** that had emerged from the ongoing pre-analysis, in order to check whether these resonated with the co-researchers' own interpretations and to identify elements that were missing or over-emphasised (Figure 4). This exchange functioned as a dialogical moment of validation and correction. Following this session, the researcher **restructured the initial pre-analysis**, aligning it as closely as possible with the themes articulated by the co-researchers.

In a subsequent analytic phase, the researcher revisited the full dataset, including verbatim interview transcripts, group discussions, and visual materials, and further clustered excerpts related to these themes on the digital board. Through this iterative movement between participant-generated meanings and researcher-led structuring, the initial descriptive category gradually developed into the more abstract theme *managing crowding and sensory overload*. This theme captures not only the presence of sensory intensity, but also how participants anticipate, navigate, and cope with such situations. A similar analytic process was applied across all themes.



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Figure 3 Participant-generated themes related to feeling at ease during mobility.

Note. Visual summary produced during a group session, capturing five experiential themes identified by co-researchers.

5 thema's die bepalen of we op ons gemak zijn tijdens verplaatsingen

- 
- Voorspelbaarheid versus onverwacht
 - Routine is anders dan iets onverwacht Als iets onverwacht is... dat is een totaal andere beleving voor mij
 - Gepland is anders dan ongepland Binnen twee weken? Dan kan ik mij wel organiseren. "Ik plan mij altijd op voorhand"
 - Drukke en nabijheid, persoonlijke ruimte
 - Hier in de straat is het rustig
 - Als mensen pushen word ik niet goed
 - Ik kies ervoor buiten de spits te reizen dan is het rustiger
 - Autonomie en keuzevrijheid
 - Als ik naar mijn werk stap heb ik geen stress... omdat ik op mijn eigen tempo ben
 - Ik neem liever de scooter
 - Ik neem de fiets dan kan ik zelf beslissen
 - Ik stap zelf naar het station
 - De blik van anderen
 - Als ik dit (mijn haar) niet aanheb, denken ze: "Dat is zeker een jongen." Ze weten niet wie ge vanbinnen zijt.
 - Mijn traject is met de fiets. Om te beginnen voel ik mij nooit echt op, alé, nooit echt -normaal- quoteonquote- wanneer ik met de fiets ga, omdat dat zo'n driewieler is.
 - Hoe we ons voelen voor fysiek e of emotioneel vooraf of tijdens
 - Ik word heel ziek op de bus... ik haat openbaar vervoer... ik word mottig.
 - Als ik de bus neem dan is het soms te ver stappen
 - Als we nog thuis zijn is dat stressy stressy... je neemt elkaars sfeer over."
 - Normaal vind ik het niet leuk als mensen naast mij zitten maar nu was het wel ok

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Figure 4 Researcher-led pre-analysis presented to the co-researchers during a group session. Note. Presentation slide summarising preliminary themes developed through ongoing pre-analysis, based on verbatim excerpts from interviews and group discussions, and used as input for collective reflection and validation.

5.5 Limitations

The composition of the group introduces a certain bias. The co-researchers had previously taken part in a structured, growth-oriented programme, which supported them in learning how to express their opinions and experiences. As a result, they are not representative of all young women with diverse support needs.

At the same time, describing this group as “privileged” feels uncomfortable. The programme primarily did what society often fails to do: believe in them and invest in their personal development.

The study is based on a small group of four young women with different support needs. The findings are therefore context-bound and not overly generalisable but offering valuable insights by revealing patterns that contribute to discussions on inclusive mobility.

Finally, this research was conducted within the scope of a master's thesis, with limited time and resources. The research was carried out alongside work, family responsibilities, and other commitments. Luckily part of the planning and logistics was supported by the Brake-Out team. These constraints limited the extent to which all relevant aspects could be addressed in the thesis, as more insights were generated during the research process than could be fully included within the available time and page limits. This is also reflected in the annexes, where variations in the level of detail and formatting occur, reflecting the conditions under which the research process developed.

6. Presentation of the results

6.1 Experiences of young women with diverse support needs of everyday movements in and around the city

Starting from the lived experiences of young women with diverse support needs, this study explores when they feel at ease during their everyday movements in and around the city.

In reflecting on these experiences, co-researchers consistently articulated two positions that structure the analysis. On the one hand, they clearly stated that *“de wereld is niet gemaakt voor ons,^{iv}”* (R3 in S5), pointing to the structural, social, and sensory barriers they encounter during their movements. On the other hand, they also emphasised that these movements are *“niet allemaal negatief,”^v* (R3 in S5), referring to moments of ease, freedom, and satisfaction.

Rather than resolving this tension, the analysis takes it as a starting point. The following sections examine which factors shaped whether co-researchers felt at ease during their everyday movements in public space and how they actively sought to maintain control over these experiences.

Managing crowding and sensory overload

Co-researchers consistently indicated that they felt most at ease while navigating the city when the environment was calm, less crowded, and allowed for sufficient physical space. Places where movement was clearly organised and where different flows were separated were described as comfortable:

“Ik vind het [...] een fijn stukje omdat het rustiger is”; “Echt een fietspad apart.”^{vi} (R3 in S3)

The possibility to sit was also explicitly mentioned as contributing to a sense of comfort and ease: *“ik had een eigen stoel.”^{vii}* (R2 in S3)

In contrast, busy environments and close proximity to others were repeatedly associated with discomfort. When co-researchers had to navigate crowded spaces, they described feeling overwhelmed and losing a sense of control:

“Gisteren [...] was het pokkendruk, [...] je kon niet bewegen[...] niet ademen.” (R4 in S4)

“Ik word snel overweldigd [...] als er te veel mensen rondom mij zijn.” (R3 in S03)

“Mensen waren aan het pushen, aan elkaar plakken, daar kan ik echt niet tegen.” (R4 in S3)

“Als ik zo moet recht staan dat vind ik ambetant want ik wil graag zo in mijn bubbelke zijn”
(R2 in S2)

“Ik was [...] te overprikkeld als er iemand ambetant was op de trein, of een baby die aan het krijsen was, of een kind die zich niet kon gedragen of iemand die luid praatte, of een tiener.”^{viii} (R2 in S5)

Beyond crowding itself, specific sensory stimuli intensified this discomfort. Tactile sensations were mentioned explicitly: *“Wat ik haat is dat [...] de paal plakkerig is.”^{ix} (R1 in S0R1)*

To deal with these situations, co-researchers actively employed strategies to regain a sense of control during their movements.

Almost all mentioned using headphones as a way to shield themselves from sensory overload: *“Ik heb veiligheidshalve mijn muziek opgezet om mij af te leiden van de drukte rondom mij.”^x (R3 in S2)*

Others described staying connected to trusted people during the journey as a way to remain calm: *“Als ik wel een beetje stressig ben, [...] dan bel ik mijn mama”^{xi} (S2 in R5)*

In addition, several co-researchers deliberately avoided crowded situations by adjusting when or how they travelled. Choosing to avoid peak hours or to walk was described as a way to maintain control over pace and proximity:

“De spitsdrukke probeer ik zoveel mogelijk te vermijden [...] Ik kom sowieso al niet vaak buiten [...] omdat er veel mensen zijn, [...] Thuis zit ik in een gecontroleerde omgeving” (R3 in S03)

“te kunnen stappen gewoon op mijn eigen ... en me niet moet haasten .”^{xii} (R2 in S2)

→ These accounts show that feeling at ease during urban mobility for the co-researchers is closely linked to having sufficient physical and sensory space, being able to regulate proximity to others, and actively exerting control over one's movement. Rather than being passive recipients of environmental conditions, co-researchers continuously monitored and adjusted their movements through concrete strategies that allowed them to remain as comfortable as possible.

The importance of everyday social interactions

Several of the co-researchers repeatedly indicated that interactions with other travellers strongly influenced whether they felt at ease during their movements in public space. Small, everyday moments of social interaction could contribute to a sense of comfort, normality, and belonging - particularly when these interactions were friendly, respectful, and non-intrusive.

Acts of everyday friendliness were explicitly mentioned as pleasant and affirming. Co-researchers referred to being greeted, smiled at, or helped in a respectful way. Being treated “like everyone else” played an important role in feeling at ease:

“Vorig jaar was er zo een meisje die zo een toffe glimlach naar mij had gedaan zo twee keer.”; “Ik heb gezegd ik heb autisme en ik zit op een speciale school en die heeft geen raar gezicht getrokken of die heeft me niet anders behandeld of zo, die was gewoon geïnteresseerd.” (R2 in S4)

“Normaal gezien kijken mensen, staren naar mij, en dat is heel interessant dat die gewoon gewoon deden en [...] toch wel zalig om te voelen.”^{xiii} (R1 in S3)

These brief encounters were described as meaningful precisely because they were small and ordinary. Co-researchers did not feel singled out or reduced to their disability.

In contrast, other interactions were experienced as strongly excluding. Situations in which co-researchers were treated as “different”, stared at, mocked, or addressed patronizingly undermined their sense of ease. Several described being laughed at because of visible differences, such as using a tricycle, or being spoken to differently because of speech difficulties:

“Als je naar mij zou kijken, staat er niet op ‘autist’. Maar [...] als ik zo blokkeren, zo niet meer kan praten [...] heb ik toch veel gehoord als kind van “je mag tegen me praten”. “Nou, Ik ga niet bijten”. Ik haat dat.” (R2 in S2)

“Ik voel me nooit normaal wanneer ik met de fiets ga omdat dat zo ’n driewieler is.” (R3 in S3)

“Normaal gezien [...] staren mensen naar mij.”^{xiv} (R1 in S3)

A lack of empathy in moments of vulnerability was experienced as particularly painful:

“Mensen zijn onbeschoft. [...]Ik ben al eens gevallen in een bus met echt blauwe plekken, en [...] ze rijden, ze rijden gewoon” (R1 in S01)

“Meestal heb ik de chance dat er bijstaanders zijn die dat zien dat ik met de rolstoel probeer op te stappen. En dan helpen die mij verder. Maar ik heb nog nooit een buschauffeur gehad die

dat van zijn stoel kwam om mij mee te helpen of om de ramp naar beneden te halen of zo. Dus ja.”^{xv} (R3 in S03)

Ambivalence also emerged around help and assistance. While spontaneous help was sometimes appreciated, at other moments it felt intrusive or infantilising:

“als mensen [...] zien dat ik met een rolstoel ben of dat ik met de wandelstok ben zeggen ze vanuit hunzelf “oh, kan ik ergens mee helpen” en dat is soms teveel. (R3 in S2)

“Ergens zou je soms het gevoel krijgen dat ze je behandelen gelijk nen baby.” (R2 in S2)

“Ik snap de twee kanten: ze willen helpen, maar laat het ons zelfstandig doen en dat we zelf hulp kunnen [...] vragen.”^{xvi} (R4 in S2)

→ This shows that feeling at ease during everyday trajectories is produced relationally, through encounters in public space. Whether co-researchers feel comfortable depends strongly on how others approach them: whether judgments and stigma are withheld, whether autonomy is respected, and whether they are recognised as competent individuals. These aspects lie largely beyond their control, apart from their limited ability to decide when and how to interact.

Control and predictability as conditions for feeling at ease

Across the accounts of the co-researchers, feeling at ease during everyday urban trajectories was strongly shaped by how they experienced control and predictability. Comfort was not described as a stable state, but as depending on being able to anticipate how a journey would unfold and how much physical, cognitive, and emotional effort it would require.

This need for predictability was closely connected to the fact that the urban environment is often not adapted to the physical or cognitive conditions of co-researchers. For the wheelchair user, even small changes in route could have major consequences, for example because they required longer distances, inaccessible transport, or the absence of appropriate support:

“Ik probeer de bus te ontwijken [...] omdat het altijd wel een stukje stappen is naar een bushalte.”^{xvii} (R3 in S03)

Decisions during a journey therefore had to be constantly weighed against bodily limits.

For co-researchers with limited access to written language, a lack of accessible communication further undermined predictability. When routes changed or delays occurred, information was often only provided in written form:

“Ze zeggen niets en het zou makkelijker zijn voor mensen die het moeilijk hebben.”^{xviii} (R1 in S01)

More generally, public transport was described as a key source of uncertainty. Delays, reroutes, and unclear communication made it difficult to anticipate the course of a journey:

“De bussen en vervoer zijn soms een beetje te laat [...] en dan erger ik me daar wel heel hard aan kapot, want ge wilt ergens op tijd kunnen zijn.”^{xxix} (R4 in S2)

In addition to these external sources of uncertainty, some co-researchers indicated that change itself was difficult to cope with:

“Ik ben slecht met aanpassingen.”^{xx} (R3 in S3)

Hence, even relatively minor changes may cause stress and require ample mental preparation. In response to this combination of external and internal uncertainty, co-researchers actively sought to retain or restore control over their movements. Many avoided public transports and instead chose alternatives that allowed them to determine route and pace themselves:

“Ik heb het echt gehad met de bus [...] dus ik ga met de scooter.”^{xxi} (R1 in S2)

Preparation emerged as a key strategy. Co-researchers described planning journeys in detail, often repeatedly, preparation was described as necessary to prevent stress from escalating.

“Als ik Google Maps heb [...] dan heb ik wel zo een rustig gevoel.”^{xxii} (R4 in S5)

“Voorbereid zijn voordat je vertrekt. Dat is altijd heel belangrijk.”^{xxiii} (R4 in S5)

At the same time, this level of preparation could itself be mentally demanding:

“Ik moest mij echt mentaal daar heel zwaar op voorbereiden.”^{xxiv} (R3 in S4)

Facing unexpected situations, co-researchers described engaging in active self-regulation:

“Ik moet efkes rustig worden, kalm. Eer dat ik kan nadenken van oké, wat is de volgende stap?”^{xxv} (R4 in S5)

Some indicated that stress could escalate to the point of complete mental blockage.

Predictability was often pursued individually through control and preparation. Co-researchers described yet another pathway to feeling at ease. Being accompanied did not remove uncertainty, but made it more manageable in sharing responsibility and problem-solving:

One co-researcher described feeling more at ease when travelling to Brussels with friends, as they could solve problems together. (S2 in S02) Similarly, travelling as a group to a bar was experienced as more comfortable, as being together reduced stress and created a sense of calm. (S5)

→This highlights that predictability is not only individually produced through control and preparation but can also be relationally achieved through shared presence.

Together, these findings show that the need for control and predictability arises from the interaction between an often-non-adapted environment, unpredictable transport systems, and individual limits in coping with change. Comfort is therefore not located in the individual or the environment alone but emerges from the relationship between both. While co-researchers actively develop strategies to manage uncertainty, these require considerable time and mental energy, making predictability a demanding but necessary condition for feeling at ease.

Mobility beyond burden: enabling participation and autonomy

Co-researchers explicitly stressed that everyday mobilities were not experienced only in a negative way. While they were clear about the stress, effort, and preparation involved, they also emphasised that it often serves a clear and shared purpose: like others, they travel in order to participate in everyday life, to reach places where they want or need to be, and to do things they value, such as learning, volunteering, dancing, or drawing. In this sense moving around is framed as a means to live a meaningful life rather than as an isolated task.

At the same time, co-researchers described that moving around independently was far from self-evident. For three of the four participants, attending specialised schools located far from home meant that transport was largely organised for them, often through school buses or residential arrangements. As a result, opportunities to learn how to travel independently were limited, postponed, or even lost. One co-researcher explained how using public transport had initially been learned, but later unlearned due to schooling arrangements:

“Openbaar vervoer ben ik begonnen toen ik tien was. [...] Maar het is mij afgeleerd geweest toen ik naar school ging [...] helemaal naar Aarschot.”^{xxvi} (R1 in S01)

Another co-researcher described having to learn independent travel only after finishing school, emphasising that this involved deliberate effort and practice:

“Na school [...] ben ik zo op zoek gegaan van wat wil ik graag[...] en dan ben ik dat beginnen leren.”^{xxvii} (R4 in S04)

Becoming independently mobile later in life was therefore described as a process that involved uncertainty, stress, and learning over time. Support and guidance played a role in this learning process, for example through explanations, practice, and the use of digital tools:

“In het begin was het wel spannend [...]maar ik heb er begeleiding voor gekregen, gewoon zeggen van daar moet je uitstappen.” “Ik heb ook een app geïnstalleerd [...] dat helpt mij wel, en nu ben ik dat gewoon ondertussen.”^{xxviii} (R4 in S04)

Despite the difficulties involved, co-researchers strongly associated being able to travel independently with feelings of freedom and accomplishment. Successfully managing a journey on their own was described as meaningful, not because it was easy, but because it confirmed their ability to find their way without being dependent on others:

“Nieuwe plekken ontdekken [...] waar ik nog nooit echt zelfstandig geweest ben. Om dat zo te ervaren.” “En ook zo de vrijheid, je hebt het wel alleen gedaan.”^{xxxix} (R4 in S5)

Moments of tension or anxiety during a journey were often followed by a strong sense of satisfaction afterwards:

“Door heel die proces. Ik weet van... Ok, ik ben goed bezig. En achteraf, als ik bij mijn bestemming was, dan valt er een last van je schouder af. Ok, ik ben er geraakt. Het is goed gegaan. En ik ben er trots op.”; Ik had zo een spannend gevoel, dit is een uitdaging. Achteraf had ik een heel trots gevoel: ik heb het alleen gedaan.”^{xxx} (R4 in S5)

Importantly, this experience was not uniform across all co-researchers. Some pursued physical movement through the city to access relationships and valued activities, others engaged in similar forms of participation through different means, including online communities:

“Ik kom sowieso al niet vaak buiten [...] omdat er veel mensen zijn. Thuis[...] zit ik in een gecontroleerde omgeving.”^{xxxi} (R3 in S03)

For this co-researcher, participation and connection also happens through online platforms and frequent video calls with a partner living abroad. These practices reflect different ways of navigating access, presence, and connection within the constraints of an often-inaccessible environment. In both cases, autonomy was expressed as the ability to choose how and where participation was possible, rather than as adherence to a single model of physical movement.

→Co-researchers explicitly wanted to recognize this positive dimension within the research. While acknowledging the difficulties involved, they resisted representations of everyday mobilities that focus solely on barriers or burden. The freedom, autonomy, and sense of accomplishment associated with being able to participate in meaningful activities were described as too important to ignore, even when achieving them required considerable effort.

6.2 Conducting inclusive research with co-researchers with diverse support needs in ways that are meaningful for them

Drawing on existing literature, I initially formulated a set of principles that I believed were necessary for conducting inclusive research, intended as a framework to be presented to the group and applied in practice. However, a fundamental tension emerged. The moment I imagined myself standing in front of the group, I realised how these predefined conditions could shape the research, rather than leaving space for it to be co-constructed. As Fine (1994, as cited in Sergeant, 2021) notes, research relations can “get us better data, limit what we feel free to say, expand our minds and constrict our mouths.” In this case, it was precisely this relational moment - before any principles were presented - that led me to reconsider my approach.

I moved to a set of guiding questions focused on my own role as a researcher. These questions were not intended to direct the group, but to guide my own actions in limiting my influence, creating a research setting that could remain flexible and allow power to be shared and co-researchers to take ownership of both the research process and knowledge production. Rather than imposing predefined conditions, the conditions for inclusive research were co-created with the group while conducting the research. Inclusion was approached as an emergent and relational process that developed through ongoing interactions, adjustments, and reflection. The outcomes of this co-creative exercise are presented below.

The creation of a safe environment for sharing personal experiences as a condition for inclusive research

Even before any substantive research activities had begun, **safety was explicitly raised as a concern**. The co-researcher who had already been involved in the research prior to the formation of the group raised questions about whether the group would feel able to share personal experiences and how moments of “blocking” could be addressed. This early exchange indicated that safety was not assumed as a given but already understood as a necessary condition for participation. These early concerns opened up a collective exploration of how safety could be actively supported within the group.

In anticipation of such needs, I had prepared a set of signals (e.g. indicating the need for a pause, wanting to ask a question...). However, before these were introduced, **the group itself proposed additional signals**. Although they were never explicitly used in the sessions, the collective

discussion around them appeared to be important in shaping a shared sense of safety, reduce pressure and create reassurance.

When asked what was needed to work well together, co-researchers emphasised conditions such as listening to one another, offering mutual support, and being honest. These principles were **enacted throughout the sessions**. On several occasions, co-researchers checked in on one another's well-being, for instance, reassured others by saying: *“nu ga je je zo voelen maar [...] als we gaan werken op de dingen dan gaat ge u op uw gemak voelen.”*^{xxxii} (R1 in S1)

When a co-researcher expressed discomfort or emotional difficulty, others responded by checking in, asking what was needed and whether support could be offered.

Within this safe environment, the possibility to **share personal experiences** - often carrying strong emotional weight - was repeatedly described as a significant added value. Co-researchers reflected positively on the moments in which experiences were exchanged:

“Het gesprek rond handicap voor mij. [...], ik vind dat leuk om dan te zien dat ik niet de enigste ben die mij zo voel” (R3 in S4)

“Het was fijn [...] dat ik gehoord werd” (R3 in S4)

“Dat we zo vrij onze mening konden zeggen [...] over ons autisme”^{xxxiii} (R2 in S4)

In a later reflection, one researcher summarised this experience by noting that: *“in een onderzoek [...] is het nog altijd belangrijk om een veilige en inclusieve sfeer te krijgen. En ik denk dat we daar wel in geslaagd zijn. Ja.”*^{xxxiv} (R3 in S4)

→ The creation of a safe research environment was largely sustained and actively shaped by the co-researchers themselves, who initiated, monitored, and gave meaning to what safety required in practice through ongoing, collective practices of attentiveness. This setting was experienced as enabling the sharing of experiences and was associated with the emergence of rich and nuanced forms of experiential knowledge.

Beyond the label “disability”: negotiating identity and self-representation

One issue surfaced almost immediately - before the formal start of the sessions: the use of the term **“disability”** (handicap). When the term was first spoken aloud, I observed an immediate reaction among two of the co-researchers. One explicitly described it as *“een lelijk woord”*^{xxxv} (R1 in S3), another referred to it as *“een vreemd woord”*^{xxxvi} (R2 in S3).

These responses reflected an affective reaction to the term itself, indicating that language was not experienced as neutral, but as directly shaping feelings of recognition and discomfort.

At the co-researchers' request, and in response to the visible unease the term generated, we engaged in an extended conversation about the meaning of ‘handicap’.

Multiple co-researchers later referred to this discussion as valuable and explicitly asked that the topic be given a central place in the research, even if, *“het niet echt op het topic van wat we onderzocht hebben [...] is.”*^{xxxvii} (R3 in S6)

This moment underscored that questions of language and identity were not peripheral, but foundational to the research process.

Across the discussion, co-researchers consistently associated handicap with stigma and **insult**: *“handicap wordt meer in de volksmond ook gebruikt als een vorm van scheldwoord.”*^{xxxviii} (R3 in S3)

Others emphasised that the term **flattens diverse experiences**, noting that

Ik heb een lichte vorm van autisme, maar er zijn er die een zwaardere vorm hebben dan mij.” (R2 in S3); *Zelfs als je twee mensen hebt met lichte autisme, dan komt dat nog anders tot uiting.*^{xxxix} (R3 in S3)

Criticism extended to the wheelchair icon, which was experienced as representing only visible, physical impairments: *“één ding dat ik haat, [...] dat is het sjabloon”* (R1 in S3); *“het moet iets zichtbaar zijn, terwijl dat problematieken ook onzichtbaar kunnen zijn.”*^{xl} (R3 in S3)

Both the term and its associated symbols were experienced as reductive and misrepresentative. Co-researchers expressed ambivalence about **naming differences** at all.

Naming a diagnosis could be **useful** for setting boundaries: *“Als ik aan iemand zeg dat ik autisme heb, dan ben ik dan heel direct duidelijk van wat mijn moeilijkheden zijn of wat ik geen probleem mee heb.”*^{xli} (R2 in S3)

for accessing support: *“Dat er ook rekening mee gehouden.”*^{xlii} (R4 in S3)

or for acknowledging the lived effort: *“Er was een meneer die zegt ‘iedereen heeft een beetje autisme’ [...] maar ik denk niet dat iemand in mijn plaats zou willen zijn [...] soms wens ik dat ik een on-off switch kan opzetten van mijn autisme.”*^{xliii} (R2 in S3)

Yet naming was also seen **as risky** or lead to exclusion, while co-researchers did express a desire to be treated as equals.

Experiences of difference varied. Some co-researchers described feeling **clearly different, while others did not**: *“Ik voel mezelf niet anders [...] er zijn dingen die ik niet kan die ‘normale mensen’ wel kunnen, en omgekeerd”*^{xliv}. (R3 in S3)

Similarly, whether having a disability was experienced as defining depended not only on the individual, but on **social responses**: *“het hangt er ook van af hoe mensen reageren naar u.”*^{xlv} (R4 in S3) Inclusion was repeatedly described as relational, requiring adaptation on both sides: *“it’s a two-way street.”* (R3 in S3)

Co-researchers also differed in how they **preferred to describe themselves**.

In what follows, we will use the names of the co-researchers as requested and discussed.

Laurel preferred “*spicy*,” Nina emphasised “*ik heb autisme*”^{xli}. Daniela did not explicitly articulate a preferred term, and Elena described “*beperking*”^{xlvii} or “*ondersteuningsnood*”^{xlviii} as relatively neutral. (S3) Rather than resolving these differences by selecting a single “correct” term, the research process created space for an alternative approach: self-identification through self-portraits, accompanied by explanations in co-researchers’ own words.

Laurel



Wie ben ik? - wat tekende ik

- “Tegenstrijdig. Omdat... Aan de ene kant ben ik echt wel een hele **grote ideeënfontein**, bijvoorbeeld. En een **out-of-the-box**-denker en van die dingen. Maar tegelijkertijd ben ik ook **nogal zwart-wit**. En dan probeer ik te tonen via kleurrijke woorden en ..de tekening zelf zwart-wit.
- “Ik heb er ook mijn diagnoses op geschreven. Omdat die niet bepalen wie ik ben of wat ik ben. Maar ze zijn toch ook wel belangrijk..”- “
- “ een moeilijke oefening voor mij vandaag. Omwille van het mentale dat ik wat meer negatief zit. Om zo echt positief over mezelf te denken en te doen is wel moeilijker.

Wat staat er: *believer, creatief, ideeënfontein, leergierig, out of the box, doorzetter, self-critisch, autisme, dyslexie, CMT, teken van rolstoel ... tekening, wereldbol*

Hoe zie ik mezelf als onderzoeker?

- “Ik denk heel breed en vanuit veel invalshoeken.” “Maar sommige dingen zie ik gewoon niet.”- dat is mijn zwakte punt als onderzoeker
- Vb voor mijn eindwerk “was het heel moeilijk om... Zowel het globale als het specifieke te zien. En om alles in gedachten te houden. “

Wat anderen over Laurel zeggen

- “Ze brengt ideeën waar ik zelf niet aan dacht.”
- “iemand die ook een mening heeft te zeggen”
- “Ze gebruikt haar ervaringskennis op een waardevolle manier.”

Nina



Wie ben ik

- “Ik heb autisme. Dat is wat ik heb.”
- “Ik ben creatief.”
- “Ik experimenteer meer nu — met tekenen en met mijn kleren.”
- “Het is alsof ik mijn eigen avatar word.”
- “Ik ben een trouwe vriend.”
- “Ik ben zelfbewust. Ik weet dat ik niet perfect ben.”
- “Ik kan nadenken over mijn fouten en reflecteren.”

Wat heb ik getekend?

- “Eerst vond ik het niet mooi, maar nu wel.”
- Woorden rond haar: *creatief, self aware, trouwe vriend, experimenteren, muziek, dieren vriend, familie/vrienden, autisme.*

Wat breng ik mee als onderzoeker?

- “Tekenen.”
- “Mijn mening.”

Anderen over haar:

- “heel creatief”,
- “zelfkritisch”,
- “kritisch.”
- Eigen ideeën vb micromomentje, discriminatie

Elena



Wie ben ik?

- "Ik leer dingen snel."
- "Ik ben heel nieuwsgierig."
- "Ik vind inclusie belangrijk. Iedereen moet kunnen meedoen in de maatschappij."
- "Ik ben een behulpzaam persoon."
- "Ik ben ook kritisch."

Wat heb ik getekend?

- Woorden rond haar portret: *Inclusie-Nieuwsgierig-Kritisch-Creatief-Behulpzaam*

Hoe zie ik mezelf als onderzoeker?

- "Ik wil graag meer dingen weten."
- "Ik ben nieuwsgierig en ik pak dingen snel op."
- "Ik vind inclusie in de wereld belangrijk — ook in onderzoek."

Wat anderen over haar zeggen

- "Ze ziet dingen snel en praktisch."
- "Ze neemt initiatief. Ze was de eerste die zei: 'Met dit weer kunnen we niet naar buiten, we moeten iets anders doen.'"
- "Ze heeft een positieve ingesteldheid: als we iets vragen, dan doet ze mee."

li

Juliska



Wie ben ik

- "Ik ben niet neutraal... mijn ervaringen spelen mee."
- "Ik ben Juliska, dat is mijn studie, en van daar vertrek ik."
- Mijn familie en vrienden zijn heel belangrijk

Wat heb ik getekend

- Alles wat ik fijn vind, teken, lezen, dansen, mijn familie, etc.

Hoe zie ik mezelf als onderzoeker?

- "Ik probeer het samen te doen."
- "Het is spannend omdat ik dit nog nooit op deze manier heb gedaan."
- "We gaan kijken wat past bij elkaar en wat niet... en dat samen beslissen."

Wat zeggen anderen over mij (in de sessie)?

- Je maakt ruimte voor iedereen om te spreken.
- We zijn niet het subject en dat voelt goed
- Je ben kalm en lief
- ideenfontijn
- Je helpt leiding geven en richting geven



lii

In these portraits, co-researchers described themselves primarily in terms of their qualities and interests. Two explicitly referred to a disability or diagnosis, while two did not. One was not present and just drew her self-portrait. This variation illustrates that self-identification functioned not as choosing a stable label, but as a situated and personal practice.

→ Read together, the negotiations around the term "disability" and the self-portraits demonstrate that inclusion in research required more than appropriate terminology; it required space for co-researchers to define themselves on their own terms, allowing meaning to be shaped by lived experience rather than imposed categories.

Negotiating structure, flexibility, fun in line with embodied realities to facilitate ownership

Throughout the research process, inclusive participation was shaped by a recurring tension between the need for structure and the necessity to adapt to changing needs and conditions.

Co-researchers repeatedly expressed a need for **structure and clarity**, particularly in relation to knowing what to expect. One participant explicitly asked to be informed in advance about planned activities so she could be prepared while another reflected during a check-out that the process sometimes felt overwhelming or chaotic but became more manageable over time: *“in the begin was het nog niet helemaal duidelijk [...] en nu begint het wat meer duidelijk te worden en fijner.”*^{liii} (R2 in S4)

At the same time, pre-structuring the research in detail would have undermined the co-creative character of the study. Co-creation required space for collective decision-making and this, sometimes, introduced uncertainty or demanded emotional and cognitive effort.

This tension became particularly visible during **moments of disruption**. For example, when a planned field activity had to be adjusted due to rain, responses varied: some experienced the collective search for alternatives as stressful. *“Ik ben slecht met aanpassingen [...] en ik zit in vluchtmodus.”*^{liv} (R3 in S3) and experienced decision-making as demanding: *“Als ik één ding haat dan is het kiezen.”*^{lv} (R1 in S3). Other experienced indicated this moment as a positive inclusive moment: *“Toen we aan het bekijken waren van hoe gaan we dat oplossen.”*^{lvi} (R4 in S4) This process was later referred to as demanding, while at the same time being recognised as a moment of pride and emerging ownership within the group.

Embodied and emotional conditions required ongoing adjustments to the pace and format of the research process. Physical discomfort, fatigue, and cognitive load influenced the engagement of co-researchers. One researcher regularly indicated needing additional time due to headaches, while another repeatedly referred to bodily pain or physical discomfort or low energy. The analytical phase was described by one co-researcher as *“langdradig”*^{lvii} (R3 in S4). This indicates that participation could not be separated from fluctuating physical and mental states.

Within this context, moments of **lightness, enjoyment, and informal interaction** played a crucial role. Co-researchers emphasised the value of just being together, for example sitting outside in the sun or sharing food. These moments were not perceived as separate from the research, but as enabling continued engagement by reducing pressure and creating mental ease. Reflecting on what made the research inclusive, co-researchers explicitly referred to informal moments such as *“samen buiten zitten in de zon met paaseitjes.”* (R2 in S4) *“Ik vond het gezellig, grappig, ik vond het chillen met de billen”*^{lviii} (R1 in S2)

→ While structure and predictability were important conditions for feeling comfortable, overly fixed formats could restrict the openness necessary for co-creative processes. Flexibility was needed to adapt the research process to fluctuating forms of energy and wellbeing. Moments of uncertainty were variously experienced but later linked to a shared sense of ownership over collective decisions. Moments of ease and enjoyment helped create calm, connection, and sustained engagement. Structure, flexibility, and enjoyment therefore functioned as interconnected practices through which ownership became possible.

Co-creation in practice: being involved throughout the process

Co-researchers repeatedly emphasised that **being involved across the entire process** - and seeing that their input was taken up - was both meaningful and unexpected:

“Betrokken worden bij het onderzoek, dat was echt wel fijn en een verrassing. [...] over de hele lijn eigenlijk. Echt input kunnen geven. En dat er daarmee ook dingen gebeuren”^{lix}. (R3 in S4)

“We hebben [...] heel goed samengewerkt om iedereen erbij betrokken te houden” (R4 in S2)

Co-creation **functioned as a practice that was enacted** through doing together. Through this process, co-researchers took up different roles, negotiated power, and actively shaped inclusive research and the conditions that made it possible.

Roles such as documenting discussions, safeguarding group comfort, or proposing alternatives when plans changed emerged spontaneously rather than being assigned. The roles and talents that co-researchers brought into the group became visible and were explicitly valued during moments of collective reflection: *“Je bent heel creatief”*; *“ze ziet dingen snel en praktisch, en neemt initiatief”*; *“ze brengt ideeën waar ik zelf niet aan dacht”^{lx} (S3)*

Co-researchers jointly steered both **the direction and the pace of the research process**. They evaluated activities, corrected summaries and added nuance. They openly expressed preferences or concerns regarding participation.

For instance, when the group proposed an excursion to a botanical garden, one co-researcher remarked *“Planten interesseren me niet, [...] maar als er een picknick is, doe ik mee.”^{lxi} (R1 in S2)*

When a decision needed to be made uncertainty was shared: *“Ik heb een idee, maar weet niet hoe haalbaar het is.”^{lxii} (R3 in S3)*

Differences in comfort, access, or preference were not approached as individual limitations, but as signals to collectively adapt the process.

Looking back co-researchers explicitly identified this co-creating as valuable:

“Wat ik wel goed vond was [...] samenwerken, rekening houden met mekaar. [...]hoe lost ge dat op, [...] Toen we aan het bekijken waren: hoe gaan we dit oplossen.”^{lxiii} (R4 in S4)

At the same time co-researchers alternately called on the researcher to facilitate the process and take the lead *“jij als de hoofdonderzoeker”* (R3 in S4) and challenged her for remaining too much in a facilitating role, as reflected in asking her if she also did the exercise *“Want je bent part of de groep”^{lxiv} (R1 in S2)*

Rather than resolving this boundary, the research process operated within it.

→ Co researchers described meaningful involvement not simply as being present within the research, but as being able to influence and shape the process itself. Co-creation emerged through ongoing negotiation, shared problem-solving, and collective adaptation. At the same time, the process did not dissolve existing hierarchies, particularly regarding the role of the academic researcher, but required continuous dialogue about ownership, responsibility, and decision-making.

Impact-led research as an emerging condition

An additional theme emerged spontaneously, without being prompted by a direct question, and concerned the purpose of the research itself. In explaining their motivation to participate, co-researchers referred to a desire for social change *“Ik wil iets veranderen voor meisjes met een beperking, dat er naar ons geluisterd wordt”^{lxv} (R2 in S1); “Ik ben blij dat we voor de vrouwen opkomen, [...] het is altijd een mannenwereld”^{lxvi} (R1 in S1); “Ik wil de stad inclusiever maken”^{lxvii} (R4 in S1); “Ik wil mijn ervaringsdeskundigheid inzetten [...] om zo voor inclusie te zorgen.”^{lxviii} (R3 in S1)*

However, these motivations were quickly accompanied by a critical question: what will we actually do with this research? *“Ik vind dat dit project [...] niet moet stoppen.”^{lxix} (R1 in S2)* While individual aspirations varied - from offering research questions others could work with, to making the research public to talk to the professors ‘behind their screens’ - the underlying concern was consistent. Research was not considered meaningful if it existed only for its own sake. Instead, co-researchers emphasised the importance of impact, change, or at least the possibility that the research could make a difference beyond the academic context.

→ For co-researchers, research was only considered meaningful when it had the potential to create impact, making this expectation a key condition for participation and a defining element of what they understood as inclusive research.

7 Discussion

Being together in difference: Inclusionary and exclusionary encounters in urban space

Young's theory argues that a just city is a place where people can live together in difference without stigma, exclusion or assimilation - a place that facilitates difference rather than erase it, what she calls *being together in difference*. (Young, 1990) An important aspect of living together in difference concerns everyday encounters with strangers in shared urban spaces.

(Wiesel et al., 2019) Using Jane Jacobs' concept of *fleeting encounters* - the idea that "casual public contact" may seem trivial but, in sum, can contribute to a sense of public identity (Jacobs, 1961, p. 56, in Wiesel et al.) - and connecting this to a relational understanding of identity, where identities are seen as not fixed but constructed, each encounter holds the potential for individuals to be perceived differently than through more fixed identities.

(Fincher & Iveson, 2008, p. 145, in Wiesel et al., 2019) Based on Wiesel et al. we distinguish between *inclusionary* and *exclusionary encounters*. Inclusionary encounters are everyday interactions in which people with disabilities are recognised as ordinary participants, fostering a sense of belonging. In contrast, exclusionary encounters reproduce stigma.

The findings show that both encounters took place within everyday mobility. Inclusionary encounters were spontaneously brought up, such as when a co-researcher recounted how a girl smiled at her in the same way she would at any other passenger, or when people did not change their behaviour after being told about her autism. These seemingly small interactions were experienced as meaningful, as they allowed co-researchers to move through public space without being marked as different, thereby contributing to a sense of belonging. At the same time, exclusionary encounters included being stared at on public transport, mocked while using a specialised bicycle, addressed in a patronising way when support was needed or - when a co-researcher lost the ability to speak - getting a dismissive remark, "I'm not going to bite you,". This illustrates how such interactions are shaped by ableist assumptions about how bodies and minds should behave in public space.

These findings suggest that the potential for "being together in difference" is present within everyday mobility but remains fragile and unevenly realised. Inclusionary encounters appear limited yet carry significant weight in shaping how individuals experience movement through the city, while exclusionary encounters reinforce feelings of stigma and exclusion. In line with Wiesel et al. (2013), this highlights that encounters during mobility are not neutral, but actively shape who can move comfortably and who cannot.

Everyday mobility as a place that highlights a care gap

Taking Tronto's dimensions of care as a lens to examine everyday mobility among co-researchers raises important questions regarding which needs are recognised ("caring about"), how responsibility is assumed ("taking care of"), and whether relations of solidarity and mutuality ("caring with") are present within everyday movement through the city.

The findings demonstrate that the need for predictability was strongly linked to the fact that urban mobility environments were often neither adapted nor accessible to the physical and cognitive conditions of co-researchers. Participants described how bus stops were not announced, creating difficulties for individuals who could not read, how public transport remained physically inaccessible, and how some were required to walk long distances in order to access suitable transport options.

The ableist organisation of urban mobility and the ensuing infrastructural barriers are not new. These needs are widely recognised within research, policy, and everyday experience by people with support needs themselves. Yet, despite this awareness, the findings suggest that little structural responsibility is taken to adequately respond to these needs. In this sense, the issue is not simply a lack of awareness, but rather a failure to collectively recognise these needs as requiring ongoing responsibility and structural response. From Tronto's perspective, this points both to shortcomings in "caring about" and in "taking care of" and "caring with". Importantly, these findings reflect not merely isolated failures or incidental barriers, but broader forms of structural neglect within everyday mobility environments.

These findings point towards the existence of a care gap within everyday mobility. The needs of co-researchers are neither invisible nor unknown, yet responsibility for responding to them is insufficiently assumed at a structural level.

At the same time, care itself does not simply disappear. As Joan Tronto argues, care and dependency remain fundamental aspects of human life, even if care is often rendered invisible within everyday social organisation (Tronto, 2017, as cited in Williams, 2019). If these care needs continue to exist while responsibility is insufficiently taken up, the question becomes: who "remains with the trouble" (de la Bellacasa, 2017, as cited in Williams, 2019), and who is required to fill this gap within everyday mobility?

Compensating for a care gap: Mental load and invisible labour in everyday mobility

Who compensates for this structural problem? The findings show that a significant part of this responsibility falls on the co-researchers themselves. In practice, they “close the gap” that emerges from the way cities and mobility systems are organised. This compensation is not a matter of preference, but a condition for being able to move through the city at all.

The results indicate that co-researchers place a high value on their freedom of movement. To preserve this freedom, they develop a range of strategies to cope with ableist norms embedded in everyday mobility. One such strategy is extensive preparation prior to travelling, including detailed route planning, anticipating potential difficulties, and preparing for possible changes in order to avoid panic or stress. For the wheelchair user, this also involved assessing in advance whether a route would be physically feasible. Other strategies involved avoidance, such as choosing walking or cycling in order to limit interaction with others. Or avoid public transport or selecting routes and times of day that are experienced as calmer and more predictable. Some participants also mentioned preparing, practising or rehearsing journeys with others. During the journey itself, co-researchers described engaging in ongoing emotional regulation, such as calming themselves, calling someone for support, or using headphones to reduce sensory input. For one co-researcher in particular, decision-making was experienced as stressful. Overall, these practices require continuous effort before and during mobility, and were described as tiring.

Inspired by Dean, Churchill, and Ruppner (2021), these practices can be understood as a form of *mental load* in which cognitive and emotional labour are closely intertwined. This mental load consists, on the one hand, of extensive cognitive labour: thinking ahead, planning routes, structured through anticipating obstacles, identifying risks, monitoring situations, and decision making. (Daminger 2019 in Dean et al. 2021) On the other hand, it involves emotional labour, including regulating stress, managing frustration, and controlling visible emotional responses in public space.

For co-researchers, this mental load is not directed at caring for others but is required simply to organise and sustain their own everyday mobility. Moving through the city demands continuous mental work before, during, and after travel. Planning and anticipation are necessary to make mobility possible in the first place, while emotional regulation becomes essential during the journey itself to cope with unpredictability and social interactions. What characterises this work is its ongoing and largely invisible nature. It does not consist of isolated tasks, but of continuous cognitive and emotional engagement that makes everyday mobility possible. While this labour enables co-researchers to preserve a degree of autonomy

and freedom of movement, it also comes at a cost, as the constant need to anticipate, regulate, and adapt was described as tiring.

Neither victims nor heroes: exercising agency in everyday urban mobility

In this research, agency was not defined or assumed at the outset. The research started from everyday experiences of mobility, without knowing in advance whether or how agency would become visible. Questions of agency emerged along the way.

The co-researchers make decisions, develop strategies, and actively seek moments of freedom and autonomy while moving in and around the city. This shows that they are not passive.

Their actions take place in a world that clearly limits them. These women are well aware that the city is not made for them. Within this reality, they act however and wherever they can and take up space where space is available. In line with Montenach (2012), agency can therefore be understood not only through acts of resistance, but also through the ways people stay within and navigate existing norms.

It is important not to frame these young women as heroes who overcome their impairments. Such a framing risks hiding the cost of constantly adapting, planning, and pushing personal limits (Kafer, 2013). At the same time, framing them as victims would deny their ability to decide, to value autonomy, and to engage with challenges. Their experiences resist both narratives. What becomes clear is that acting in this way comes at a cost. A significant amount of energy goes into navigating barriers, managing uncertainty, and doing invisible work simply to participate in everyday life. What remains open-and underdeveloped at this stage-is how their lives might look different if less energy were spent on dealing with obstacles that should not exist in the first place.

8 Methodological reflection

Working with power asymmetries in a co-creative inclusive research approach

Power asymmetries within this research process cannot be ignored. While co-researchers participated voluntarily alongside other commitments, this thesis constituted my primary academic project, involving a greater investment of time and carrying institutional stakes linked to the completion of my degree. This unequal distribution of time, priorities, responsibility, and positional power inevitably shaped the research process.

From the outset, the research did not begin from an equal position. I largely defined the research topic, selected participants, and entered the project with greater access to academic knowledge and literature. Although there was substantial room for sharing power during data collection, the analysis phase proved particularly challenging. I had access to more data, including full transcripts, and more time for analysis. Ongoing pre-analysis was used as an attempt to counterbalance this tension. The writing phase was also experienced as challenging due to the limited interaction with the co-researchers.

The overview illustrates how power was distributed across the research process. I used this unevenness as a point of departure, repeatedly reflecting on **how my own power could be used to redistribute power to the group**. Where co-creative practices were possible, power became more visible and negotiable, although asymmetries were never fully eliminated.

Writing, as a time-intensive and largely individual activity, concentrated control most strongly and was therefore particularly challenging. These limitations reflect broader tensions between the principles of inclusive research and the realities of academic requirements.

Research phase	Decision-making and roles	Concrete implementation
Problem exploration and research question	Decision-making: thesis student; Consultation: co-researchers	Individual conversations prior to session 1
Review of existing research	Decision-making and implementation: thesis student	Literature review
Choice for participatory and inclusive research design	Decision-making: thesis student (informed by literature)	Literature review
Design of data collection methods	Decision-making: joint. Academic requirements monitored by thesis student	Continuous-, adapted per session
Data collection	Input and implementation: co-researchers. Support: thesis student	• Preparatory conversations. • Session 2: sharing individual observations. • Session 3: drawing routine trajectory and discussion. • Session 4: sharing a self-chosen experience
Data documentation	Verbatims: Implementation and responsibility: thesis student Images: co-researchers	• Accessible report of each session, shared with co-researchers in pdf and audio (see annex) • Full verbatim transcription
Joint reflection and thematic analysis	Prioritisation and giving meaning: co-researchers. Writing: thesis student	• Session 4: reflection on the process+ extracting themes • Session 5: identification of themes on mobility • Further clustering and ordering by thesis student
Discussion and reflection	Implementation and responsibility: thesis student	Matching findings with theories
Conclusions	Substantive direction: co-researchers; Academic elaboration: thesis student	- Session 5 and 6 discussions - Written synthesis by thesis student
Writing	Thesis student	

Caring research as an enabling condition for sharing experiences and power

Co-researchers described the research setting as a space in which they felt able to speak openly, disagree, share experiences, take up roles, and influence decisions. This did not emerge automatically but was shaped through deliberate attention to relationships throughout the research process.

Prior to the start of the project, preparatory conversations took place between co-researchers and the thesis student. The co-researchers already knew one another before the research began. These existing connections formed an important basis for trust within the group.

From that moment onward, reciprocal and respectful interactions, mutual support, encouragement, and collaboration were actively initiated and safeguarded by the group among co-researchers and researcher. Co-researchers also remained attentive to the risk that strong group cohesion could smooth over disagreement or create pressure towards consensus.

Difference was therefore explicitly welcomed, and participants were encouraged to take time before responding. As a result, co-researchers described feeling able to share experiences and opinions, including uncertainty, vulnerability, and disagreement.

Care therefore appeared to function as an enabling condition for inclusive research. The caring relationships within the group seemed to support co-researchers in navigating existing power asymmetries and participating in ways that felt meaningful and accessible to them. At the same time, the research environment created conditions in which experiential knowledge could emerge, be explored collectively, and be treated as valuable within the research process.

At the same time, care did not function as a fixed or stable condition. The creation and maintenance of a caring research environment required ongoing attention, adjustment, and shared responsibility throughout the research process.

Working- the- hyphen in practice

Two moments illustrate the effects of “working the hyphen” and how it supported decision-making towards what was experienced as “better data”. While drafting a set of guiding principles for inclusive research, I realised that presenting predefined conditions to the group would already shape the process, rather than allowing it to emerge collaboratively. A similar tension arose during the writing of the conclusions: although I could formulate a coherent conclusion for the methodological sub-question from my own perspective, it did not feel complete until I returned to the words and meanings used by the co-researchers themselves. This process caused delays, but also resulted in more grounded and meaningful

data. In both moments, the relationship with the co-researchers - even in their absence - helped guide decisions in line with the inclusive research idea.

The group as an enabling condition for knowledge production

The group itself played a crucial role in enabling knowledge production. Co-researchers could not always meet the expectations of research settings, such as planning ahead or ensuring consistent participation. Working as a group made it possible to accommodate these differences. Attention, participation, and contributions could shift over time, allowing knowledge production to continue without placing pressure on individuals to conform to normative research expectations.

In this sense, the group seemed to function as an enabling structure for inclusive research, making it possible to produce knowledge collectively while remaining responsive to difference. Complexity emerged relationally through shared reflection on lived experience.

Where did the knowledge increase?

I initially assumed that I would contribute academic concepts, while co-researchers would contribute experiential knowledge, allowing knowledge to increase in both ways.

Reality was different. Co-researchers demonstrated nuanced understandings that resisted simplification, for example their relational political understanding of disability. Many themes central to academic debates already appeared present within co-researchers' reflections, expressed through grounded and accessible language.

This led me to question the assumption that theoretical knowledge necessarily needed to be "brought into" the research setting. Instead, the process highlighted the value and complexity of knowledge emerging from lived experience and collective sense-making within the group. For me, this resulted in a deeper understanding of the everyday realities and complexities co-researchers navigate. For co-researchers, participation contributed to growing insights into shared experiences, the nature of research, and how knowledge is produced. Crucially, these forms of nuanced reasoning did not emerge automatically, but were facilitated through the relational and collective conditions created within the research group.

Messy by necessity: impact and responsibility in inclusive research

Did this research contribute to a better life for people with support needs? This question remains a deliberately open one. Inclusive research appeared “messy by necessity”: its relational and open-ended character does not fit neatly within academic timelines, fixed outcomes, or clear project boundaries.

At an individual level, co-researchers indicated that sharing their experiences with others was meaningful in itself. Being able to talk about everyday mobility with peers who recognised similar challenges created space for reflection, recognition, and mutual understanding. This exchange was experienced as valuable, as an effect of participation in the research process.

At a collective level, co-researchers expressed that they did not want the research to end with the submission of the thesis. There is a shared desire to explore how the research can be taken further, and concrete steps have been taken in that direction. At the same time, it remains uncertain what form this continuation will take. Conversations with the co-researchers and Konekt about possible next steps are ongoing – such as presenting the results at public events - but outcomes cannot be fully planned or guaranteed in advance.

This situation points to a fundamental tension inherent to inclusive research. Inclusive research is necessarily messy, because it asks for forms of engagement, responsibility, and follow-up that do not fit neatly within academic timelines or project boundaries. At the same time, inclusive research cannot avoid a focus on impact. Taking inclusion seriously means accepting uncertainty while remaining committed to action, engagement, and relevance beyond the research itself. In that sense, the way this research continues mirrors how it began: without a fixed blueprint, but with a willingness to take steps, remain involved, and respond to what emerges.

9 Conclusion

How do young women with diverse support needs experience feeling at ease and belonging when moving in and around the city, what obstacles do they face, and how do they navigate them?

The experience of moving in and around the city is marked by a clear ambivalence. On the one hand, young women express a strong sense that the world is not made for them. On the other hand, mobility is not experienced as purely negative, but also as a crucial way to realise autonomy and independence. Despite the many obstacles they encounter, they actively invest in being able to move and participate in everyday life.

Feeling at ease is strongly shaped by interactions with others. Everyday encounters can either support or undermine a sense of belonging, depending on whether individuals feel reduced to their disability or recognised and treated with respect. Both inclusionary and exclusionary encounters occur. Positive encounters have significant potential to foster belonging, yet often remain fragile, while negative encounters can lead to feelings of stigma, exclusion, and avoidance.

At the same time, the ability to move comfortably through the city depends on infrastructural conditions, including accessibility, clarity of information, predictability, and the management of sensory stimuli. This highlights how certain ways of moving, sensing, and communicating do not align with the norms embedded in urban mobility systems, which privilege particular bodies and behaviours.

These barriers and the needs they produce are widely recognised in both disability and urban research yet remain insufficiently addressed in practice. As a result, a gap emerges between recognised needs and the responsibility taken to respond to them.

In this context, young women with diverse support needs must actively compensate for this gap. They do so by developing strategies such as careful preparation, anticipating potential difficulties, maintaining contact with others, and regulating their emotions during movement. This requires continuous cognitive and emotional effort and results in a significant mental load.

Through these practices, young women exercise agency by navigating conditions that were not designed for them. They value their ability to move independently and often experience pride in overcoming obstacles. At the same time, this should not be interpreted as either heroism or victimhood. Rather, their experiences reveal that participation is made possible

through continuous individual effort. This raises the question of how their experiences might change if less extensive efforts were required.

→ This study shows that feeling at ease and belonging when moving in and around the city are shaped by infrastructural and relational conditions. Yet, as structural responsibility for responding to care needs is not taken up, this responsibility is shifted onto young women with diverse support needs, who are left to bridge this gap themselves through their own agency, resulting in a significant mental load required to sustain their mobility and participation while at the same time experiencing this effort as a source of pride and a valued expression of their autonomy.

Methodological sub-question: How can participatory inclusive research be developed with young women with diverse support needs in ways that are meaningful for them?

Shared ownership as a meaningful condition and practice withing a situation of power asymmetry

Shared ownership was identified by co-researchers as a meaningful condition and practice of the research. Yet, inclusive research in this study started from an unequal power position. As it is not possible to remove power asymmetries, they were continuously navigated throughout the research process. This implies a specific responsibility for the academic researcher to actively use this position in order to redistribute power within the research process, creating research settings that remained open, flexible, and responsive. In doing so, space is created for co-researchers to gradually take ownership of both the research process and knowledge production. At the same time, this cannot be understood as a stable endpoint that can simply be achieved. Instead, it emerges as a fragile and continuously renegotiated balance, shaped through ongoing interactions, decisions, and relationships within the research process.

Caring research as enabling condition and emerging practice for ownership and knowledge production

Co-researchers indicated that the creation of a caring and safe research environment functioned as an important condition for meaningful participation and the sharing of experiences. Co-researchers described the research setting as a space in which they felt able to speak openly, share personal experiences, and participate in ways that felt meaningful and accessible to them. This was crucial as knowledge production was grounded in the sharing of

experiences. Moreover, the caring environment played a crucial role in **shaping the quality and depth of this knowledge**. By creating a space in which co-researchers felt safe to speak, make mistakes, and express themselves, experiences could be articulated and explored fully, resulting in rich and nuanced forms of experiential knowledge.

Care was not enacted by the academic researcher alone but emerged through **ongoing collective practices within the group**. Co-researchers themselves actively shaped what safety and care required in practice by initiating, monitoring, and sustaining reciprocal support, attentiveness, encouragement, and space for difference throughout the process. Care did not function as a fixed or stable condition, but required ongoing attention, adjustment, and shared responsibility throughout the research process.

Investing in relationships appeared to support the **navigation of existing power asymmetries** within the research process. Through relational work - building trust, creating supportive settings, and remaining attentive to difference - it becomes possible to create conditions in which talents within the group can emerge and participation can take multiple forms. While unequal power positions did not disappear, relational knowledge helped the researcher make decisions that remained more responsive to the wishes and needs of co-researchers.

In this sense, caring research functioned as a relational condition shaping how ownership, participation, and knowledge production took place within the research process.

Negotiating structure and flexibility in inclusive research

Finding a balance between structure, flexibility, and moments of enjoyment emerged as an important condition for meaningful participation. While structure and predictability helped co-researchers feel comfortable and able to participate, flexibility was necessary to respond to fluctuating forms of energy, attention, wellbeing, and engagement. Moments of enjoyment and lightness were not peripheral, but contributed to connection, reduced pressure, and sustained involvement. Structure created a sense of safety and orientation, while flexibility allowed the process to remain responsive to difference and changing needs. Working within these tensions - between structure and openness, guidance and co-creation - became part of the collaborative process itself.

What emerges from this is that participatory inclusive research cannot be organised through fixed or fully stable formats. Instead, it requires ongoing adjustment and negotiation in response to the embodied realities of participants and the relational dynamics within the group. The resulting messiness should therefore not be understood as a sign of poor design, but as a structural consequence of taking participation, difference, and lived experience

seriously. An inclusive research setting does not require removing tension or uncertainty, but by collectively working within them.

Inclusive research never stops

An important finding that emerged within this research is the **need to continue, to follow-up**. Co-researchers explicitly expressed that they did not want the project to stop. This was not only the result of their involvement in the process, but also because the research touched their everyday realities. In this sense, continuing the research appeared as a **condition for meaningful participation**. This dynamic follows from the inherently **messy nature of inclusive research**, as it involves forms of engagement, responsibility, and follow-up that do not fit neatly within academic timelines or predefined project boundaries. The need to continue the research can therefore be understood both as an expression of co-researchers' lived involvement and as a structural feature of inclusive research practices. Rather than aiming for closure, inclusive research generates ongoing responsibilities, relationships, and commitments that extend beyond the research itself.

Beyond terminology: self-definition as a condition for inclusion

In this research, creating space for co-researchers to define themselves on their own terms, allowing meaning to be shaped by lived experience rather than imposed categories, emerged as a **key condition for inclusion**.

Acknowledgements: invisible work made visible

This thesis was a joint effort with my co-researchers Nina, Laurel, Daniela and Elena. More in general this research is the result of **collective work**. What follows is therefore not a conventional acknowledgements section, but a way of making visible the large amount of work that usually remains in the shadows. Throughout this process, I was anything but an independent or self-sufficient researcher. I was an **interdependent spider in a web** that takes care seriously.

My partner helped me make the decision to go for this madness. He was willing to turn our balance upside down, redistribute care work, and step into this mess with me. All of the grandparents of my children offered our children a warm home when I was not there. My mother provided emotional support. My father planted the original seed long ago when he encouraged me to work with people with disabilities. My mother-in-law helped with proofreading. My other mother- and father-in-law were always available for thoughtful conversations.

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The co-researchers helped create a caring environment, took care of one another and of me, and occasionally kicked me rightly when I was inattentive to the needs of the group.

Two fellow master's students walked this path with me: writing side by side, exchanging ideas, sharing living rooms and meals, offering emotional support, and intellectually challenging one another.

My friends helped me make the final decision about this topic, proofread or listened to whatever I found interesting, difficult, or urgent that week and took me out to have some fun. Without minimising my own contribution, this work is **co-creation**. A network of very different people each formed an indispensable link in between care and knowledge production.

What would happen if we stopped treating this invisible work as background noise, and recognised it as both necessary for knowledge production and part of the research process itself?

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In deliberate deviation from APA guidelines, authors' first names are written out in full. This choice is grounded in feminist and critical citation practices that aim to enhance visibility, situatedness, and the embodied nature of knowledge production.

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Note: As English (nor French) is not my native language, I used translation tools and tools for spelling correction- including A.I. for support.

Déclaration sur l'honneur

mémoires/TFE de la Faculté de philosophie, arts et lettres, UCLouvain

Je déclare qu'il s'agit d'un travail original et personnel, que toutes les sources référencées ont été indiquées dans leur totalité et ce, quelle que soit leur provenance, et que l'utilisation des outils d'intelligence artificielle est conforme aux consignes générales d'utilisation publiées par l'UCLouvain et disponible à cette adresse :

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Je suis conscient·e que le fait de ne pas citer une source, de ne pas la citer clairement et complètement, de ne pas annoncer dans une partie spécifique en début du mémoire l'utilisation que j'ai faite des outils d'intelligence artificielle ou de les utiliser de manière contraire à ce qui est prévu dans la note institutionnelle constituent des irrégularités graves au regard du *Règlement des études et des examens de l'Université catholique de Louvain* (Chapitre 4, section 7, article 107 à 114) au sein de l'Université. J'ai notamment pris connaissance des risques de sanctions académiques et disciplinaires encourues.

Au vu de ce qui précède, je déclare sur l'honneur ne pas avoir commis de plagiat ou toute autre forme de fraude et de n'avoir pas utilisé les outils d'intelligences artificielles en dehors de ce qui est accepté à l'UCLouvain.

Nom, Prénom : Van Hauwermeiren Juliska

Date : 18/05/2026

Signature de l'étudiant·e :



Translations

ⁱ involvement/input

taking on a role yourself “Juliska process facilitator, R4 report ‘I’m kind of creating a Word document... actually a report.’”

— R4 00:31:40 official, R1 atmosphere monitor unofficial

J. you won’t be there the next two times.

R1. I will definitely do it via my iPad... I’ll just give a little signal and then I’m immediately on it.

So I don’t have any problems with that. I’ve done it many times already, so no problem.

who is allowed to do research? “I don’t think you need to have a diploma... some of us cannot study, but we can study in another way so that we can do it in your format.”- R1, 01:20:00

S4 R3. But when I started participating here, I began with the idea of... Okay, we’re going to do different things here. And we are going to be the subject. And really from that... But it was a nice surprise to then also really... Being allowed to choose how, which direction.

S4 Being involved in the research on the one hand. That is really nice and was a surprise. That actually runs through the whole line. Being able to give real input. And that things get done because of that.

S0R1 J Is that a topic that you think, yes I would want to do that.

R1. Yes, if it is the project. And if it is something we are going to do that you would suggest, then I would do it.

R3. We also looked at what research actually is, at least the basics of it. It’s about a question and an answer. On the one hand.

R1. sorry, questions can you explain that?

R3. For example, our research question here is how young women move around the city.

R1. and how we are. Also how we see things.. Others, no no moving.

R1. also not how we are, rather moving. Yes, thank you.

R3. But it is also important in good research that at the end of your research you have more questions than answers. Because then more people can continue the research, yes, towards the outcomes of your own research actually.

R4. yes yes so that others can continue further

R1. yes, the answers are not that helpful and if you have questions, then you have more choices to know what it actually is. yes yes, because then it takes longer. And then it is also short, concise and powerful, we talked about that too.

S2 J: was it inclusive. R3: “reasonably, because we also collaborated really well to keep everyone involved?”

S4 R3 But when I started participating here, I began with the idea of... Okay, we’re going to do different things here. And we are going to be a subject. And really from that... But it was a nice surprise to then also really... Being allowed to choose how, which direction. Yes, like that.

What do we see recurring in each other during the journeys we make?



Hustle/bustle & stimuli

- "I think mainly the hustle/bustle and the stimuli."
- "When it was very busy... with delays..." and the frustration



Own bubble / isolation

- "Being able to have your own little bubble like that? That came up quite often too."
- "That music helped everyone."
- Isolating yourself in a different way



Positive moments / humanity

- "That there are always people who want to help."
- "That it isn't always pure negativity and just problems for us."
- "A little chat... that that was a funny moment."
- "That someone who didn't know me... still gave a smile." - "I thought it was a pity that I didn't really quickly... give a nice smile back."

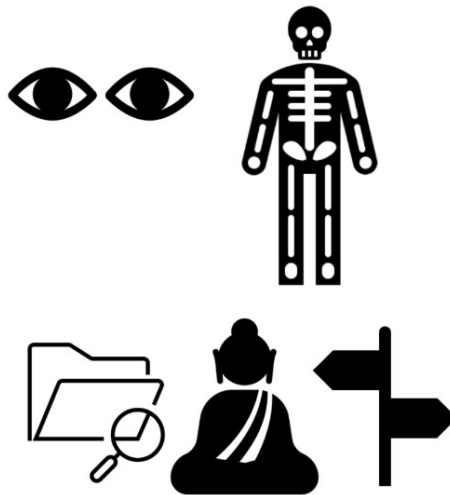


The government that does take transport and before and after into account

"Recently, I had to fill out papers from the FOD regarding my allowances. ...And one of the things they really specify is regarding transport. Not just during the transport, but also what precedes it, what happens afterwards, and so on. So, the government is quite aware of that and focuses on it to some extent."

ii

5 themes that determine whether we are 'at ease' during travel



- Expected planned <-> unexpected-unplanned
- Peace - space <-> pressure - close by
- Choosing for oneself (pace, the route, departure time) <-> depending on others
- The gaze of others: belonging <-> not belonging
- How we feel body and mind - beforehand or during

iii

iv the world was not made for us

v not all negative

vi I find it a nice part because it is quieter" "there is a separate space for bicycles

vii I had my own seat

viii "I get overwhelmed easily when surrounded by too many people."

"People were pushing, clutching together; I really can't stand that."

"If I have to stand, I find it annoying, because I want to be in my little zone."

"I was too overstimulated if someone was being annoying on the train, or a baby who was screaming, or a child who couldn't behave, or someone who was talking loudly, or a teenager"

ix What I hate is that the pole is sticky

x "I turn on my music as a safety precaution to distract myself from the commotion around me."

xi I sometimes call my mom when I'm a bit stressed when on the road

xii "I choose to go avoid rush hour, when it is quieter." "I don't go out often because there are a lot of people."

"At home, I am in a controlled environment." "when walking I can do it on my own, no rush"

xiii "Last year there was a girl who gave me such a nice smile, like twice."

"I said that I have autism and that I go to a special school, and she didn't make a weird face or treat me differently or anything- she was just interested."

"Normally, people look at me, they stare at me, and it was really interesting that they just acted normal and [...] it actually felt really nice."

xiv "If you look at me, it doesn't say 'autistic' on me. But [...] when I kind of freeze and can't talk anymore, I've often heard people say things like 'you can talk to me' or 'I'm not going to bite.' I hate that."

"I never feel normal when I ride my bike, because it's a tricycle."

"Usually [...] people stare at me."

xv “I once fell in a broken bus. No empathy at all.”

“Mostly I’m lucky that there are bystanders who see that I’m trying to get on with the wheelchair. And then they help me further. But I’ve never had a bus driver who got up from his seat to help me or to put the ramp down or something. So yeah.”

xvi “When people [...] see that I’m in a wheelchair or using a walking stick, they themselves say, ‘oh, can I help you with something’, and sometimes that’s too much.”

“Sometimes you kind of get the feeling that they treat you like a baby.”

“I understand both sides: they want to help, but let us do things independently and let us ask for help ourselves.”

xvii “I try to avoid the bus because I have to walk too far to a stop.”

xviii ““They don’t say anything, and it would be easier for people who are struggling.”

xix “The buses and transport are sometimes a bit late [...] and that really annoys me, because you want to be able to arrive somewhere on time.”

xx “I am bad with adjustments.”

xxi “The bus, I don’t like taking it at all, that’s why I have a scooter.”

xxii “My strongest point is mainly planning and organizing.”

“When I have Google Maps, I feel so calm.”

xxiii “Being well prepared helps with that.”

xxiv “I had to mentally prepare myself very hard for that.”

xxv “I’m going to take a quiet moment to think: okay, what am I going to do?”

xxvi “I started using public transport when I was ten. But I un-learned it when I went to school all the way to Aarschot.”

xxvii “After school, I started looking for what I really wanted... and then I started learning it.”

xxviii “In the beginning it was quite nerve-wracking... but I received guidance, just being told to get off there.”

“I also installed an app... that helps me, and by now I’m just used to it.”

xxix “Discovering new places [...] where I have never really been on my own. To experience it like that.”

“And also the freedom, you did do it on your own.”

xxx “Through that whole process, I really felt like... okay, I’m doing well. And afterwards, when I had reached my destination, it felt like a weight was lifted off my shoulders. Okay, I made it. It went well. And I’m proud of myself.” “I had such a nervous feeling, like this is a challenge. Afterwards I felt really proud: I did it on my own.”

xxxi “I don’t go out often anyway... I prefer to stay inside in a controlled environment where I can choose for myself when it is busy and when it isn’t.”

xxxii “You are going to feel this way now, but if we start working on things, you will feel at ease”

xxxiii “The conversation about disability, for me [...], I like it, to see that I’m not the only one who feels this way.”

“It was nice [...] that I was heard.”

“That we could freely express our opinions [...] about our autism.”

xxxiv “Because in research it’s still important to create a safe and inclusive atmosphere. And I think we did succeed in that. Yes.”

xxxv “an ugly word”

xxxvi “a strange word”

xxxvii “even though this might not be on topic”

xxxviii “handicap is also used as a form of swear word in every day language”

xxxix “I have a mild form of autism, but there are people who have a more severe form than I do.”

“Even if you have two people with mild autism, it still shows up differently.”

xl “The symbol is not inclusive[...], It has to be something visible, whereas problems can also be invisible”

xli When I tell someone that I have autism, then I’m very clear about what I find difficult or what I don’t have a problem with.”

xlii “that it is okay to need help too”

xliii “Someone said everyone has a bit of autism, but I don’t think anyone would want to be in my place ... sometimes I wish I had an on/off switch”

xliv “I don’t feel different ... there are things I can’t do that ‘normal people’ can, and vice versa”

xlv “it depends on how people react to you”

xlvi “I have autism”

xlvi “disability”

xlvi Support need

xlvi Who am I? – what did I draw

- “Contradictory. Because... On the one hand, I really am a huge **fountain of ideas**, for example. And an out-of-the-box thinker and things like that. But at the same time, I am also quite black-and-white. And then I try to show that through colorful words while...the drawing itself is black and white.”

-
- “I also wrote down my diagnoses. Because they do not determine who I am or what I am. But they are still important as well...”
 - “a difficult exercise for me today. Because mentally I’m feeling a bit more negative. To really think and act positively about myself is more difficult.”

What does it say: believer, creative, fountain of ideas, eager to learn, out of the box, perseverer, self-critical, autism, dyslexia, CMT, wheelchair symbol ... drawing, globe

How do I see myself as a researcher?

- “I think very broadly and from many different perspectives.” “But there are some things I simply don’t see.” – that is my weak point as a researcher
- Example for my thesis: “it was very difficult to... see both the big picture and the specific details. And to keep everything in mind.”

What others say about Laurel

- “She brings ideas that I hadn’t thought of myself.”
- “someone who also has an opinion to share”
- “She uses her experiential knowledge in a valuable way.”

ⁱ Who am I

“I have autism. That is what I have.”

- “I am creative.”
- “I experiment more now- with drawing and with my clothes.”
- “It’s like I am becoming my own avatar.”
- “I am a loyal friend.”
- “I am self-aware. I know I am not perfect.”
- “I can think about my mistakes and reflect.”

What did I draw?

- “At first I didn’t like it, but now I do.”
- Words around her: creative, self-aware, loyal friend, experimenting, music, animal lover, family/friends, autism.

What do I bring as a researcher?

- “Drawing.”
- “My opinion.”

ⁱⁱ Who am I?

- “I learn things quickly.”
- “I am very curious.”
- “I find inclusion important. Everyone should be able to participate in society.”
- “I am a helpful person.”
- “I am also critical.”

What have I drawn?

- Words around her portrait: Inclusion – Curious – Critical – Creative – Helpful

How do I see myself as a researcher?

- “I want to learn more things.”
- “I am curious and I pick things up quickly.”
- “I find inclusion in the world important- also in research.”

What others say about her

- “She notices things quickly and thinks practically.”
- “She takes initiative. She was the first to say: ‘With this weather we can’t go outside, we need to do something else.’”
- “She has a positive attitude: if we ask something, she participates.”

ⁱⁱⁱ Who am I?

- “I am not neutral... my experiences play a role.”
- “I am Juliska; that is my field of study, and that is my starting point.”
- “My family and friends are very important.”

What have I drawn?

- Everything I enjoy: drawing, reading, dancing, my family, etc.

How do I see myself as a researcher?

- “I try to do it together.”

-
- “It is exciting because I have never done this in this way before.”
 - “We are going to look at what fits together and what doesn’t... and decide that together.”

What do others say about me (in the session)?

- “You make space for everyone to speak.”
- “We are not the subject, and that feels good.”
- “You are calm and kind.”
- “A fountain of ideas.”
- “You help provide leadership and direction.”

liii “the further the research progressed and I knew where we were going, the nicer it became”

liv “I am bad with adjustments, I feel myself going into flight mode”

lv “If I hate one thing, it is choosing.”

lvi “when we were looking at: how are we going to solve this.”

lvii “tedious”

lviii “when we were sitting outside and eating Easter eggs.” “I thought it was cozy, funny, I thought it was super chill”

lix “Being involved in the research, that was really nice and a surprise. That applies to the whole experience really. Being able to really provide input. And that things actually happen as a result”

lx “You’re very creative.” “She sees things quickly and practically, and takes initiative.” “She brings ideas that I hadn’t thought of myself.”

lxi “Plants don’t interest me, but if there’s a picnic, I’ll join in.”

lxii “I have an idea, but I don’t know how feasible it is.”

lxiii “What I did find good was [...] working together, taking each other into account [...] how do you solve that? [...] When we were looking at it: how are we going to solve this?”

lxiv “Because you are part of the group”

lxv “I want to change something for girls with disabilities, so that we are listened to”

lxvi “I am glad that we stand up for women, it is always a man’s world”

lxvii “I want to make the city more inclusive”

lxviii “I want to use my expertise based on lived experience... to ensure inclusion”

lxix “I think this project should not stop”