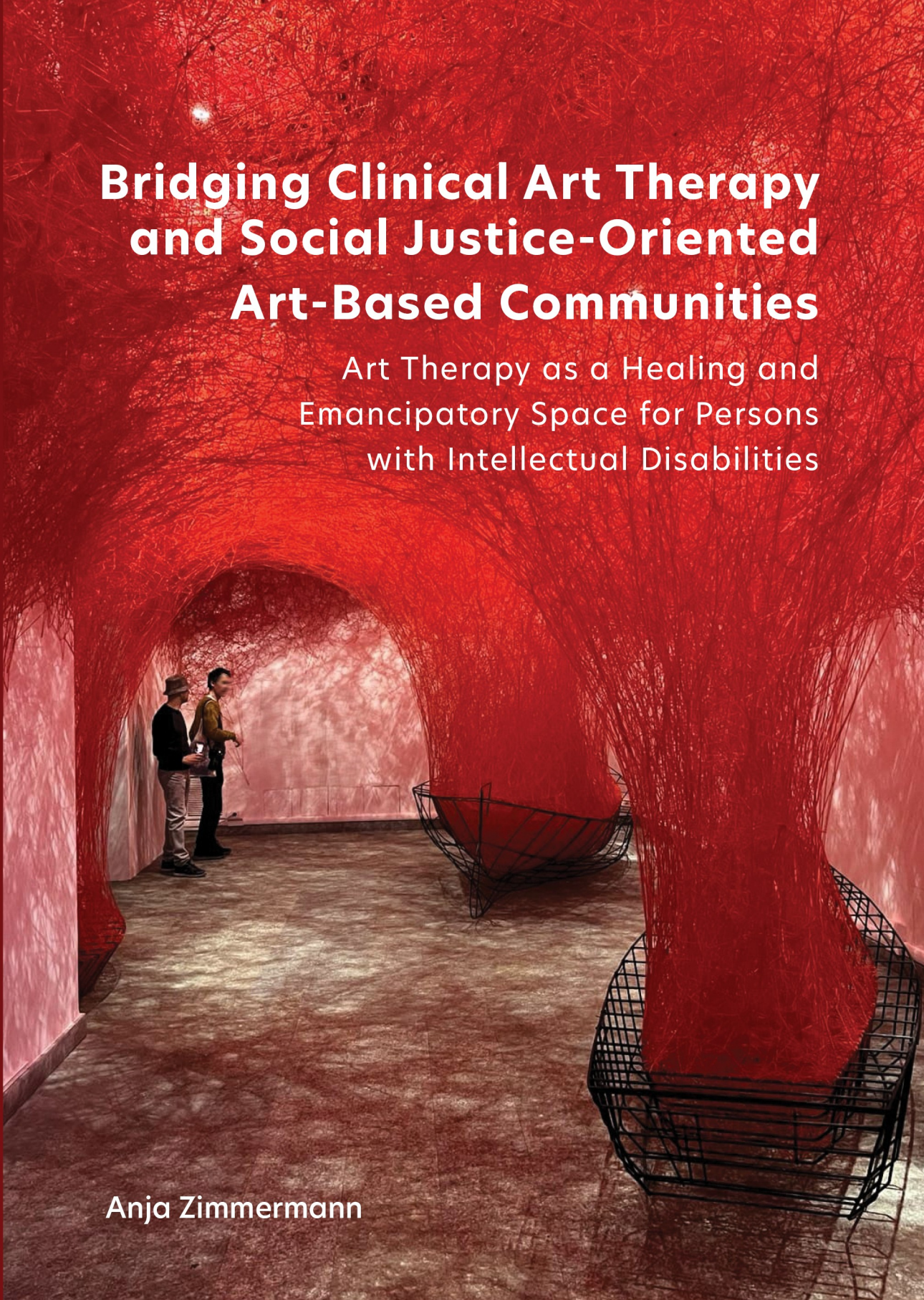
Bridging Clinical Art Therapy and Social Justice-Oriented Art-Based Communities

Art Therapy as a Healing and Emancipatory Space for Persons with Intellectual Disabilities



Anja Zimmermann

Stellingen

1. Social justice is a practice that requires continuous reflection and is negotiated in collaboration with the people it concerns (see Chapter 3 & 7).
2. Social justice requires us to rethink not only what participation should look like, but the conditions in which participation can emerge as well (see Chapter 7).
3. Who decides what counts as competence also decides who is invited to participate and whose knowledge counts (see Chapter 3; 6 & 7).
4. Interdependence is a condition of meaningful participation (see Chapter 6 & 7).
5. When people with intellectual disabilities are treated as contributors to knowledge, rather than merely as recipients of care, social justice unfolds in practice (see Chapter 7).
6. The most transformative practices begin with not-knowing: listening, responding, and being willing to be changed (see Chapter 6 & 7).
7. People cannot fully belong to a community they have no part in shaping (see Chapter 6 & 7).
8. Reflection on and awareness of power do not prevent us from reproducing the oppressive power relations we seek to change (see Chapter 7).
9. A safe space for people who experience exclusion becomes socially transformative only when it remains connected to the world outside it (see Chapter 7).
10. Art therapists should step forward and use their expertise to strengthen the social position of people with intellectual disabilities (see Chapter 4 & 7).
11. A PhD teaches you that "almost finished" is a surprisingly flexible concept.
12. There is always room for one more colour.

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Bridging Clinical Art Therapy and Social Justice-Oriented Art-Based Communities

Art Therapy as a Healing and Emancipatory Space for Persons with Intellectual Disabilities

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„Wir fangen etwas an; wir schlagen unseren Faden in ein Netz der Beziehungen.
Was daraus wird, wissen wir nie. Das ist ein Wagnis. Und nun würde ich sagen,
dass dieses Wagnis nur möglich ist im Vertrauen auf die Menschen.
Das heißt, in einem [. . .] Vertrauen in das Menschliche aller Menschen."

(Hannah Arendt im Gespräch mit Günter Gaus, 1964)

Short Summary

This research project aims to broaden understanding of social justice by situating it within relational and embodied practice, rather than treating it solely as an abstract principle. It shows how art-based communities within art therapy praxis can serve as healing and emancipatory spaces that bridge clinical and community contexts for individuals with intellectual disabilities.

It demonstrates how these practices foster relational forms of social justice that go beyond formal rights and procedural inclusion, revealing how recognition, meaning, and radical belonging are co-created through art-based, embodied, community-based encounters. Attuned to rights-based aspirations, relational ethics, and critical reflections on normativity that intersect in practice, art therapy can support processes of healing, social repair, and emancipation, cultivating community spaces and relationships where these processes can emerge, take root and flourish.

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Prologue

In the following story, which is based on an article previously published as "Miss Be, Her Red Threads, and the Others: A Story about Social Justice and the Appreciation of Visual Art in Research Practice" (Zimmermann & Hermsen, 2022), I position myself within my PhD research project as both, an art therapist and the sibling of an individual with an intellectual disability[1]. The story traces the origins of my project and the experiences and inspirations that have shaped my engagement with questions of social justice for persons with intellectual disabilities.

This positioning is methodologically significant. In qualitative research, I understand myself to be the primary instrument of knowledge production, and I recognise that my social location, lived experiences, and professional commitments inevitably shape how I formulate research questions, relate to participants, and interpret meaning. By making this positioning explicit, I seek to enhance the transparency and credibility of my work, allowing readers to better understand the interpretive lens through which I conduct and present this research (Finlay, 2002; Guba & Lincoln, 1982; Holmes, 2020; Visse, 2024).

Articulating my positionality also enables me to acknowledge the relational and ethical dimensions of working alongside individuals with intellectual disabilities, particularly in a field where many individuals face challenges in having their stories heard without others speaking for them (Goodley, 2023; Visse, 2024). By situating myself openly within the research, I commit to ongoing reflexivity regarding issues of representation and power that may influence both, my research encounters and the ways I present participants' contributions. In this sense, my reflexive positioning forms part of my commitment to social justice as well as to methodological rigor.

At the beginning of designing this research project, I coincidentally saw this intriguing photo of the art installation "Between the Lines" by Chiharu Shiota (2017) while I was surfing the internet (**Figure 1**). After downloading and printing it, it laid on my kitchen table for weeks. Every time I walked by, I got the feeling that it was screaming for my attention. This image intuitively symbolised what my research project would be about. I knew that deep down, but I could not find the words. Caught up in what I believed to be the requirements of a PhD research project, I struggled with what others had written in journals and books about the subject of my interest. In a moment of frustration about another unsatisfying attempt, I walked away from my desk, sat down at the kitchen table with a cup of fresh mint tea, and started talking to the picture.

1 Throughout this dissertation, I use person-first language ("persons with intellectual disabilities") in line with the preference of one of the self-advocacy organisations for persons with intellectual disabilities in the Netherlands (LFB), where most of this research was conducted (www.lfb.nu).



FIGURE 1. Credit: Joep Jacobs, pictoright.nl & bildkunst.de

"Between the Lines, you have my full attention now," I said. "Do you want to tell me what your story is about?"

"Of course," she said, "and please call me by my nickname, 'Miss Be'. Because my story is about being, about life, nothing less than that."

The sun was setting at that time, quietening the house and the rest of the world. I had all night to hear her story and to find out what it could mean to me.

I asked her: "Miss Be, when I look at you, I see the red woollen threads coming out of what look like boats. These boats seem to float, all in the same direction. The threads expand in many directions, but there is a structure too, which makes it possible for the threads of all boats to meet. What story are you trying to tell me?"

"My story is about the endless human web," Miss Be said. "It is about the fact that we are all connected. Even if we want to, we cannot escape being bonded in an endless number of relationships. These relationships are not only bonded by friendship or love, but also by hate, pain, or ignorance. Some of them are easy to perceive, like when we are related to others by birth or close long-term friendships; others are invisible, like relationships with people we have never met and will never meet."

She took a breath, and after a while she added: "Well, you do know that, of course. But you miss the point. You should have a look inside yourself and your relationships before

talking about others in your project. Why do you want to do this project in the first place?"

I realised that she was right. Where did my interest in social justice for people with intellectual disabilities come from?

Images of grey clouds that veiled my childhood memories appeared before my eyes. Behind them, there was my oldest brother, born with a disability and bullied for most of his life. He was a small man, too small to stand up for himself. I felt the old pain in my stomach, and I felt guilty. The pain and guilt were fostered by images of him not being accepted, even in family situations. He was the stupid one, the one who failed at school, who did not have friends, and who was laughed at for his dreams of becoming a deejay.

Through knowing my brother and parts of his story, I came to understand that the challenges in our family were due not only to how he functioned or what he could or could not do, but rather to how he was accepted, treated, and supported. He could not fit into the world of the people around him, and the people around him did not understand his need to connect.

Instantly, I looked at the other side of my kitchen to stop the memories, as I could not bear them.

"All of my life, I have been looking away, Miss Be. First, I was a child who did not understand what was happening, and as soon as I grew up, I moved away. That made it easy not to look and see what was happening. I did not take any responsibility for his needs. Unfortunately, he died young, so that was that" I said. "Should I dig deeper into my family's history?"

"No," Miss Be said. "Look at my threads. They are red because they talk about vivid relationships. And therefore, they talk about responsibilities towards each other now. Not in the way you THINK about responsibility. Stop thinking about your childhood. Show the world how you PRACTICE responsibilities towards others today. What are your responsibilities right now? To whom? Show others who you are and what you believe in by your actions. And then start telling stories about social justice (Walker, 2007). A good way of living together, in your words, a 'socially just' way, can only be shaped by how people interact and share responsibilities (Tronto, 1993, 2013)."

I recognised Miss Be's ideas about social justice as a relational practice from the interdisciplinary field of care ethics. Political scientist Joan Tronto, one of the well-known care ethicists, argues that social justice is incomplete without care, which she defines as everything we do to maintain, continue, and repair our world so that we can live in it as well as possible (Tronto & Fisher, 1990; Tronto, 1993; 2013). From this perspective, care is a collective practice embedded in a 'life-sustaining web' of relationships and conditions that make life possible and liveable. This has implications at the personal, institutional, and global levels, as it is necessary to meet the needs of everyone (Tronto, 1993). It presupposes recognising everyone's vulnerability and interdependence. Interdependence is thus the

foundation of family affairs, encounters in the public domain, care structures, government regulations and policies, and global economics (Tronto, 2009, 2013). This focus widens the limited legal and political domains of social justice (Held, 2006, 2015), based on a fundamental difference from the ethics-of-justice conception of the human condition. In care ethics, people are relational.

Moral philosopher Margaret Urban Walker (2007) proposed a view of morality and an approach to ethical theory that uses the critical insights of feminism and race theory to rethink how moral theory is inescapably shaped by culture and history. To her, morality is embodied in practices of responsibility that express our identities, values, and connections to others in socially patterned ways. She stated that ethical theory needs to be empirically informed and politically critical to avoid reiterating forms of socially entrenched bias.

"PRACTICE OF RESPONSIBILITIES… What is my practice?"

I thought about my work in Nepal. In the summer of 2019, I stayed for some weeks in the crowded, noisy, and dusty city of Lalitpur to volunteer as an art therapist at a school for children with disabilities. Some small children could not talk, older children were paralysed and very smart, and some did not react to caregivers' attention at all. Others had signs of syndromes like Down's syndrome, which I knew from the people I used to work with at home.

In Nepal, I learned a lot from the conversations I had with members of my host family and the people I met during my walks. They told me stories about the bad influence of poverty on how a child with a disability is valued, about the shame in families, the guilt that parents feel, and bad karma as causes for disability. The plot of the stories touched me again and again: if you are a child with a disability in Nepal, you are nothing but bad luck, and your family will offer you basic care, such as food and shelter, but may also lock you up because of the shame you have caused simply by being born. At that time, I could imagine that without paper nappies and washing machines it must be difficult to accept that your child will never be toilet trained, that it is difficult to realise your child will never be able to take care of you and fill the gap of a non-existent pension system, and that you have a never-ending problem paying medical bills for your child. But I found it painful to hear that guilt and shame were filling the moral space in this issue in a land where Buddha was smiling at me from every corner of the street. Of course, I saw the similarity with the story of my brother. He was born only ten years after the Second World War, at a time when "healthy" and "smart" people were needed to build up a "decent standard of living". Even though I could understand the burden of that context for families, I could not get the words "social injustice" out of my head.

I could not speak Nepali at all, but I had a suitcase full of art materials and trusted that children do speak the universal language of creating art. There they were again before

my eyes: the proud and strong young man who was particularly interested in two young women in his class; the girl who loved to dance but had trouble standing up due to spasms in her limbs; the young boy who angrily kept more toys than he could carry close to his chest in order not to share them with others; the girl quietly lying on the floor with her eyes wandering over the ceiling. I did what I knew best by using art materials and the language of the body to invite them into moments of meaningful contact.

Many children easily accepted the invitation to create and have fun with me and each other during the hot afternoons. We were drawing together, singing, dancing, or playing the guitar. There was a lot of movement and energy in the room. Others needed another, even more embodied approach to find a way to enjoy moments like this.

To get to know the girl who was lying on the floor better, I lay down next to her with my eyes wandering over the ceiling, like hers. What did she see? Was she drawing patterns with her eyes, creating artwork that nobody else could see?

I had to slow down my energy and let go of any expectations. I felt as if I had to shut out the world. The situation felt as if our bodies were floating like boats in the sea. While we were lying there for quite some time, the girl started to make noises. I picked them up and sang them back to her. Then her noises became louder. So, there it was: we were doing something together; we were connected at that moment through the language of embodied being (Rutten-Saris, 1990). At that time, I felt responsible for that girl's experience of life in that moment because I knew the approach of "Emerging Body Language" (Rutten-Saris, 1990), an art therapy method in which I had been trained and with which I had worked for many years. I knew that using this method could create meaningful relationships with people with even severe intellectual disabilities. That responsibility -knowing what could be done- felt uneasy at the same time. Because who was I in this girl's life? Could I be more than a stranger from Europe who flew in for some weeks and checked out when the holiday was over, leaving her behind lying on the floor?

"Hello! Are you still there?" Miss Be shouted at me, and I woke up from my daydreams. "Where were we? Connection, relationship, responsibility, senses, movement, energy, mirroring body language, being attuned with all the senses to the other person…" I thought.

Even though I started to understand more about social justice as a practice of responsibilities in relationships (Walker, 2007), I needed a break from Miss Be. I stood up and walked to the bookshelf in my living room. There he was, my favourite artist, on the cover of a pocketbook with his hat on and his fur cape: Joseph Beuys, the German artist who proclaimed that "everybody is an artist" (Stachelhaus, 1995; Wildgen, 2015). He was someone from the past who also resonated with feelings I had about my childhood in West Germany during the Cold War. I knew him very well, even though I did not know him at all.

As I opened the book, I found a folded paper about him and his work that I had written some months before. I read it aloud to myself.

In Europe, especially in Germany, post-Second World War sources influenced the use of the arts for social justice and reform pedagogy (D'Elia, 2015; Schottenloher, 1994). In the late 1950s, when Germany reappeared as a global player on the international political and cultural scene, the social activist and artist Joseph Beuys (1921–1986) extended the concept of art, known as "social sculpture". Beuys tried to find a way out of the disaster of ideological dualities such as fascism versus communism. The innovative power of art was meant to create a new perspective beyond politically and intellectually proposed alternatives (Stachelhaus, 1995; Wildgen, 2015). He proclaimed, "every person to be an artist", meaning that everybody takes part in the creation of social reality and that, therefore, the way we create society is art (Schottenloher, 1994; Stachelhaus, 1995).

The words "The innovative power of art" stayed with me. I sat down on the couch and thought about them. But what is "art"? I was familiar with the ideas of Beuys. To him, art is a free activity in which rules and conventions can be followed or challenged. Art can create a new reality if every artist—which, according to him, is every human being—asserts themself against the conventions or rules given by society. According to Beuys, society was not a system into which one has to fit, as my brother was expected to do, but rather a "social sculpture": a work of art collectively shaped by all people, creating space for individuals as they are and for what they need (Stachelhaus, 1995; Wildgen, 2015).

"So, art could be anything," I thought. "But what more could be said about art in its essence?" I wondered.

Shaun McNiff (2018), an American art therapist who uses art in research projects known as art-based research, was standing next to Beuys on the shelf. "McNiff seems to describe something essential about art," I thought. Going through his pages, I found that "[…] throughout its history, art has demonstrated a reliable pattern of being ahead of the convention and challenging it" (McNiff, 2018, p. 24). So, he appeared to be in line with Beuys.

"Then, this 'being ahead of, and challenging conventions' might be one of the important ways art has functioned over the last 50 years or so," I said to myself. "What could this mean for my PhD project?" I wondered.

For twenty years, I had worked as an art therapist with people with intellectual disabilities. I remembered the young woman whose hands were strapped to her waist because otherwise she would hurt herself severely. During the sessions with her and the nurse who took care of her, I invited the young woman to paint with me. The young woman's hands were not supposed to be released, but I was able to convince the nurse that we should try to find a way to be creative together. I took a big but short brush in my hands, put some blue paint on it, placed the tip of the brush on a large piece of paper, and waited to see

what would happen. Slowly but surely, the woman put her hand, still covered with the fabric of the straps, on my hand, guiding the brush over the white paper. We drew a long line before she guided my hand to the red paint and back to the paper. While painting, the woman paid more attention to the artefacts we created and to me sitting next to her. I felt that she was connecting to the situation, to me, to the art material, and to the artefacts. That situation, observed by the nurse, challenged the ideas about this woman's needs held by her support team and therefore created a new reality. She was able to create and therefore was "abled," it was us, the people around her, who needed to learn what she required to live a healthier and better life with us. We needed a new social construct, as Beuys would have said.

I went back to Miss Be. She was still there on the kitchen table, next to the empty teacup.

"If social justice is defined by the practice of responsibility in relationships as described by Walker (2007), and art is defined as something that can create new realities by challenging conventions, as Beuys (Stachelhaus, 1995; Wildgen, 2015) and McNiff (2018) stated, and if my art therapy experience shows the practice of connecting and building relationships through the language of embodied being (e.g., Bailey, 2015; Levine, 2011; Moon, 2002; Rutten-Saris, 1990), fostered by the use of art materials within an art-making process that results in an art product (e.g., Ben-David et al., 2025; Haeyen, 2018, 2026; Hinz, 2019; Moon, 2002; Pénzes, 2020, 2024), then what?" I looked at her, and she answered.

"Everything comes together in the web of relationships, but what matters is in the moment. What matters to you right now?" she asked.

"Well, I guess that I am talking to you," I replied. "You are a piece of art—well, a photo of it. You are a thing, but I have learned a lot from you so far. Just because you are."

My head started to slow down. This encounter with Miss Be, this picture, had affected me, especially by evoking memories, images, feelings, and thoughts connected to the people in those memories. (. . .)

As an art therapist, I liked the idea that making art is a dialogue between the artist as an active, creative agent, as a spectator of their artefacts, and the art form, which also has an active part in the dialogue. Bennett (2015) adds that the artefacts themselves play an important role in that dialogue. The young woman guiding my hand while I was holding the brush created a thing, an image, a painting, and she was affected by the encounter with her artefacts. The traces of her body language on paper, as Rutten-Saris (1990) defined artwork, kept her going (Grabau & Visser, 1987; Moon, 2002; Smeijsters, 2008). I guessed that if she had been able to talk, she would have shouted: "Look what I can do! I forgot about my creativity, but look, it is there!"

"That is not what I mean," said Miss Be. "I mean, in practices of responsibility, what are you responsible for, and to whom?"

Looking back at the stories about my brother, the children in Nepal, and the people I worked with as an art therapist, I realised that I wanted to contribute to a new and better social construct for all people, with and without intellectual disabilities. As a privileged person, I felt responsible for discriminated and excluded people like my brother, underprivileged and marginalised people like the children in Nepal, and segregated people like the institutionalised woman with the brush. But that responsibility was too big for one person.

As an experienced art therapist, I had the knowledge and skills to connect with people who are disabled, foster relationships with them, and support them in expressing themselves, all through the possibilities of art materials, art forms, and cooperative art-making. This could open ways for others to hear the voices of people who face difficulties in speaking and standing up for themselves through their artefacts, just as I heard the voice of Miss Be. "Supporting others to have their voices heard. This is my felt responsibility to people with intellectual disabilities and to the rest of society," I thought.

The clock showed me that it was late. I was tired, and I decided to go to sleep. Climbing the stairs, I thought about the conversation with Miss Be. I felt grateful for what she had shown me: the complexity and richness of the subject, the clearer picture of what I was going to do as a graduate student, the memories that came back and helped me find the context of my interest, and the encounter with Beuys and the others who would accompany me during my project. I suddenly felt deeply connected to the complex world that I am trying to understand and hopeful about contributing to better relationships. Last but not least, I loved my profession more than ever.

"Good night, Miss Be," I shouted. This was a happy voice. "See you tomorrow."

Then I switched off the lights.

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Chapter 1

GENERAL INTRODUCTION

Background to the Study

Although the rights of persons with disabilities have gained increasing international recognition, and social justice has become a central policy concern (United Nations, 2006), persons with intellectual disabilities continue to experience systematic exclusion across key domains of social life, including education, employment, healthcare, and community participation (Scior et al., 2020; World Health Organization, n.d.). Such exclusion is not incidental but embedded in enduring social, institutional, and cultural arrangements that shape who is recognised as competent, autonomous, and socially valuable, and who is not (Foucault, 1980).

This structural marginalisation is reflected in persistently high levels of social isolation and loneliness (Bigby, 2008; McConnell et al., 2016; Reeves et al., 2025), as well as in disproportionate exposure to violence, abuse, stigma, and exploitation (Ashby & Mander, 2026; Cook & Hole, 2021; Dunkle et al., 2018; Hall, 2005; Jansen-van Vuuren & Aldersey, 2020; Merrells et al., 2018; Power & Barlett, 2018; Strnadová et al., 2018; Sutherland et al., 2024). These conditions are associated with chronic stress and long-term consequences for mental health and well-being (Hughes et al., 2019; Santoro et al., 2018). Research consistently shows that persons with intellectual disabilities experience mental health difficulties at significantly higher rates than the general population (Glasson et al., 2020; Jahoda et al., 2025; Kendall & Owen, 2015), with a pooled prevalence of co-occurring psychiatric disorders of approximately one-third among adolescents and adults shown in a systematic review and meta-analysis (Mazza et al., 2020).

Importantly, this heightened vulnerability does not arise from intellectual disability itself, but from ongoing processes of stigmatisation, discrimination, exclusion, and marginalisation (Flynn, 2024; Scior et al., 2020; World Health Organization, n.d.). While legal frameworks such as the *Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD)* (United Nations, 2006) have advanced formal equality and protection, they do not in themselves sufficiently enough transform the everyday relational and institutional dynamics through which injustice is produced and sustained. These dynamics call for approaches that move beyond procedural inclusion and instead attend to how recognition, belonging, and social value are enacted in lived interactions.

Intellectual disability

In this dissertation, intellectual disability is approached as a socially and relationally situated construct that emerges in the interaction between individuals and their social, physical, cultural, and institutional environments (Goodley, 2001; World Health Organization, n.d.). While intellectual disability has traditionally been framed through a predominantly medical lens that emphasises cognitive impairment as an individual deficit (Flynn, 2024), such an approach risks overlooking the broader social processes that shape how difference is understood and responded to.

A relational perspective shifts attention from individual limitations to the ways in which societal norms, institutional arrangements, and professional practices define what counts as competence, autonomy, and meaningful participation (Goodley, 2017). Expectations concerning independence, productivity, and rational decision-making are often taken for granted as markers of full membership of society or citizenship (Duffy, 2023). When individuals do not conform to these expectations, they may be positioned as dependent, incapable, or in need of regulation. In this way, disablement is not only a matter of impairment but also of how social environments are organised and how difference is interpreted (Goodley, 2017).

For persons with intellectual disabilities, experiences of injustice frequently arise not simply from a lack of resources or rights, but from subtle and everyday processes through which their voices, preferences, and capacities are evaluated and sometimes dismissed. Medical classifications, assessment procedures, and professional decision-making structures can unintentionally reinforce hierarchies of competence and worth (Ansara, 2020; Whitaker, 2013). Such processes shape who is recognised as a legitimate decision-maker, whose knowledge is valued, and whose life is seen as socially meaningful.

Moreover, intellectual disability intersects with other social positions, including gender, race, class, and age. These intersections influence how individuals are perceived and treated within families, communities, and institutions (Crenshaw, 1991; Wickenden, 2023). Global data indicate that disability disproportionately affects women, people living in poverty, older persons, and individuals in low- and middle-income countries (World Health Organization, n.d.), highlighting that experiences of marginalisation are rarely shaped by disability alone.

From this perspective, intellectual disability cannot be understood solely as a personal characteristic or as a matter of unequal access. It is shaped within normative frameworks of social power that regulate membership of society and participation, define autonomy, and attribute social value. These dynamics raise critical questions about how social justice should be conceptualised, not only as formal structural equality or inclusion, but

as something that concerns recognition, relational positioning, and the conditions under which persons are seen, heard, and responded to as morally significant members of society.

Social justice

Central to this dissertation is the concept of social justice, understood as a plural, evolving, and context-sensitive construct. Rather than adopting a single normative theory, this study approaches social justice as a multidimensional framework through which art-based communities can be examined as contexts in which human rights and equivalent relational positioning are pursued and in which justice may be negotiated, navigated, and experienced. To clarify this orientation, several influential perspectives on social justice are outlined below.

a) Social justice as a plural and relational concept

Social justice cannot be reduced to one definition or foundational principle. Across disciplines and historical periods, it has been conceptualised in diverse and sometimes competing ways, reflecting changing moral priorities, political struggles, and social conditions. Social justice functions as a normative orientation toward valued goods such as for example dignity, fairness, freedom, participation, or recognition (Barry & Matravers, 1998). Its meaning is therefore shaped by especially its context and by the questions it seeks to address.

For persons with intellectual disabilities, debates about social justice are closely tied to broader discussions within disability studies, including tensions between medical, social, relational, and critical perspectives. This plurality underscores that social justice is not a static ideal to be implemented, but an ongoing process that must be interpreted and realised within specific social and historical spaces.

b) Liberal and rights-based conceptions of social justice

One of the most influential modern accounts of social justice was articulated by the political philosopher John Rawls (1921–2002). In his liberal-contractual framework, social justice is located within the basic structure of society, encompassing political, legal, economic, and social institutions (Rawls, 1999). Rawls proposed that principles of justice could be derived from a hypothetical distant position of fairness, in which individuals reason without knowledge of their own social position. This hypothetical 'veil of ignorance' deliberately abstracts from concrete social contexts and particular relationships to ensure impartiality. From this standpoint, rational actors would endorse equal basic liberties for all and arrange social and economic inequalities in ways of distributive fairness that benefit the least advantaged (Rawls, 2006; Wenar, 2025).

Rawls' work has profoundly influenced contemporary policy, law, and human rights discourse. Within disability contexts, this orientation is reflected in international frameworks such as the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD) (United Nations, 2006). Although the World Health Organization (n.d.) and the United Nations (2006) coin disability primarily as a social issue arising from interactions between individuals and society, the CRPD is explicitly grounded in a rights-based perspective on social justice as it focusses on the rights to full participation in social, cultural, economic, and political life, emphasising equality, non-discrimination, accessibility, and inclusion. From this perspective, social justice is strongly associated with formal rights, institutional reform, and equal opportunities.

This rights-based framework has been important in advancing disability rights and challenging exclusionary systems. However, legal recognition and institutional inclusion do not automatically translate into lived experiences of belonging, dignity, or mutual recognition (Hall, 2010). Formal inclusion may coexist with subtle forms of marginalisation or stigma in everyday life (Bennett & Rausch, 2025). These concerns raise questions about how social justice is experienced and lived within daily social practices beyond legal or institutional arrangements.

c) Relational conceptions of social justice

Care ethics offers an alternative starting point for understanding social justice. Rather than grounding social justice in abstract or juridical principles, or in institutional arrangements, care-ethical perspectives emphasise relationality as central to ethical social life (Tronto, 1993; Walker, 2007). From this viewpoint, social justice is not only a matter of distributive fairness of societies' resources (Held, 2015), but is realised within practices of attentiveness, responsiveness, and acknowledged interdependence in everyday encounters.

Foregrounding interdependence, care ethics challenges ideals of autonomy that assume independence and autonomy as the norm. For persons with intellectual disabilities, whose lives often involve networks of support, this perspective highlights the significance of relationships in shaping conditions under which persons are being seen, heard, and recognised as significant members of society (Kittay, 1999). Aligned with a Ricoeurian perspective, care ethics understand the self as fundamentally intersubjective, meaning that to live a good life is co-determined through relationships rather than defined exclusively by individual choice or externally imposed norms (Ricoeur, 1992). Social justice, in this sense emerges within relational interactions in the ways needs, voices, and preferences are acknowledged and responded to. Being seen, heard, and recognised are not individual achievements but processes enacted within social relationships (van Nistelrooij & Visse, 2019).

Care ethics, with its focus on everyday caring practices, recognises that care[2] is deeply political and shaped by the structural contexts within which social practices unfold. Political philosopher and one of the founders of care ethics, Joan Tronto (1993), argues that the 'life-sustaining web' that makes life possible and liveable encompasses human bodies and selves, including physical and psychological well-being, social relationships, such as families, communities, and institutions, and the material environment, including housing, infrastructure, and the natural world. When parts of this web are neglected or break down, the conditions necessary for sustaining life are undermined. Furthermore, Tronto (1993) argues that care in this sense is never merely interpersonal but is always embedded within relationships of power, privilege, and institutional organisation. Decisions about whose needs are prioritised, who provides care, and which forms of dependency are valued are therefore inherently political. For this reason, relational social justice must be considered alongside broader structures of social power and structural inequality. Care ethicists, such as Virginia Held, conceptualise care and justice are complementary rather than opposed, with care being more fundamental, and that justice should be embedded within caring relationships rather than treated as a separate framework (Held, 2015).

d) Critical social conceptions of social justice

Critical social theories add attention to the ways in which norms, institutional practices, and systems of knowledge are shaped and again shape what is considered socially valuable and worth to be recognised. Rather than assuming that social justice can be defined from a neutral standpoint, these conceptions examine how social arrangements produce both, inclusion and being excluded from dominant social frameworks.

Michel Foucault (1926–1984), for example, analysed how power operates through networks of discourse, professional practices, institutional arrangements, and social norms (Foucault, 1980). Power, in this view, does not only repress, as it also produces categories, standards, and expectations through which individuals are understood and governed. Within disability contexts, such processes may manifest in, for example, diagnostic classifications, assessment regimes, and institutional practices that define competence and social worth.

From a critical social conception, social injustice is therefore not only a matter of denied rights and unfair redistribution of society's resources, or insufficient interrelational recognition, but also of how normative standards shape who is recognised as valuable or capable enough to be a meaningful member of society. In that sense, calls for participation,

2 Joan Tronto defines *care* as "a species of activity that includes everything that we do to maintain, continue, and repair our 'world' so that we can live in it as well as possible." This world includes our bodies, ourselves, and our environment (Tronto, 1993, p. 103).

social inclusion, self-determination, empowerment, and voice, while important to many, may also require reflection on how responsibility for social change is distributed between individuals, their families, and broader social structures. Critical social conceptions thus invite sustained examination of the normative assumptions that organise social life, and the possibilities for alternative forms of recognition and belonging.

Integrating conceptions of social justice

Bringing these conceptions together allows for a nuanced and multidimensional understanding of social justice. Liberal and rights-based conceptions emphasise equality before the law and institutional fairness, care ethics foregrounds lived experience, interdependence, and recognition, and critical social theories draw attention to the role of norms, power, and structural arrangements in shaping the network of persons and their relationships and positions. As Held (2015) suggests, these need not be opposing moral frameworks, instead, they can be understood as complementary, offering normative guidance and illuminating the conditions through which such norms are lived.

This layered understanding provides the conceptual foundation for examining art-based communities not merely as service settings or inclusion initiatives, but as relational spaces situated within broader social structures. Within such spaces, rights-based aspirations, relational ethics, and critical reflections on normativity may intersect in practice. This dissertation therefore investigates how social justice is articulated, designed, and experienced within art-based communities involving persons with intellectual disabilities.

Art therapy and the art-based community

In the Netherlands, where most of this research was conducted, art therapy commonly refers to creative art therapy (*beeldende therapie*), a professionally regulated discipline within the broader field of creative arts and psychomotor therapies (*vaktherapie*). Next to art therapy, this field also includes music therapy, drama therapy, dance/movement therapy, play therapy, and psychomotor therapy (Vaktherapie Nederland, n.d.; Willemsen et al., 2024). Art therapy is generally defined as an experiential therapeutic practice in which the art-making process, the qualities of art materials, and the created artefacts are intentionally used within a therapeutic relationship to support emotional functioning, expression, and well-being (Haeyen, 2018; Haeyen, 2026). Within this framework, creativity is understood as relational and processual: meaning emerges through interactions between participant, art materials, and therapist.

Internationally, art therapy is situated within broader traditions of creative arts therapies, expressive arts therapy (Leavy, 2018; McNiff, 2006), and creative experiential therapies (van Laar et al., 2025). Despite variations in terminology and methodological emphasis, these approaches share the use of visual and tactile media such as drawing, painting, and sculpture, as primary forms of engagement, as well as an emphasis on embodied, more-than-verbal and experiential processes of understanding, meaning-making and transformation (McNiff, 2006; Vaktherapie Nederland, n.d.). Artistic processes may support experiences such as expressing emotional pain and loss, connecting with different dimensions of life, being seen and heard, and developing personal artistic expression (McNiff, 2006).

To clarify the art therapy framework of art-based communities fostering social justice, several aspects that relate those concepts are outlined below:

a) Relational and embodied dimensions of art therapy

Recent literature describes several interrelated processes as central to art therapy practice, including sensory engagement with materials, embodied exploration, experiences of flow, relational attunement during shared creative activity, and reflection through the created artefact (Robb et al., 2025). These processes unfold within relational contexts rather than as isolated psychological mechanisms. Client reflections further suggest that both the creative process and the therapeutic relationship may contribute to experiences of trust, co-regulation, and emotional integration (Ben-David, 2025).

Such relational dynamics resonate with care-ethical understandings of social justice as lived through practices of attentiveness, recognition, and responsiveness. From this perspective, art-based community engagement within an art therapy framework may contribute to relational spaces in which participants encounter one another through shared creative processes.

b) Art therapy and community-based approaches

While art therapy has historically developed in close relation to individualised and medicalised models of mental health care (Ottemiller & Awais, 2016; Willemsen et al., 2024), community-oriented practices have also long existed within the field (Huss & Havsteen-Franklin, 2023; McNiff, 2006; Ottemiller & Awais, 2016). Although historically less prominent within professional discourse, these practices have received renewed attention in recent years, particularly in the form of open studio and community-based models (Finkel & Bat Or, 2020; Huss & Havsteen-Franklin, 2023; Ottemiller & Awais, 2016).

This renewed interest aligns with broader developments in mental health discourse, including recovery-oriented and well-being frameworks that emphasise social participation and collective dimensions of well-being (Finkel & Bat Or, 2020; Ottemiller

& Awais, 2016). Community-based art therapy is therefore increasingly described as fostering social connectedness, participation, and shared meaning-making (Finkel & Bat Or, 2020), while also fostering social change within environments which in turn has a positive impact at the individual level (Ottemiller & Awais, 2016).

Within the literature, community-based approaches are associated with promoting healthy interactions, supporting identity development, fostering agency, and strengthening community cohesion (Frostig, 2011; Kaplan, 2016; McNiff, 2006; Moon, 2002; Talwar, 2016; Vick, 2016). From a social justice-oriented perspective addressing structural inequality, art-based communities are understood as spaces in which marginalised persons reposition themselves, for example by moving from identities such as 'patient' to those of artist or collaborator, and through opportunities for self-advocacy (Hocoy, 2005; Moon, 2016; Talwar, 2016). Related discussions in social art therapy emphasise how artistic practice can amplify marginalised voices and contribute to experiences of solidarity, recognition, and empowerment, particularly during community crises such as COVID-19 (Huss & Havsteen-Franklin, 2023).

Community-based approaches are often referred to as *open studios* (Finkel & Bat Or, 2026; Moon, 2002, 2016; Vick, 2016), *community-based art studios* (Allen, 2008; Vick, 2016), *expressive arts therapy studios* (McNiff, 2009) and *community arts studios* (Howells & Zelnik, 2009). Despite differences in terminology, these settings share a commitment to communal art-making and the potential of creative practice to foster meaningful interaction among participants (Moon, 2016), or personal individuation that brings a sense of dignity to people living on the hospital wards (McNiff, 2006). Such practices occur in diverse locations, including hospitals (McNiff, 2006), museums (Brown Treadon, 2016; McNiff, 2006), community centres, or public spaces such as parks and urban environments (Kaplan, 2016).

c) Historical roots and social justice orientations of art-based communities

Art-based communities developed alongside broader movements for mental health reform, social activism, and cultural transformation. Although art therapy is often associated with individual treatment models (Willemsen et al., 2024), its history also includes community-oriented and emancipatory strands (McNiff, 2006; Moon, 2016).

Early recognition of artistic expression in psychiatric contexts emerged with the work of Hans Prinzhorn and Karl Wilmanns, who collected artworks created by patients in psychiatric institutions between 1919 and 1921. Prinzhorn's publication *Artistry of the Mentally Ill* (1922) highlighted the expressive and creative capacities of these works and contributed to early interest in art-making within therapeutic contexts (Koenig, 2022).

During the late 1930s, art studios were established within psychiatric institutions in the United States and the United Kingdom, based on the belief that creative activity could

support mental well-being and human expression (Moon, 2016; McNiff, 2006). From the 1950s onwards, art therapists increasingly engaged with art-based communities beyond institutional settings. Creative practices became part of broader activist and empowerment movements addressing racial injustice, poverty, and social exclusion (Moon, 2016; Vick, 2016).

Parallel developments occurred in relation to disability. Following deinstitutionalisation, community initiatives emerged that supported artistic practices among persons with disabilities. The outsider art studio movement contributed to recognising artworks created by persons with disabilities as culturally valuable rather than merely therapeutic (Vick, 2016).

These developments also intersected with wider artistic movements. In post-war Europe, Joseph Beuys' concept of social sculpture emphasised that artistic practice could contribute to shaping social reality and collective transformation (Schottenloher, 1994; Stachelhaus, 1995; Wildgen, 2015). Similarly, movements such as Fluxus emphasised participation and process in art-making, highlighting the social dimensions of artistic practice (Chandler & Neumark, 2005).

Together, these developments contributed to contemporary understandings of art-based communities as spaces of shared creativity, experimentation, and social engagement (McNiff, 2006; Moon, 2016; Talwar, 2016). At the same time, such practices remain embedded within broader social norms and policy contexts concerning disability (Zimmermann et al., 2024).

d) Art therapy and intellectual disability

Art therapy has long been offered to support individuals with intellectual disabilities across a range of settings, including clinics, private practices, residential facilities, and community-based studios (Miller et al., 2020). A diversity of practices has developed in response to the heterogeneity of this population (Power et al., 2023). However, art therapy has also been criticised for its reliance on medicalised and individualised models that prioritise normalisation and able-bodied norms. Miller et al. (2020) argue that such approaches often grant professionals disproportionate control over the lives of people with intellectual disabilities, positioning them as dependent and marginalising their agency and cultural expression. Similarly, Miller and colleagues (2020) observe that art therapists frequently function as gatekeepers, with clients' creative potential and autonomy seldom fully recognised within conventional clinical frameworks. These critiques have led to calls for approaches that foreground the political and social dimensions of disability, thereby enabling art therapists to acknowledge and support the creativity, agency, and cultural expression of their clients (Miller et al., 2020; Talwar & Sajnani, 2022; Yi, 2018; Yi & Moon, 2020).

Despite the social justice- related claims, explicit attention to persons with intellectual disabilities remains limited within the broader art therapy literature on open studios, community art therapy approaches, and social art therapy. Finkel and Bat Or's (2020) systematic scoping review indicates that only a small proportion (4%) of publications on open studios specifically address disability.

In this dissertation, the concept of *art-based communities* is therefore employed in a deliberately broad sense to encompass community-oriented artistic practices involving persons with intellectual disabilities, that are somehow connected to social justice principles. Within this frame, rather than assuming that social justice is achieved simply through laws and rights in communities, or countering normative assumptions of their environments, art-based communities may offer spaces in which social justice can emerge in the breadth of the concept as outlined in this dissertation, including relational social justice. At the same time, these communities are not separate from broader societal norms and institutional frameworks. They remain embedded within existing social, educational, and care structures, professional practices, and funding arrangements.

e) Art-based communities in relationship to social justice

Within art therapy and community arts literature, art-based communities are frequently associated with empowerment, participation, advocacy, and identity development (Frostig, 2011; Golub, 2005; McNiff, 2006; Moon, 2016; Talwar, 2016; Yi, 2018). These practices are often presented as aligned with broader social justice aspirations, including social inclusion, voice, and resistance to marginalisation.

However, the ways in which social justice is conceptualised within this body of work are not always made explicit. References to empowerment, agency, participation, or voice may draw on differing underlying assumptions about social justice, ranging from rights-based inclusion and access to relational recognition, to more critical engagements with power and normalisation discourses. As a result, art-based communities are often normatively positioned as socially just practices, while the conceptual foundations of this positioning remain diverse and at times implicit.

Moreover, limited systematic attention has been given to how such communities are intentionally designed to foster social justice for persons with intellectual disabilities, or to how participants themselves experience these communities in relationship to social justice. This leaves open important questions about how social justice is experienced in art-based communities, and in relation to which concepts.

To further reflect on how art-based communities might foster social justice for persons with intellectual disabilities, the philosophical work of Meininger (2013) offers a useful conceptual perspective. Drawing on Foucault's notion of heterotopia, Meininger describes *niches*, that are spaces of encounter in which people with and without intellectual

disabilities can meet in ways that allow difference and strangeness to remain visible rather than be absorbed into prevailing norms of normality. In such niches, dialogue becomes possible across differing perspectives, and alternative forms of togetherness may emerge. Rather than framing social justice solely in terms of formal inclusion or empowerment, this perspective invites consideration of communities as relational spaces within everyday social arrangements, where relational social justice can emerge. Whether and how art-based communities function in this way remains an empirical and conceptual question.

Problem definition and research questions

While art-based communities hold theoretical potential to foster social justice for persons suffering from structural inequality and social power, theoretical and empirical evidence regarding their potential for persons with intellectual disabilities remains limited. Little is known about how these communities are intentionally designed to align with social justice perspectives, or how participants experience their engagement in relationship to social justice. In conclusion, the ways in which participation in art-based communities may foster social justice for persons with intellectual disabilities have not yet been systematically explored.

This knowledge gap is particularly urgent considering the ongoing human rights violations experienced by persons with intellectual disabilities, which not only entails the denial of their rights as full members of all parts of society, but also leads to horrific violence against individuals and negative health outcomes. These dynamics call for possibilities and approaches that move beyond procedural inclusion, as legal recognition and institutional inclusion do not automatically translate into lived experiences of being a valued, full member of society. Investigating how art-based communities can be purposefully developed and facilitated to foster social justice is therefore both, a theoretical and practical imperative, and constitutes the central focus of this research project.

To address this gap, the overarching research question guiding this dissertation is: How can art-based communities foster social justice for people with intellectual disabilities? This question is further explored through four sub-questions:

a) How can social justice for persons with intellectual disabilities be understood and meaningfully related to art-based communities?
b) How are art-based communities designed, and in what ways do these designs seek to foster social justice?
c) How do participants experience art-based communities, and how are these experiences related to the fostering of social justice?
d) What can be learned from these designs and experiences to inform new practices that aim to foster social justice for persons with intellectual disabilities?

Aims and outline of this dissertation

Aims of this dissertation

The overarching aim of this dissertation is to examine how art-based communities can foster social justice for persons with intellectual disabilities. Situated at the intersection of social justice theory, disability studies, and art therapy-informed practices, the objectives of this research are both scientific and practical. Scientifically, the dissertation seeks to contribute to conceptual and empirical understandings of social justice as lived in community contexts, with particular attention to how art-based communities are designed and experienced by participants. Practically, the study aims to strengthen the knowledge base of art therapy and related fields by generating empirically grounded insights into community-based art-therapy practices that seek to foster social justice for persons with intellectual disabilities. These insights are intended to inform the field of art therapy.

More specifically, this dissertation aims to:

- Conceptualise social justice in relationship to persons with intellectual disabilities and examine how this concept can be meaningfully connected to art-based communities.
- Analyse how art-based communities are designed, and in what ways these spaces are oriented towards fostering social justice.
- Explore how participation in art-based communities is experienced by persons with intellectual disabilities.
- Generate practice-oriented insights to inform the development of new or existing art-based communities aimed at fostering social justice for persons with intellectual disabilities.

Outline of the dissertation

The core of this dissertation comprises four peer-reviewed articles and one article currently under review, each addressing one or more of the research questions. All articles underwent minor editorial revisions upon inclusion in this dissertation to ensure consistency across the manuscript. These are APA7 referencing, UK English spelling, lay-out adaption, and change of terminology "people with ID" or "people living with ID" into "persons with intellectual disabilities". No substantive changes have been made to the content. Together, these articles offer a cumulative and multi-perspectival exploration of social justice in relationship to art-based communities. For an overview, see **Table 1**.

Research question a) *How can social justice for persons with intellectual disabilities be understood and meaningfully related to art-based communities?* is addressed through two

conceptual and interpretive studies. Chapter 2 presents a scoping review examining how art-based communities are described in relation to social justice, identifying dominant themes, values, and underlying assumptions in the literature. Chapter 3, a historical case study, deepens this inquiry by situating contemporary understandings of dignity, recognition, and justice within a broader historical context of exclusion and dehumanisation. By critically examining Nazi eugenic practices, this chapter provides a normative and historical lens through which present-day conceptualisations of social justice for persons with intellectual disabilities can be more sharply understood. The articles in Chapter 4, 5, and 6 refine and deepen the findings.

Research question b) *How are art-based communities designed, and in what ways do these designs seek to foster social justice?* is primarily addressed in the qualitative interpretive synthesis scoping presented in Chapter 4. This article systematically analyses design elements, approaches, and artistic expressions within art-based communities, offering insight into how structural and relational features of these communities are intentionally shaped to promote social justice.

Research question c) *How do participants experience art-based communities, and how can these experiences be understood in relation to fostering social justice?* is explored in two empirical contributions. The mixed-methods study, presented in Chapter 5 contributes to research question c) by providing empirical insight into how participants experience creative and experiential therapies and what these experiences mean to them. Although the study was conducted within the Australian National Disability Insurance Scheme rather than specifically within art-based communities, its focus on participants' lived perspectives provides relevant empirical evidence for understanding how creative and experiential practices may support experiences associated with social justice, including choice, recognition, voice, self-efficacy, belonging, and being taken seriously. Chapter 6 subsequently extends this inquiry by examining these experiences within art-based communities through an embodied, relational, and autoethnographic perspective. Taken together, the two studies address different but complementary dimensions of participants' experiences in relation to social justice.

Finally, research question d) *What can be learned from these designs and experiences to inform new practices that aim to foster social justice for persons with intellectual disabilities?* is addressed integratively in the general discussion of the dissertation. Drawing on the findings of all five articles, this final chapter synthesises conceptual, empirical, and experiential insights to articulate implications for theory, practice, education, and future research. Attention is given to how art-based, and art therapy-informed practices can be designed and facilitated to support relational, embodied, and emancipatory forms of social justice for persons with intellectual disabilities in community contexts.

TABLE 1. Overview of research questions, articles, and methodological approaches

Research question	*Article(s)*	*Primary methodological approach*
a) How can social justice for persons with intellectual disabilities be understood and meaningfully related to art-based communities?	Zimmermann et al. (2024). How do arts-based communities conceptualise their contribution to social justice for people living with intellectual disabilities? (JoCAT)	Scoping review (PRISMA-ScR), conceptual and thematic analysis of how social justice is articulated in the literature.
	Zimmermann et al. (2025). Unveiling life stories about social justice for individuals with intellectual disabilities: a case study of Nazi's eugenic practices (Disability & Society)	Historical case study; critical interpretive analysis informed by disability studies and social justice theory.
b) How are art-based communities designed, and in what ways do these designs seek to foster social justice?	Zimmermann et al. (2025). Arts-Based Communities Fostering Social Justice for Persons with Intellectual Disabilities (Canadian Journal of Art Therapy)	Qualitative interpretive synthesis scoping review focusing on design elements, approaches, and artistic expressions.
c) How do participants experience art-based communities, and how can these experiences be understood in relation to fostering social justice?	van Laar et al. (2025). Empowering voices-Learning from NDIS Participants About the Value of Creative and Experiential Therapies (Psychotherapy and Counselling Journal of Australia)	Mixed methods study combining thematic analysis of testimonials with academic literature.
	Zimmermann et al. (2026). Experiencing Social Justice in Art-Based Communities with Persons with Intellectual Disabilities: An Autoethnography	Longitudinal autoethnography informed by arts-based research, sensory ethnography, and evocative writing.
d) What can be learned from these designs and experiences to inform new practices that aim to foster social justice for persons with intellectual disabilities?	General discussion chapter (this dissertation)	Integrative synthesis across all studies; theoretical reflection and practice-oriented interpretation.

Introduction to the interspaces

The interspaces presented at the begin of the chapters of this dissertation consist of parts of art-based narratives, created together by Robin Stemerding, a companion in many stages of this research journey, and me. With the art-based narratives, we explored our lived experiences of our concept of social justice as moments of being heard, seen, recognised, and responded to with care and dignity. Developed at the very beginning of the research, these narratives emerged from a reflective *art-based learning from experience*- process in which our photographs, drawings, collages, and sculptures functioned as media for dialogue, (self-)understanding, and ethical reflection (Hübner, 2024). As art therapists, Robin Stemerding and I used artistic expression to evoke insights that are often difficult to articulate verbally, allowing layered meanings and multiple perspectives to emerge (McNiff, 1998; Visse et al., 2019b).

We initially worked as a duo to create a safe, reflexive space for us before inviting others to participate in what became the first self-initiated art-based community in this research project, enabling us to find our own voices and develop in-depth self-understanding within our particular contexts (Leget, 2013; Niemeijer & Visse, 2016). In what we later called this *first wave* of the art-based community at HAN University of Applied Sciences, we explored our understanding of social justice through Walker's (2007) expressive-collaborative model, approaching social justice as a moral good embedded in everyday practices and lived experiences of being part of this world.

By engaging with these interspaces, the reader of this dissertation is invited to encounter understanding in a non-linear, visual, and embodied form, highlighting the epistemic value of art, image, and story in experiencing and exploring relational and ethical dimensions of everyday life (Leavy, 2015; Walker, 2007).

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Chapter 2

Interspace. Listening to Noempf



(. . .) As an art therapist in a forensic clinic, I often meet Noempf in the patients I work with, as also it is a role I know for myself as a person. Looking for an expression of the many men, including myself, who have no words for their situation. Overwhelmed, feeling mixed up, and not knowing how to react or what to do. Noempf is the man, who does not understand the world and what is happening. He is not sure how he ended up being in this situation.

As therapists, we are open to Noempf, we ask him about his story. Noempf is often aggressive or shows behaviour that cannot be tolerated, but when Noempf tells his own stories, he is serious and tells his concern. Often, he shows uncertainty that you otherwise do not see. There are many unasked questions to which there is no answer. (. . .).

Photo and story: *Images of meaning*. Stemerding & Zimmermann. Unpublished

HOW ART-BASED COMMUNITIES RELATE TO SOCIAL JUSTICE

This chapter addresses research question a), which explores how social justice for persons with intellectual disabilities can be understood in relation to art-based communities. To examine this question, the chapter presents the following published article:

Zimmermann, A., Hermsen, M., Pelgrim, T., van Dijk, L., Awater, A., Leget, C., & Visse, M. (2024). How do arts-based communities conceptualise their contribution to social justice for people living with intellectual disabilities? A scoping review. *JoCAT, 19(*1).

The corresponding appendix can ben downloaded from https://www.jocat-online.org/a-24-zimmermann.

Abstract

This study reports key concepts of arts-based communities regarding their contribution to social justice for people with intellectual disabilities and provides a foundation for future research. A scoping review was carried out, following the systematic search-strategy approach proposed by the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA) guidelines. To extract data, a data-charting form for characteristics and topics of included publications was developed. Thirty-three publications were included in the review. Concepts and terminology were synthesised into key concepts.

The identified key concepts are empowerment and self-advocacy; social interaction, belonging and inclusion; awareness and challenging stigma; advocacy for rights and social change; and skills and employment. These concepts can be related to aims of the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities and to claims in art therapy literature.

Introduction

Disability has historically been viewed through a medical model focused on the incapacity and impairment of individuals. Persons with intellectual disabilities have largely been provided daily support through structures that segregate them from public life, such as residential institutions. Since the 1980s, the growing tendency to see disability as a human and social rights issue has led to policy shifts toward inclusion (Schippers, 2021). There has been a reduction in segregation-focused structures as approaches using a social model of disability have increased, recognizing that persons are disabled not only because of their bodies, but also because of environmental factors (Danermark & Gellerstedt, 2004; World Health Organization, 2011). In a radical political/social model, centered on a feminist framework of disability, disability is acknowledged as multifaceted and contextual, recognizing the need for radical social change (Kafer, 2013; Yi, 2018).

To improve the social position of people with disabilities, the United Nations' *Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD)*, adopted in 2006 at the United Nations Headquarters, outlines aspects such as respect for independence, full participation in society, and accessibility to public life (United Nations, 2006). The aim of the convention is the creation of an inclusive and socially just society where all persons deserve equal economic, political, and social rights and opportunities, and can participate without experiencing obstacles (United Nations, 2006; World Health Organization, 2011).

Despite the convention, persons with intellectual disabilities continue to experience barriers in accessing services, including health, education, employment, and information (Schippers, 2021). Reporting on a worldwide survey, Scior et al. (2020) indicate that in countries where advocacy and self-advocacy are well advanced and equality of opportunity is reflected in policy, law, and service provision, there is widespread support for the CRPD aims. However, double standards persist alongside the message that persons with intellectual disabilities are valued as equals and welcome in all parts of life, frequent concerns are raised that their inclusion in activities, such as education and work, negatively affects the opportunities and advancement of those without intellectual disabilities. Such attitudes reduce social rights of persons with intellectual disabilities and hinder efforts to improve public attitudes, as contact appears key to their success (Scior et al., 2020).

To change mechanisms that maintain social injustice, human rights organizations advise ongoing action (United Nations, 2006). The World Health Organization (2011) reports that community-based development programs can challenge negative attitudes toward others, leading to greater visibility of, and participation by, persons with disabilities. However, there is insufficient clarity about which approaches are most successful. There is a need for research, focusing on approaches that increase social justice for persons with intellectual disabilities in society (Clifford Simplican et al., 2015; Scior et al., 2020).

Arts-based communities

In this study, arts-based communities (ABCs) refer to a broad and diverse concept of groups of people who come together to engage in various artistic activities such as painting, sculpting, dancing, making music, theatrical performance, or writing poetry. These communities provide space for participants to connect, learn, share creative interests, and explore new ideas. Literature in the field of art therapy describes variations of ABCs as, for example, open studios (Moon, 2002, 2016; Vick, 2016), community-based art studios (Allen, 2008; Vick, 2016), or community art studios (Howells & Zelnik, 2009). The design of these communities differs between homogeneous groups of persons, such as psychiatric patients, and heterogeneous groups composed with diverse backgrounds and characteristics. In ABCs, participants are often facilitated to make authentic art rather than being directed by the suggestions or interpretations of others (Moon, 2016).

History and development of arts-based communities

Art-based communities emerged in the late 1930s, when the first art studios were created within psychiatric asylums in the United States and the United Kingdom (Finkel & Bat Or, 2020; Moon, 2016). Art-making was believed to promote mental health and became part of empowerment projects for patients (Moon, 2016). In addition, art therapists began to appreciate the community-based art approach to help patients engage in broader communities (Moon, 2016; Vick, 2016).

During the 1960s and 1970s, as the problems of mental health patients were increasingly contextualised within larger social settings, the ABC approach became more accessible to address the needs of deinstitutionalised adults with developmental, physical, or mental disabilities (Moon, 2016). ABCs such as open studios were set up outside institutional walls. This period also saw the beginning of the studio outsider art movement, in which artwork by persons with intellectual disabilities was recognised as a legitimate genre and art movement (Vick, 2016; Yi, 2018).

According to a scoping review by Finkel and Bat Or (2020), in recent years there has been an increasing prevalence of studio art approaches in art therapy, moving beyond traditional definitions of the profession in institutional contexts and into the realm of social action. This suggests that ABCs have been rediscovered as practices that support social justice experiences for marginalised persons.

Art-based communities and social justice

Art therapy literature indicates that ABCs have the potential to instill agency, promote empowerment and self-advocacy (Frostig, 2011; Kaplan, 2016; Moon, 2002; Talwar, 2016; Vick, 2016), facilitate healthy interactions through the transformative power of the arts (Moon, 2002), raise awareness and give voice to underprivileged or marginalised persons

(Frostig, 2011; Golub, 2005; Talwar, 2016), and contribute to broader social change (Frostig, 2011). Literature concerning ABCs to foster social justice for persons with intellectual disabilities has been addressed by Miller (2020). Miller describes disability art-studio practice as "a counter-cultural endeavour rooted in a political movement, [which] offers a distinct and potentially fruitful framework in which art therapists in studio practice with artists labelled/with intellectual disabilities can advance social justice" (p. 93).

Although existing literature suggests that ABCs have the potential to foster social justice, the theoretical assumptions underlying this claim are not yet supported by rigorous research. Art therapists appear to rely on implicit practical knowledge, and studies specifically examining ABCs and persons with intellectual disabilities in this context remain scarce.

Purpose of the study

To address this knowledge gap, research is required that explores existing ABCs and expands understanding of how they can foster social justice for people with intellectual disabilities. The aim of this study is to contribute to knowledge about the potential of ABCs to increase social justice for this population. This article focuses on the following research question: How do arts-based communities conceptualise their contribution to social justice for people living with intellectual disabilities?

Method

Design

A scoping review was carried out to get an overview of existing literature on the topic, to identify key concepts in a field that we found characterised by a lack of consensus on terminology and key concepts, and to provide a foundation for future research by identifying gaps in the existing literature.

The method used for extraction of relevant information followed the systematic approach proposed by the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA) guidelines (Moher et al., 2009).

Search strategy

The search was carried out in a systematic, replicable, and comprehensive manner from October 2020 to July 2023. The database search was conducted on 11 December 2020 and updated on 13 March 2023. The search strings led back to the start of the databases.

The search strategy consisted of steps following the PRISMA Flow Diagram (Moher et al., 2009; see **Table 1**). The first step consisted of a broad search in seven leading electronic

databases, which were expected to contain academic, peer-reviewed publications on the topic. Search terms, search strings, and databases were chosen with the assistance of an information specialist. The chosen databases were APA PsycInfo (Ebsco), CINAHL Plus with Full Text (Ebsco), Medline (Ebsco), SocINDEX (Ebsco), Web of Science Core Collection, ERIC (Ebsco), and Embase (OVID).

Within each database, papers were searched for containing at least one term or synonym from the block 'intellectual disability,' 'social justice' and 'arts-based.' These terms (including synonyms and closely related words such as 'learning disabilities,' 'cognitive impairment,' 'fairness', 'human rights', 'social equality', 'art therapy', and 'creative arts') were used as index terms or free-text words to represent the concepts mentioned above. For each database a customised search was constructed, taking into account the unique properties of each database, such as syntax and thesauri. For search terms and search strings used for all professional domains in the databases, see Appendix, **Table 4**.

After duplicates were removed (Bramer et al., 2016), the second step entailed screening titles, keywords and abstracts of the remaining 3592 articles, with the help of Rayyan QCRI (Ouzzani et al., 2016). This first selection process was performed by three authors (first, fourth and fifth authors). To increase consistency among reviewers, they worked in pairs, sequentially evaluating the titles, abstracts and keywords. The first author screened all articles, while the fourth and fifth each screened half. Discrepancies between them were discussed weekly to find consensus and, if necessary, resolved with the other authors. If the title, abstract and keywords did not provide enough clarity on whether a study conformed to the screening criteria, the article was included. This ensured it could be subject to a detailed assessment in the next stage.

In the second selection process, full texts of all potentially relevant studies were assessed by the three (first, fourth and fifth) authors. Disagreement between these authors, regarding article eligibility or key criteria, were resolved through discussion with the remaining authors. During the second selection process, the selection was sharpened by excluding all studies that did not match the inclusion criteria.

Study selection

A priori inclusion and exclusion criteria were established and implemented.

Inclusion

The following were included:

studies with primary evidence of English-language peer-reviewed journals focusing on relevant information about ABCs that show a relationship to social justice for people living with intellectual disabilities in terms of, for example, inclusion, social change, human rights and empowerment (see Appendix, **Table 4**, S1):

- a variety of art expressions, to detect all arts-based approaches in communities, such as visual art, theatre, dance, music and poetry (see Appendix, **Table 4**, S3-S7)
- publications reporting qualitative studies, quantitative studies, mixed-methods studies, case studies and action-research studies; and
- publications with a method section.
- There were no restrictions in relation to the design of or approach in the ABC.

Exclusion

The following were excluded:

- studies of ABCs limited exclusively to educational settings, and studies of ABCs limited to producing vocational or for-art-marketing emphases only
- publications that did not describe empirical data, providing an understanding of the practice of arts-based communities
- papers identified as discussion or opinion papers and
- studies available merely in the form of an abstract or presentation, or duplicate.

Quality assessment

The quality of each of the included studies was assessed and discussed in pairs by the first, fourth and fifth authors using the Standard Quality Assessment Criteria for Evaluating Primary Research Papers from a Variety of Fields guide (Kmet et al., 2004; see Appendix). The checklist for assessing the quality of qualitative studies (and the qualitative part in mixed-methods studies) consisted of ten criteria with a maximum summary score of 20 points (see Appendix, **Table 2**). The checklist for assessing the quality of quantitative studies (and the quantitative part in mixed-methods studies) consisted of 14 criteria with a maximum of 28 points (see Appendix, **Table 3**). The items were scored depending on the degree to which the publication met the criteria ('yes' = 2, 'partial' = 1, 'no' = 0). Items in quantitative studies not applicable to a particular study design were marked 'n/a' and were excluded from the calculation of the summary score. By summing up the points, a summary score was calculated for each publication. For this article, all papers selected during the search have been included and treated equally regardless of quality scores. It was expected that the inclusion and exclusion criteria guaranteed a quality-standard minimum, such as an underlying research project, peer review and a method section. The aim was not to source evidence of the impact of the ABCs in relationship to social justice, but to identify terminology, ideas and thoughts that could teach us about underlying concepts.

Charting the data

For data extraction, a data-charting form (Supplementary Material 3) was jointly developed by four authors (first, second, sixth and seventh authors). This tool, based on the research question, included classification of findings according to (a) reference, date

and country of publication; (b) focus of study; (c) study design, description of sample and quality score; (d) described concepts in findings and conclusion of the study with regard to fostering social justice for people living with intellectual disabilities; (e) ABC design; (f) ABC approach; and (g) artform and its use in relationship to social justice.

Four reviewers (first, second, fourth and fifth authors) independently extracted the data from the selected papers and entered them into the data-charting form, discussed the results, and continuously updated the data-charting form. Any missing data were requested from the study authors and a time limit of four weeks given for their response.

The first and second authors synthesised similar terminology and concepts into key concepts.

Overview of the findings

In this section, an overview of the extraction of the findings is presented alongside what the authors judged to be the most important concepts. Firstly, the number of included articles after the screening process is presented. Secondly, the data extraction process is outlined. Thirdly, characteristics of the included studies/publications, including the identified key concepts for answering the research question of the scoping review, are presented.

Number of included articles after the screening process

The PRISMA flow diagram (**Figure 1**) presents the systematic search and screening process. In total, 4799 publications were found. Out of these, 1207 findings were duplicates, leaving 3592 to be screened. We excluded 3321 findings following application of the protocol's inclusion and exclusion criteria. The remaining 271 articles were screened full-text, applying the inclusion criteria. Finally, 33 of the publications identified through the systematic search were included in the review.

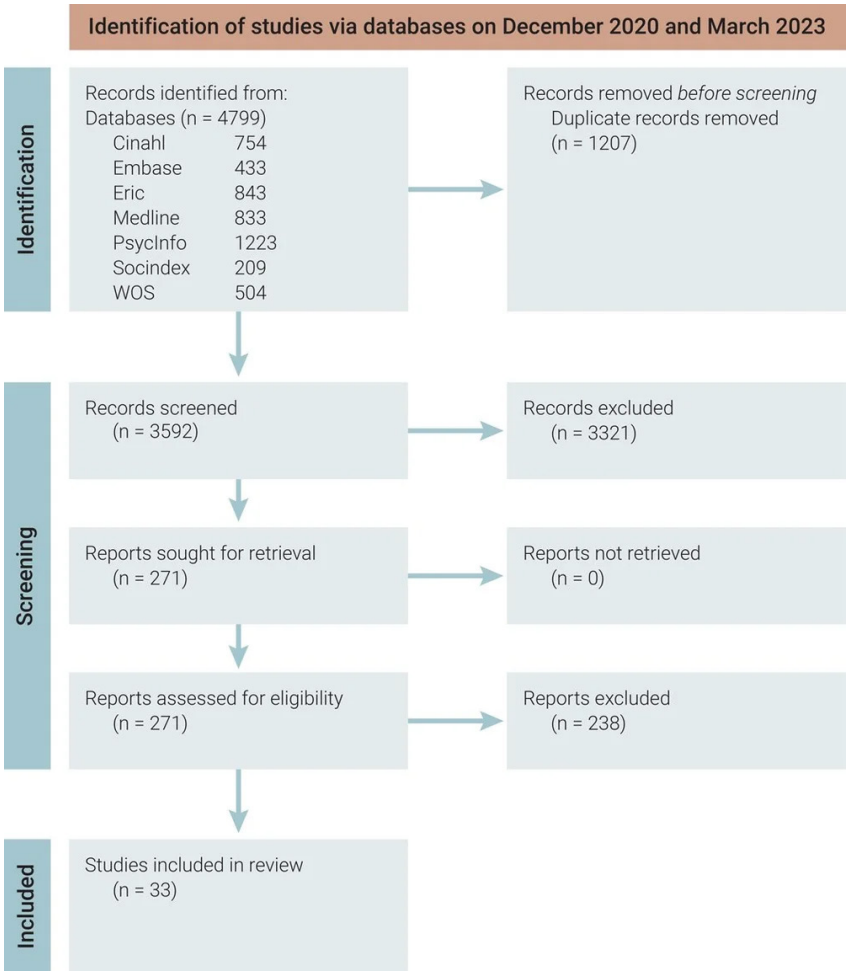


FIGURE 1. PRISMA flow diagram (Moher et al., 2009).

Data extraction

The data-charting form (see Appendix, **Table 1**) presents the data extraction of the included papers. Next to characteristics of the included publications, we identified terminology and concepts that were synthesised into five key concepts answering the research question.

Characteristics of the included publications

Geographical variation and variation in date of publication. Of the 33 studies, 14 were conducted in the UK, five in the US, three each in Canada and Norway, two in Australia, and one each in South Korea (as part of the Australian study), Ireland, Finland, the Netherlands, Sweden, Portugal and Spain.

Prior to 2000, one article was included. From the period 2001–10, eight articles were included. In five articles, the arts-based community was performed in Europe, and in three articles it was in the US. From the period 2011–20, 19 articles were included. Fifteen articles described arts-based communities in Europe, two articles described arts-based communities in the US, and two described those in Canada. From 2021 until the date of the search in 2023, five articles were included – two from Australia, two from Europe and one from Canada.

Study design. Of the 33 included papers, 24 studies were identified as qualitative studies. Eleven of these were identified as case studies, two as inclusive studies, and one as narrative study. Five were identified as action research, three as mixed-method studies with a quantitative part of data collection and analysis, and one as a quantitative study.

Article quality. The quality of the selected qualitative publications ranged from five out of 20 possible points to 20 out of 20 points (see Appendix, **Table 1**, column 4). Five articles were assessed as scoring less than half of the possible points (Almeida et al., 2011; Calvert, 2010; Hourigan, 2009; Macpherson & Bleasdale, 2021; Moore, 2015).

All papers reporting a quantitative study, or containing a quantitative component, were assessed as scoring 26 or more out of 28 possible points (Cook, 2020; Kivijärvi & Poutiainen, 2019; MacGlone et al., 2020; Schlosnagle et al., 2014).

Notably, in most of the selected papers, the number of participants (N/n) included in the empirical data was unclear (Almeida et al., 2011; Caldwell et al., 2008; Curtis & Mercado, 2004; Harter et al., 2006; Ineland, 2005; Johansen & Saur, 2018; King et al., 2016; Moore, 2015; Price & Barron, 1999; Richards et al., 2019; Saur & Johansen, 2013; Schlosnagle et al., 2014) or was assessed as small (Calvert, 2010, N = 1; French & Jones, 2019, N = 1; Goddard, 2015, n = 3/unclear; Hall, 2010, N = 2; Hourigan, 2009, N = 1; Macpherson & Bleasdale, 2012, N = 1; Macpherson & Fox, 2016, N = 1; Scott & Watfern, 2021, N = 1).

Only three studies were explicitly identified as inclusive research studies (French & Jones, 2019; Scott & Watfern, 2021; Whitehurst, 2006). Two of these were (co-)authored by researchers with experiential expertise as participants in an arts-based community while living with intellectual disabilities, thereby offering an insider perspective (French & Jones, 2019; Scott & Watfern, 2021). Both studies were assessed as high-quality articles, scoring 18 out of 20 points.

Key concepts

By data extraction of the included papers, five key concepts about fostering social justice were identified. They are presented in order from most common to least common.

TABLE 1. Key concepts.

Synthesised key concept	Number of articles with related terminology
Social interaction, belonging and inclusion	24
Empowerment and self-advocacy	18
Awareness and challenging stigma	14
Social change and advocacy for rights	11
Skills and employment	8

(1) Social interaction, belonging and inclusion

In 24 selected articles, the key concept of contribution of the ABC to social justice for people with intellectual disabilities can be described as more or better interaction. The data show a variety of concepts and terminology, such as social inclusion and integration into the wider society (Curtis & Mercado, 2004; Schlosnagle et al., 2014; Stickley et al., 2012; Whitehurst, 2006), inclusion in the art scene (Levy et al., 2017; Macpherson & Bleasdale, 2012), and inclusive experiences for all within ABCs (Hourigan, 2009). Sense of belonging, relationships of belonging, person-directed experiences of belonging, and experiences of attachment as values in and aims of ABCs are of interest in a great number of articles. Hall (2010, 2013), King et al. (2016), and Kivijärvi and Poutiainen (2019) describe sense of belonging as an important experience in the ABCs. Other included articles addressing inclusion and integration, (social) collaboration, relationship and sense of belonging are by Caldwell et al. (2008), Calvert (2010), Dickinson and Hutchinson (2019), Goddard (2015), Harter et al. (2006), Johansen and Saur (2018), Macpherson and Fox (2016), Moore (2015), Nijkamp and Cardol (2020), Price and Barron (1999), Saur and Johansen (2013), Schnellert et al. (2021), and Scott and Watfern (2021).

In relation to the barrier between participants within the ABC, Hourigan (2009) writes that ABCs can create social interactions that help socially challenged persons make lasting relationships and create an inclusive tone of acceptance for all participants. Other examples are joining in with arts activities to feel part of the community (Stickley et al., 2012), and carefully listening to each other (Macpherson & Fox, 2016). Nijkamp and Cardol (2020) write that their study reveals that realizing inclusion in a collaboration between actors with and without disabilities is not easy. Nevertheless, they found examples in which actors with and without intellectual disabilities co-created and collaborated on an equal basis.

Several articles addressed the reduction of the barrier between ABC participants and people outside the ABC. The concept of the contribution of ABCs to social justice concerning this barrier is described as fostering social inclusion into the wider society

(Curtis & Mercado, 2004; Schlosnagle et al., 2014; Stickley et al., 2012; Whitehurst, 2006), or inclusion in the field of art (Levy et al., 2017; Macpherson & Bleasdale, 2012). Levy et al. wrote in 2017 that the boundaries of who could engage in the arts and experience the freedom to be the person they wanted to be, which for some might be a musician or a dancer, were only beginning to be disrupted.

According to authors, ABCs can transcend barriers in social interaction, such as traditional hierarchies (Harter et al., 2006; Macpherson & Bleasdale, 2012), enabling people to combat social alienation (Calvert, 2010), establishing a communicative space for encounters on equal terms (Calvert, 2010), creating connection on a deeper level (Hall, 2013), fostering understanding (Macpherson & Fox, 2016), and allowing people to be taken seriously (Price & Barron, 1999). According to others, ABCs that address resistance and activism support breaking down barriers of social interaction by transforming exclusion and stigmatization into community engagement (e.g., Hall, 2010; Johansen & Saur, 2018; Moore, 2015; Saur & Johansen, 2013).

Two of the articles describe that it is not easy to break down barriers of social interaction by participation in ABCs (Hall, 2010; Nijkamp & Cardol, 2020). Hall (2010) writes that the belonging that people yearn for is largely that within the ABC. The development of belonging to wider society is much more limited.

(2) Empowerment and self-advocacy

According to 18 articles, ABCs contribute to social justice for people with intellectual disabilities by fostering empowerment and self-advocacy. This concept is underlined by three arguments:

First, being part of the arts-based community can contribute to building confidence, self-esteem, a sense of purpose and growth (Dickinson & Hutchinson, 2019; French & Jones, 2019; MacGlone et al., 2020; Schlosnagle et al., 2014). It is stated that people with intellectual disabilities become braver in relation to what they believe they can achieve, and that they can discover their personal and authentic preferences (King et al., 2016; Schnellert et al., 2021; Scott, 2021).

Second, creating art is considered to promote self-advocacy, empowerment and autonomy (Cook, 2020; Curtis & Mercado, 2004; Price & Barron, 1999). The art-making process, such as creating a theatre play, can be an empowering and rewarding process by promoting people to use their own voice of expression (Almeida et al., 2011; Nijkamp & Cardol, 2020; Richards et al., 2019). Within the creative process people can work according to their own perceived strengths and abilities (Stickley et al., 2012) and are involved in shaping their own personal outcomes (Levy et al., 2017).

Third, having the opportunity to perform the personal in public spheres, such as performances before an audience (Goddard, 2015; Harter et al., 2006), creates opportunities for people with intellectual disabilities to be taken seriously (Parry, 2017; Price & Barron, 1999). Johansen and Saur (2018) argue that when one is visible and claims space on a stage or with one's artwork, it is not so easy to be oppressed without the oppression itself becoming visible.

(3) Awareness and challenging stigma

Thirteen articles outline concepts that the authors synthesised to the key concept of raising awareness and challenging stigma as a contribution of ABCs to social justice. The data show two perspectives on that concept:

First, that through performance arts it can be possible to understand and celebrate differing abilities, gifts, shared passion for the arts and the realisation that perhaps people are more alike than different (Curtis & Mercado, 2004). In this way, art is seen as having the ability to provoke an awareness transformation, in which persons with intellectual disabilities become more visible and less seen as incapable (Hall, 2010, 2013; Kivijärvi & Poutiainen, 2019; Parry, 2017; Price & Barron, 1999; Yoon et al., 2020).

Second, according to Richards et al. (2019), all persons with intellectual disabilities face direct or indirect stigma because of their label. Through sharing stories and counter-narratives by means of art, the stigma associated with disability stereotyping and the misconceptions of living with intellectual disabilities is challenged and questioned (Caldwell et al., 2008; Harter et al., 2006; Richards et al., 2019). Art is supposed to be an activity that shapes lasting relationships and attachment, which can create an inclusive tone against stigma (Hourigan, 2009; Macpherson & Bleasdale, 2012; Schnellert et al., 2021).

(4) Social change and advocacy for rights

In eleven articles it is mentioned that ABCs can serve as platforms for social change and advocacy for rights. The key concept leans into the perspective that artistic expression can bring attention to issues of social (in)justice, and that honoring the artistic expression of persons with intellectual disabilities is a political gesture (Johansen & Saur, 2018; Price & Barron, 1999).

The synthesis of the variation in the articles related to this key concept describes that artworks, art performances and art-based stories can increase the autonomy of people with intellectual disabilities (Harter et al., 2006), provide new economic and aesthetic opportunities for persons otherwise excluded from the public sphere (Harter et al., 2006; Macpherson & Bleasdale, 2012; Yoon et al., 2020), and transform understanding of persons with intellectual disabilities (Hall, 2010; Yoon et al., 2020).

According to authors, the ABCs can actively work against oppression (Goddard, 2015; Viscardis et al., 2019), transform beliefs and values, at least in some respect (Kivijärvi & Poutiainen, 2019; Viscardis et al., 2019), and disrupt traditional hierarchies and practices (Schnellert et al., 2021; Viscardis et al., 2019). Ineland (2005) writes, for example, that theatre group Olla operates from the viewpoint that they are renegades outside institutional norms and performs above the institutional range. Therefore, this has influenced the institutional environment. According to Saur and Johansen (2013), the traditional view on arts performances can be challenged and the actors will eventually be seen as a natural part of the city's cultural life. The authors write that to succeed in changing old-fashioned ways of thinking, it requires brave decisions that dare to challenge both audience and actors. In their second article (Johansen & Saur, 2018), they underline that, by making the unexpected visible, one can create turmoil for the cause of a democratic society with shared decision-making on an equal basis.

(5) Skills and employment

Data show that some ABCs provide skill-development programs and vocational training for individuals with intellectual disabilities. Eight of the included articles report that by fostering artistic abilities and personal, social or practical skills, participants gain greater independence and enhance their employability (French & Jones, 2019; Goddard, 2015; Harter et al., 2006; MacGlone et al., 2020; Price & Barron, 1999; Schlosnagle et al., 2014; Scott & Watfern, 2021; Yoon et al., 2020). Price and Barron (1999) write that the Lawnmowers Theatre Company operates, beside other purposes, as a vehicle for development of personal skills such as communication, dealing with key agencies, management and basic finance.

The ABCs partly collaborate with local businesses, organisations and galleries to create employment opportunities and promote the inclusion of people with intellectual disabilities in the creative industries (French & Jones, 2019; Goddard, 2015; Harter et al., 2006; Yoon et al., 2020). French and Jones (2019) report, for example, that the ABC led to a business called Positive You for the first author, who is living with intellectual disabilities. She writes that the business has provided her with many opportunities to meet new people and see new places, has enabled her to be taken seriously, boosted her self-esteem, and given her the experience that it is her right to be included in decisions that affect her.

Discussion

The object of this review was to identify concepts of arts-based communities (ABCs) that relate to their potential contribution to social justice for people with intellectual disabilities, to synthesise key concepts, and to provide a foundation for future research.

Through a systematic and replicable search process, 33 articles were selected, assessed, and reviewed. These studies demonstrated a broad variety of research foci, samples, and quality scores, allowing existing knowledge in this field to be scoped.

The earliest article meeting the inclusion criteria dates from 1999. The findings show an upward trend in publications over time, suggesting both an increase in the number of ABCs for persons with intellectual disabilities and growing academic attention to this topic. This trend aligns with the findings of Finkel and Bat Or (2020), who identified an increasing prevalence of studio art approaches and a shift of these practices toward the domain of social action. ABCs for people with intellectual disabilities that foster social justice appear to be part of this broader movement.

Most included studies employed qualitative research designs, such as case studies or action research, often with small or unclear sample sizes. Future research should therefore aim to develop a richer and more rigorous body of knowledge, not only regarding the potential of ABCs as approaches to foster social justice for persons with intellectual disabilities but also concerning the perceived impact of participation on their lives.

Only three articles were explicitly identified as inclusive research projects, and only two were (co-)authored by researchers with experiential expertise as ABC participants with intellectual disabilities, thereby offering a firsthand insider perspective. This indicates that future research would benefit from greater collaboration with, and direct inclusion of, the voices of persons with intellectual disabilities to strengthen insider understanding (de Haas et al., 2022).

In analysing the selected papers, priority was given to examining terminology, ideas, and perspectives that illuminate art-based community concepts contributing to social justice. Consequently, all papers meeting the selection criteria were included, regardless of quality scores. In future research focused on perceived impact, publication quality should be considered more explicitly to ensure appropriate interpretation of findings and to assess whether caution is required when including results from lower-quality studies.

The ABCs described in the included articles were almost exclusively located in Western, high-income countries, particularly the United Kingdom and the United States. One Australian study reported on two ABCs in South Korea. This lack of geographical and cultural diversity may be attributable to the inclusion criteria, especially language restrictions. Expanding future searches to include publications in other languages could

broaden the scope to additional regions and introduce new perspectives, for example by examining concepts of social justice not explicitly related to the CRPD. Across regions, no significant differences were identified in the concepts or terminology used.

Similar concepts and terminology were synthesised into five key concepts related to the CRPD and to art therapy literature addressing the needs of persons with developmental, physical, or mental disabilities, as outlined in the introduction. Commonalities were identified between literature addressing ABCs as spaces of social justice for marginalised populations in general and for persons with intellectual disabilities in particular. Art therapy literature highlights shared concepts such as fostering agency, facilitating empowerment and self-advocacy, promoting healthy interactions, raising awareness, amplifying the voices of underprivileged or marginalised individuals, and contributing to broader social change.

In relation to CRPD aims, various terms related to social inclusion were synthesised into the concept of *social interaction, belonging, and inclusion*. Additionally, concepts such as self-esteem, autonomy, and working from perceived strengths and abilities were synthesised into *empowerment and self-advocacy*, aligning with the CRPD emphasis on independence. A further key concept, *skills and employment*, was linked to the CRPD aim of independent living opportunities for persons with intellectual disabilities.

The CRPD's conceptualization of social justice, which emphasises respect for independence, social inclusion, participation, and accessibility (United Nations, 2006; World Health Organization, 2011), does not clearly specify how these rights can be realised in everyday life (Duffy, 2023). Duffy distinguishes between rights and entitlement as they are enacted in concrete practice. For example, the entitlement to participate in one's own community rather than in segregated day-care settings. He therefore advocates for a shift in focus from quality of life within service systems to citizenship beyond them: a life lived meaningfully in community, within relationships and interactions, as a full citizen.

Many included publications addressed inclusion both within ABCs and in interaction with people outside these communities, particularly through exhibitions and performances. However, ABCs appear to be largely situated within care systems, with limited attention to fostering social change aimed at entitlements beyond these systems. In contrast, some publications focused more explicitly on political and societal change, for example by challenging democratic decision-making structures (Johansen & Saur, 2018), disrupting traditional hierarchies and practices (Schnellert et al., 2021; Viscardis et al., 2019), or positioning themselves outside institutional norms (Ineland, 2005).

In summary, an increasing movement of ABCs toward fostering social justice both within and beyond care systems can be observed. However, the perceived impact of different designs and the extent to which they challenge the binary between care systems and broader society remain unclear.

Responsibility for fulfilling the CRPD's aim of an inclusive and socially just society, where all individuals have equal economic, political, and social rights and opportunities (United Nations, 2006; World Health Organization, 2011) appears to be disproportionately placed on persons with intellectual disabilities themselves (Treanor, 2020), including within ABCs. The reviewed literature emphasises personal growth, self-empowerment, self-advocacy, and skills development. For many persons with intellectual disabilities, such expectations may be unrealistic and risk reinforcing deficit-oriented perspectives, diverting attention from societal responsibilities, including the provision of adequate resources and structural support required for full citizenship.

Duffy (2023) further advocates for storytelling as a means of fostering connection and mutual understanding in the pursuit of social justice. From a critical disability culture perspective, Yi (2018) similarly calls for the exploration of community-based art practices as tools for social justice. She argues for a shift away from medicalised disability narratives toward an understanding of disability as a cultural identity that exists alongside and interacts with other cultures. In *Res(crip)ting Art Therapy: Disability Culture as a Social Justice Intervention*, Yi (2018) describes two self-advocacy projects aimed at making visible the often silenced performative desires of persons with disabilities, seeking to rescript dominant disability-as-impairment narratives.

These approaches to fostering social justice warrant further investigation, as they fell outside the scope of the present review. Future research could explore how storytelling becomes a reciprocal process rather than a one-sided burden placed on persons with intellectual disabilities, and how alternative disability narratives might transform the perspectives of non-disabled individuals. A subsequent article is currently in preparation to further examine ABC designs and approaches and their implications for social justice.

Finally, the reviewed ABCs, their designs, and their underlying concepts raise important questions for future research. Promising topics include the potential of ABCs to reduce social barriers between persons with intellectual disabilities and others, effective designs and approaches for future ABCs, and participants' perspectives on the role of ABCs in resistance, activism, and social change.

Limitations of the review

The selection criteria and the search strategy limited the review. First, no 'grey' data were included, such as videos, live performances or presentation papers. 'Grey' data could elaborate knowledge on the subject by adding empirical data, perhaps even from an evaluative perspective of participants with ID. Second, publications focusing on ABCs with no other purpose than including children in mainstream education were excluded. During our study, many of these publications were identified. A review on that subject

could increase knowledge about ABCs that aim to foster inclusion in education. Third, some of the articles included were assessed with low-quality scores. After discussion, they were included in the study, because empirical data to answer our question were expected from these publications. Fourth, the language restriction in the inclusion criteria led to a lack of geographical/cultural variation of data.

Conclusion

Arts-based communities conceptualise their contribution to social justice for people with intellectual disabilities through a variety of concepts and terminologies, which were synthesised in this study into five key concepts. These concepts can be related to the aims of the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities as well as to claims made in existing art therapy literature on art-based communities.

As the search yielded a rich diversity of studies, further research is needed to deepen understanding of these key concepts and their relevance for future ABCs as interventions to foster social justice for persons living with intellectual disabilities. In particular, future research should focus on identifying successful designs and approaches, as well as on exploring participants' perspectives and the perceived impact of ABC participation on their lives.

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Chapter 3

Interspace. Playing the piano after losing my path



(. . .) My head was spinning for weeks, all day long. (. . .). It was during the second day of the hike when I got completely lost in the landscape. There was no one to ask for the right path, and it turned out that I was walking in circles. I got desperate and decided to take another path, not knowing where it would lead me. After another hour, some houses appeared in the woods. And there it was: a piano, just at the side of my path. I sat down and started to play. Sad music emerged when I intuitively moved my fingers over the black and white keys. I felt grateful for the music and whoever it was, that placed the piano there. It felt like it has been placed there for lost people like me. Like someone knew, that it could help me reconnecting with myself and the world around me, clearing my head in a situation of loss and being lost. Making music comforted me at that moment. My body and mind got nourished. The clouds in my head gave way to a clearer view. The thought of that person putting the piano there made my heart feel warm. (. . .).

Photo and story: *Images of meaning*. Stemerding & Zimmermann. Unpublished

SOCIAL JUSTICE, DISABILITY, AND HISTORICAL VICTIMISATION

This chapter addresses research question a), with a focus on understanding social justice for persons with intellectual disabilities in historical contexts. It draws on a case study of Nazi eugenic practices to examine how injustice has been socially and institutionally constructed. The chapter presents the following published article:

Zimmermann, A., Hermsen, M., Visse, M., & Leget, C. (2025). Unveiling life stories about social justice for individuals with intellectual disabilities: a case study of Nazi's eugenic practices. *Disability & Society*, *40*(10), 2779–2799. https://doi.org/10.1080/09687599.2025.2455095

Abstract

This paper unveils the story of Wilhelm, an individual with intellectual and physical disabilities in the context of eugenics practices during the Nazi regime. The findings of the singular case study are presented in a storytelling format, for contextual understanding, and to help everyone better comprehend the challenges faced by individuals with intellectual disabilities. Wilhelm's story has been discussed through the lens of social justice shaping his world into one in which violence was justifiable. Lessons have been drawn to advocate for ongoing evaluation of social justice concepts, guided by criteria that reflect the realities and voices of the individuals involved. Additionally, we seek to enhance possibilities to unveil stories and honour the memory of individuals with intellectual disabilities who endured the atrocities of the Nazi era.

Introduction

The twentieth century witnessed a dark chapter in history marked by the heinous atrocities committed during the Nazi era (1933–1945). Amidst the well-documented horrors of genocide and systemic discrimination, the plight of people with intellectual disabilities remains a somber and often overlooked aspect (Hepburn, 2014; Silvestri, 2019, 2023). Their representation and memorialisation have long been delegated to the margins of Holocaust memory work and hidden from public consciousness (Hepburn, 2014). According to Silvestri (2019), the Germans of today find it hard to relate to these persecutions and killings, preserving the memory of it in the private and family dimension, and often hidden as family secret.

However, the remembrance of individual victims holds significance as it serves to forge a connection between a victim's family memory and the collective memory of Nazi practices (Silvestri, 2023). Hearing, recognising, and commemorating the specific experiences of individual victims within the broader historical context elucidate the intricate interplay between personal and collective memories surrounding the atrocities committed during this period. As Robertson et al. (2019, p. 7) wrote about historical personal life stories: "Unique in many ways, universal in others, these accounts give us deeper insights into those historical events, as well as the individual experiences of the thousands of adults and children who were murdered".

In navigating the web of documentation pertaining to the Nazis' eugenic practices targeting individuals with disabilities, it becomes evident that existing literature has focused on the ethical dimensions of the historical events. Notwithstanding contributions of scholars, including Hepburn (2014), Light et al. (2022), Robertson et al. (2019), Rotzoll et al. (2010), and Silvestri (2019, 2023), a significant gap in the current body of knowledge is observed regarding a comprehensive understanding of the experiences of individuals with intellectual disabilities of eugenics practices during the Nazi regimes. To learn lessons from these understandings that are applicable to contemporary social practices, we have employed a social justice lens.

Social justice

The understanding of justice is inherently fluid, exhibiting variations across temporal, spatial, and cultural dimensions, as it eludes derivation from a singular fundamental idea. Rather, justice emerges as a concept accommodating diverse interpretations and conceptions. Although these interpretations and conceptions may differ, there is a consensus that justice fundamentally revolves around the pursuit of a particular good (Barry & Matravers, 1998/2011).

An influent conception that influences theory of social justice in the twentieth century comes from the American political philosopher John Rawls. Rawls (1999) posits justice primarily in the complex framework of a society's basic structure, including family, political-, economical-, and legal institutions. In his social contract theory, Rawls argues that two principles would be reached through an agreement from a neutral, distant position of fairness and equality. These are firstly, that each person is to have an equal right to the most extensive basic liberty compatible with a similar liberty for others and secondly, that social and economic inequalities are to be arranged so that they are reasonably expected to be to everyone's advantage, and attached to positions and offices open to all (Rawls, 2006; Wenar, 2025).

Today, concepts of social justice are influenced by Rawls' theory, and by various United Nations declarations. The United Nations (UN) had played a significant role in shaping and promoting principles related to social justice in a global scale. One important declaration, the *Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD)* was adopted in 2006. The CRPD recognises the rights of persons with disabilities, including their social right to participation in all aspects of life. It contributes to the promotion of social justice by addressing issues of inclusion and equal opportunities (United Nations, 2006).

A different perspective to understand social justice had been provided by French philosopher and social theorist Michel Foucault (1926–1984). Instead of departing from Rawls' theoretically possible neutral, distant position of fairness and equality, or from a theoretical-juridical perspective with laws, force, and conventions, his work has implications for understanding often hidden power systems and dynamics that maintain inequality, marginalisation, and exclusion in society. A system of power, in Foucault's words 'apparatus', refers to a dynamic and complex network consisting of discourses, institutions, laws, administrative measures, scientific statements, and practices within society. This network works to produce, regulate, and control knowledge, maintain power relations, and shape how people understand themselves and their place in society (Foucault, 1980). The apparatus is not fixed; it adapts to historical conditions and influences how we perceive and engage with the world. It operates as a strategic system that governs individual behaviour and the organization of society, creating and sustaining certain truths and norms that shape our reality (Foucault, 1980). Departing from Foucault's theory, social justice involves resisting power dynamics that define what counts as normal, healthy, or worthy.

The main object of this study is to listen to stories about the childhood years of an individual with intellectual and physical disabilities, victimised by the Nazi regime, and to explore archival records, historical documents, and scholarly accounts of the subject, to unveil and understand the experience by individuals with intellectual disabilities. By better understanding, lessons can be drawn to encourages advocacy for social justice for people with intellectual disabilities.

Method

Research design

Using a singular case study design to unravel the complexity and understand in-depth the meaning and context of lived experiences of a single demarcated person from multiple perspectives, this study unveils the historical life story of a person with intellectual and physical disabilities in the context of the Nazi's euthanasia practices (Abma & Stake, 2014). According to Abma and Stake, a case study is preferable where value-laden moral issues are concerned to generate bottom-up context-related knowledge.

We concentrated on the particularities of Wilhelm's story to show how things worked for him in that context (Abma & Stake, 2014). Due to quantitative limitations of data in his story, we enriched the story into a composed portrait by including more historical life stories of victims and survivors of the Nazis with similar characteristics.

To better understand the fragmented story and what can be learned from this person's story, we related historical documents and scholarly articles to the case to clarify the coherence of the story and the influence of the context on his story.

Starting with the case, our design has not been preordained, recognizing that we did not know enough about the complexity and particularities of Wilhelm's life story in advance and searched for issues that emerged (Abma & Stake, 2014).

Participant selection

About 200,000 persons with disabilities were killed by the Nazi regime between 1940 and 1945 (United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, 2026). Regrettably, the number of individuals with intellectual disabilities who survived persecution is very limited (Schlebach, 2024), and survivors were not documented. It is likely that most survivors have since passed away. Consequently, the selection of informants for research becomes necessary to approximate the experiences of the victims as closely as possible.

The individual identified under the pseudonym Wilhelm, whose story is the focal point of investigation in this study, is a distant relative of the first author, Anja Zimmermann (AZ). His story as a victim and survivor of the Nazi era occurred serendipitously during a family gathering, thereby leading to the adoption of convenience sampling for the study. Wilhelm died of old age only some years before, while his story was not known by most of even close family members. After Wilhelm's death, a relative by marriage and neighbour to Wilhelm took, out of curiosity, the initial steps to unveil Wilhelm's story during the Nazi era. He was the first to collect information from German government agencies and persons who may have had information. Fragments of the story subsequently circulated within the family, indicating that Wilhelm indeed had been persecuted by the Nazis. This information bore relevance to the context of Nazi's eugenics practices. This confirmed the

selection of the case, as we expected to learn from it about the experiences of individuals with intellectual disabilities during the Nazi regime (Abma & Stake, 2014).

For many years, the individual identified under the pseudonym Erika cared for Wilhelm daily, cultivating a deep familiarity with him. Consequently, Erika was purposively selected as the initial participant. To enrichen our understanding by multiple perspectives, we invited subsequently the remaining five close family members (Guba & Lincoln, 1989). They had resided near Wilhelm for an extensive duration. Additionally, a sixth, more distantly related family member was invited after finishing a preliminary version of the article. Notably, all participants belonged to the second generation following the Second World War.

Ethical considerations

Formal ethical approval for this study was granted by the Institutional Review Board of the University of Humanistic Studies in Utrecht, the Netherlands. [Number 2020.16.].

Informed consent

Before inviting potential informants, they were informed about the study's purpose, the emotional impact of discussing Wilhelm's story and Nazi practices, their role, and their right to withdraw at any time without penalty. Participants could ask questions before providing informed consent, which was obtained from all interviewees. Confidentiality and anonymity were strictly maintained, with identifying information securely stored.

Data collection

Empirical data collection. The first author (AZ) collected data between 2021 and 2023. She made several visits to Wilhelm's legal guardian and relatives in his village, spending five days in 2021 and three in 2022. During these visits, she conducted open interviews and conversations until saturation (Abma & Stake, 2014), reviewed Erika's archival materials, documents from other participants, and photographed relevant items from Wilhelm's home. AZ also volunteered at St. Josefshaus Herten, where Wilhelm was housed by the Nazis, contributing to the 'art kitchen' initiative in 2021 and 2022. This facilitated discussions with staff, including the archivist, who shared documents and anecdotal accounts from the Nazi era. Additional data were gathered through online research and correspondence via email and phone calls with participants and officials.

Document collection. Between 2021 and 2023, documents were collected using a snowball approach to gather diverse sources on Wilhelm's experiences and Nazi eugenics' impact on individuals with intellectual disabilities. The first author (AZ) focused on accessing Wilhelm's files from Erika's archive and visited St. Josefshaus Herten to seek additional records. Information was also requested from governmental archives, such as Herten's village archives, and from family members.

AZ also sourced historical and scholarly documents containing at least one term or synonym from the block 'Nazi,' and 'intellectual disability.' These terms (including synonyms and closely related words in English or German language such as learning disabilities; Behinderte; *Aktion T4*; Nazi eugenics; Nazi regime; Nazi era; Nationalsozialismus; Krankenmorde) were used to represent the concepts mentioned above to ensure comprehensive triangulation (Abma & Stake, 2014). Documents were included if they: (1) shared stories of similar victims/survivors, (2) involved those connected to the events, (3) were published on governmental or Holocaust memorial websites, or (4) were academic research. Once data saturation was reached on topics like *Aktion T4*, additional documents were excluded.

AZ also sought testimonials and personal accounts from survivors and families, including from the online *Aktion T4* memorial (https://gedenkort-t4.eu/biografien) and connected with a family member of a victim like Wilhelm.

Data analysis

Transcripts from the audio recorded interviews and thick descriptions of conversations, and the personal files from the family archive were organised to coherently tell Wilhelm's story in a chronological way. In different rounds, stories about Wilhelm, the selected historical documents, and testimonies or accounts of persons connected to the events that we have found in scholarly articles and on memorial websites were combined to interpret the case by going back and forth between details of the story and the greater whole (Abma & Stake, 2014). By bringing the different elements of the story together, a meaningful story emerged.

The first author shared three draft versions of the story with the participants for member check and discussed with them what has been learned so far and which questions still needed answering. A later preliminary version has been discussed with the more distant family member. Thereby the data slowly developed into the final story in the findings section of this article, telling Wilhelm's story combining different perspectives and sources within the historical context (Abma & Stake, 2014).

Findings

Limited data concerning Wilhelm's experiences have been found due to the Nazis' destruction of evidence, stories being veiled, and survivors remained silenced by traumas. Based on the data that were found, a composite portrayal called 'Wilhelm's story', is narrated through the eyes of the first author (AZ), aiming to foster genuine connection between the reader and Wilhelm, and a deeper understanding of the challenges he faced. The story is told by zooming in to and out from the contextual Big Story and Wilhelm's Story in the Big Story.

The big story

In the rainy summer of 2020, at my dad's 90th birthday party, I spoke with Erika, a distant relative, for the first time in over twenty years. I mentioned my research on social justice for people with intellectual disabilities, and Erika responded, "I can tell you a real story. Come over, and I'll share my experiences caring for my disabled uncle and what I know about his childhood". I vaguely remembered her late uncle Wilhelm, who was born in 1924 in southwestern Germany with difficulties walking and talking. My father had told me that Wilhelm survived the Nazi regime, narrowly escaping deportation to a gas chamber thanks to the courage of nuns who cared for him. Before visiting Erika two months later, I researched Wilhelm's historical background.

After searching on the internet, to refresh my knowledge about the Nazi era (e.g. Black, 2003, 2012; Hepburn, 2014; Light et al., 2022; Robertson et al., 2019; Rotzoll et al., 2010; Silvestri, 2019), and about eugenics, I learned that eugenics' literal meaning -good birth- suggests a suitable goal for all prospective parents (de Melo-Martin & Goering, 2022). Its theory advocates for selective breeding to enhance the genetic quality of future children and the entire human population. Eugenics history went back to the Victorian era in the United Kingdom. In 1863, Sir Francis Galton (1822–1911), a cousin of Charles Darwin (1809–1882), theorised that if talented people only married other talented people, the result would be measurably better offspring (Black, 2003, 2012). Where in his cousin's biological concept, reproductive success (fitness) means leaving the most copies of oneself in successive generations, Galton's work suggested the 'improvement of the human race' (Black, 2003, 2012). He believed that by careful selection, it would be quite practicable to produce a highly gifted human race in a few generations.

In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the eugenics movement became widely accepted when biologist Gregor Mendel's studies showed that certain traits, such as the color or shape of pea plants, could be passed from one generation to the next in a predictable, law-like fashion (Frost, 2017). Frost wrote that 'eugenicists postulated that many human traits, including criminality, alcoholism, immorality, shiftlessness, and "feeble-mindedness" (intellectual disabilities), could be passed from one generation to the next, and that such passing could be predicted with near-mathematical certainty' (Frost, 2017, p. 275). Once the Mendelian approach to heredity was in place, the eugenics movement began to spread to many countries including Canada and the US, as well as to many countries in Europe (Hepburn, 2014).

According to Dikötter (1998, p. 467), eugenics 'belonged' to the political vocabulary of every significant modernizing force between the two world wars. It was part of widely discussed issues like evolution, degeneration, civilization and modernity, and it touched on a wide variety of emerging fields like maternity, psychiatry, criminology, public health, and sex education. The grand plan was to wipe out individuals and forthcoming

generations of those deemed weak and inferior, the so-called 'unfit' by segregation, marriage restrictions, and sterilization programs. Those deemed 'unfit to reproduce' included people labelled with intellectual disabilities, together with people labelled with mental or physical disabilities (Black, 2003, 2012; Light et al., 2022).

At that point the subject took such a hold on me that for weeks, I immersed myself in what I found reading on the internet. I read for example that in Germany, even before 1933, there were tendencies to implement the idea of eugenics by targeted selections. In 1920, the German lawyer Karl 1920 Binding and the psychiatrist Alfred E. Hoche published the text: 'Permission to destroy unworthy life' (Kagerer, 1997; Robertson et al., 2019; Rössner & Stöckle, 2011). To prove the economic viability of the action, they made calculations of possible savings when murdering people labelled with disabilities. In 1933, at the beginning of the Nazi regime, the ideas of eugenics were translated into Rassenhygiene, the Nazi idea of purification of the German people (Silvestri, 2019). First, the Sterilization Act was enacted. Many children and adults born with disabilities, including intellectual disabilities, blindness, or epilepsy, were forcibly sterilised (Daum & Deppe, 1991; Robertson et al., 2009). From 1939 onwards, 'children's departments' were set up in hospitals, in which children with disabilities were murdered. That same year, Hitler authorised 'euthanasia', meaning the program to systematically kill all individuals with disabilities (Robertson et al., 2019; Schlebach, 2024). The beginning of the *Kindereuthanasie* (killing of children) was baby Gerhard Kretschmar jr. who was born blind, with 'malformed' limbs and suffering from seizures. His parents, enthusiastic supporters of Nazism, asked Hitler to authorise the clinic staff of a hospital to euthanise the baby. After Hitler's authorization, Gerhard was killed by a lethal injection. Through the *Kindereuthanasie* the aims of the *Krankenmorde* (killings of the sick) were set in motion (Robertson et al., 2019).

The *Krankenmorde* was the name given to the first systematic killings. Later this was called '*Aktion T4*' (1940–1941), named after the office at Tiergartenstrasse 4 in Berlin that coordinated the killing of people with disabilities (Black, 2003; Hepburn, 2014; Kagerer, 1997, 2012; Light et al., 2022; Robertson et al., 2019; Rotzoll et al., 2010; Silvestri, 2019). Six *Tötungsanstalten* (killing institutions) with gas chambers were built and used for '*Aktion T4*' (Hepburn, 2014; Robertson et al., 2019; Rössner & Stöckle, 2011). One of them was Grafeneck in Gomadingen, in southwestern Germany where 10,654 people with physical, mental, or intellectual disability lost their lives (Hepburn, 2014; Rössner & Stöckle, 2011). This was supposed to be Wilhelm's final destination. The others *Tötungsanstalten* were Hadamar in Hessen, Brandenburg near Berlin, Bernburg, and Sonnenstein in Sachsen, and Hartheim in Austria. They were equipped with a carbon monoxide gas chamber disguised as firstly an inhalation room and later as a shower room (Robertson et al., 2019). In the Tötungsanstalten, registry offices were set up. The cause, date and place of death of victims were falsified, and files were exchanged in order to make it more difficult or impossible for relatives to investigate (Kagerer, 1997).

In January 1940, the first 'test killings' in gas chambers of *Tötungsanstalten* took place (Kagerer, 1997). The systematic killing of people with disabilities in the gas chambers lasted from 1940 until 1941. It stopped after public protest by the Catholic church (Light et al., 2022; Rössner & Stöckle, 2011). The start of using gas to kill Jews, Roma, Sinti and other persecuted persons in the same year was led by the murder personnel who had gained relevant experience in the 'euthanasia' program against people with disabilities (Scriba, 2024). However, Hitler's order to stop *Aktion T4* did not mean the end of the 'euthanasia killings.' Doctors and medical personnel continued the killings of children with disabilities, although they were more discreet than before. More decentralised than in the phase of the gassings, the new 'wild euthanasia' measures were now closely tied to regional requirements, with local authorities determining the pace of the killings. In this second phase of the euthanasia program, which was widespread, the killings were carried out less obviously. In most cases, overdoses of medication and lethal injections were administered. In many facilities, adults and children were also systematically starved to death. The 'euthanasia program' continued until the final days of the Second World War and was expanded to include ever broader target groups, including geriatric patients (United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, 2026).

At that point, I did not understand why I was not more aware of these historical events. Searching the internet showed me that representation and memorialization of the euthanasia program, even the *Aktion T4* victims has been long delegated to the margins of Holocaust memory work (Hepburn, 2014).

According to Hepburn (2014, p. ii), there is a void in commemorating *Aktion T4*. She wrote that it can be found in various elements. In the first place, in negative stigmas associated with disabilities, both in confronting the topic and presenting it on public display. Secondly, in legal issues. Only a very few numbers of doctors, caregivers, or commanders of the Tötungsanstalten were prosecuted and sentenced for their crimes but continued to practice without any repercussions. According to German historian Gerrit Hohendorf (in Zwick, 2019), the stigmatization of people with mental illnesses and intellectual disabilities did not end after 1945. For example, the 1933 'Law for the Prevention of Genetically Diseased Offspring' which allowed the compulsory sterilization of any citizen who in the opinion of a 'Genetic Health Court' suffered from a list of alleged genetic disorders was only repealed officially in 2007. According to Zwick (2019) this is a reason why the public acknowledgment of these crimes has remained so difficult to this day. Another element is the taboo of addressing German suffering and the representation of German people as victims, and not solely as the perpetrators of WWII. Hepburn (2014, p. ii) wrote that 'this complex dichotomy of presenting German people as both victims and perpetrators within the same action results in a political nervousness and general avoidance'. A fourth element has been described by historian Robert Parzer (in: Zwick, 2019, p. 57), who has noted that taboos surrounding mental and intellectual disabilities in Germany have also

obscured the history of these victims whose stories were sometimes only researched by third-generation descendants. Additionally, the taboos have led some to consider these Germans 'victims of second rank'. For survivors, this lack of commemoration meant their lives were full of silences and negations (Silvestri, 2019).

Emerging of big stories

Erika's place is a six-hour train ride from where I live. I had put my laptop, a photo camera, and some articles in my bag. One of the articles was "Philosophy and the Apparatus of Disability" by Shelley Tremain (2018), a prominent disability theorist who has contributed extensively to the field of disability studies, particularly through her exploration of the concept of 'disability as apparatus'. Tremain argues in her work that disability should be understood not only as a personal characteristic or medical condition but also as a social and political apparatus that operates to regulate and control the lives of disabled individuals. I was interested in how Tremain connected Michel Foucault's 'apparatus' to disability.

Reading her article, Tremain brought more life to my understanding of Foucault's concept of the apparatus by introducing her analysis of the apparatus of 'biopower' in relationship to disability. She defines biopower as "the set of mechanisms through which the basic biological features of the human species became the object of a political strategy, of a general strategy of power" (Tremain, 2018, p. 82). This refers to how governments and institutions regulate populations by managing aspects of human life, such as health, reproduction, and bodies, for political and economic purposes.

A concrete example of biopower can be found in the historical practice of eugenics. As governments sought to make populations healthier and more productive, they viewed people with disabilities as a burden, reducing the strength of the population and cost money in terms of medical care. To address this, societies began to define and standardise what was considered 'normal'. Those who did not fit this standard, particularly people with disabilities, were seen as 'abnormal' and treated as less valuable.

By managing and defining the 'normal,' systems of power could exclude and marginalise those who didn't fit, reinforcing societal inequalities. Tremain showed me how biopower not only targets individuals with disabilities but also shapes how society views disability, turning it into a social issue. Tremain's article helped me to shed a light on how power structures emerge and maintain, making the atrocities against people with disabilities in Nazi Germany possible.

My train arrived and Erika was waiting for me in front of the small train station to drive me to her home. We went over to Wilhelm's house, just around the corner. She said that I was just in time as the house was about to be pulled down. Wilhelm's hat was there, his furniture, his clothes, and the many handles on the walls that had helped him move

around from one room to another. Being there with Erika felt like we were on a mission: to commemorate Wilhelm, to foster consciousness of discrimination and stigmatisation of people labelled as disabled, and of the big story that caused so many victims.

The morning after my arrival, Erika started to talk about Wilhelm's life, supported by six files of photos and documents. On the one hand, the documents were private and included photos of happy family gatherings, Wilhelm's soccer membership card, and birthday cards. On the other hand, some documents were official, for example those from the care institution Wilhelm was sent to, newspaper articles about Nazi history and people with disabilities, and documents commissioned by the German government to document its history.

I listened to Erika for four days, taking notes and photos of what seemed important to get glimpses of Wilhelm's life, and read through the files. In the same period, I interviewed four more family members about Wilhelm's life, and what was known about his history.

Wilhelm's story in the big story

Wilhelm was the oldest child in a family of poor farmers and basket makers. According to his medical documents, he had polio at birth, problems with his vestibular system, difficulties walking and picking things up, and it was difficult to understand what he was saying. His father died of the flu when Wilhelm was only twelve years old, leaving his mother with many difficulties feeding her four children. Due to his health problems, he was bullied by his teacher and the other children, and therefore only attended school for four years. He lacked education but was able to write his name and read short sentences like the titles of newspaper articles.

In August 1940, Wilhelm left home and stayed for 'therapeutic treatment' in an institution for people with intellectual disabilities in southwestern Germany. Why Wilhelm has been sent away and by whom, how he was segregated from his family, the reaction and role of his family members, and of others in his surroundings is unclear. According to the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum (2026), in August 1939, a Nazi Ministry mandated that doctors, nurses, and midwives report newborns and young children showing signs of severe mental or physical disability. Starting in October 1939, parents were encouraged to place their children in specialised 'children's hospitals'. This marked the initial phase of the systematic registration of individuals with disabilities, laying the groundwork for the implementation of *Aktion T4*.

Wilhelms registration file had been informed by the nuns. These files were used by the Nazis to decide about the sequence of deportation to the gas chambers of Grafeneck. The Catholic institution where Wilhelm was sent to, the St. Josefshaus Herten, was hundreds of kilometres away from home so he was segregated from his family, leaving his family without any influence on his fate. By chance the St. Josefshaus was close to Wilhelm's aunt Maria's home. Maria lived on a farm with her three children. On Sundays, she and her

children visited Wilhelm by train, and therefore became known to the nuns taking care of Wilhelm and the other children.

In July 1940, one month before Wilhelm arrived in St Josefshaus, the '*Deportationskommandos*' of the Nazis started. This meant that the children were transported from St. Josefshaus Herten to another children's home in Emmendingen or Zwiefalten, to veil their real destiny, and from there to Grafeneck's gas chambers where they were killed and their bodies burned. After a while the nun's learned the real reason for the transportation of the children, as they had received letters from the families of the deported children asking questions about the death of their child. The nuns tried to protect the children but could not prevent five deportations of 345 children in total (Kagerer, 1997; Rössner & Stöckle, 2011; Vomstein, 1940). Astrid Ritter, one of the nuns at Herten at that time, shared her memories in a report in 1996 that Erika kept in one of Wilhelm's files (Kagerer 1997, 43–44). Ritter said that:

Each time two dark grey busses with blinded windows arrived. In each bus were two Nazi nurses for the children. They were stamped and, as far as I could see on the last transport, an anaesthetic was used. It was quiet on the bus. There was also a doctor present, who gave a very restless, nervous impression.

Erica's historical documents also showed correspondence between the parents of the children and the staff of the St. Josefshaus Herten (Kagerer, 1997). Kagerer argued that families were not informed about the deportation and the killing of their children. Instead, they were told lies about sickness and natural death. For example (Kagerer, 1997):

> December 2, 1940
>
> Dear Miss El. P.
>
> Since we have the official directive to inform the paying carers accordingly, we inform you that today, Richard P. and Erich S. have been transferred to another institution by order of the Ministry of the Interior in Karlsruhe. The location is not known to us. It was also not possible for us to inform you of the transfer beforehand. We leave it up to you to contact the responsible authority immediately.
>
> Sincerely
>
> Vomstein (director St. Josefshaus)
>
> December 22, 1940
>
> To the directors of St. Josefshaus, Herten
>
> I hereby fulfil the sad obligation to inform you that we have received the news from the Grafeneck state nursing home, that Richard P. died unexpectedly on

> December 15, 1940, of a stroke and that two days later, Erich S. unexpectedly died on December 16, 1940, of influenza followed by meningitis. …….
>
> Sincerely
>
> Miss El. P

In a recent personal letter from one of Maria's children, we read that shortly after Wilhelm arrived in Herten, the third deportation had been announced. The nuns phoned Maria in the middle of the night asking her to come and get Wilhelm. At that time, she was the only one in her village with a phone. Maria's husband was at war in Norway, but Alfred, another family member from Wilhelm's village was staying at her farm. He had been injured by an accident and was therefore not fighting at war. Instead, he had to work at a building site, with his truck. This truck made it possible to rescue Wilhelm the night before deportation.

In the Herten files, it was noted that Wilhelm went on holiday on that day in August 1940 (Gräff, personal communication, August 10, 2017). Maria hid Wilhelm on her farm until the end of *Aktion T4* in 1941. He was one of the 126 institutionalised children at Herten who survived, with the help of family, by escaping, hiding in the building, or by being rescued during the stopover in Emmendingen (Gräff, personal communication, August 10, 2017; Grein, 1944; Kagerer, 1997; Vomstein, 1940). Later, Wilhelm was brought back to his family by Alfred and his truck.

The bodies of the victims were burned. Urns were only sent to the surviving relatives upon request. After the war, two graves with a total of 270 urns containing the ashes of those murdered remained in Grafeneck. To date, there is no conclusive explanation for the existence of these graves. It seems most likely that the *Aktion T4* personnel, who remained in Grafeneck after the killings ended in December 1940 until March 1941, dug the graves for the remaining, not by family requested urns. In January 1983, almost 200 urns were 'found' in the basement of the Konstanz crematorium. Most of the urns, namely 141, came from victims who were murdered in the Tötungsanstalt Hartheim in Austria; 46 urns came from Grafeneck. According to the Landeszentrale für politische Bildung Baden-Württemberg (2000), in most of the research conducted on the 'euthanasia' victims, no relatives or descendants could be identified.

After returning, Wilhelm lived with his mother, younger brothers and sister in the old farmhouse, making baskets and growing potatoes. According to a family member, his story was silenced thanks to Alfred, the family member with the truck who was a member of the Nazi party. One of the participants said that:

> the silencing was aiming to veil the fact that Wilhelm should have been recognised as being persecuted by the Nazi regime and had the right to receive a corresponding pension or support. Well, the old Nazis, they've stayed that way. The so-called 'denazification', that only took place superficially. (…) there were so many former

> Nazi jurists and Nazi judges. They cheated their way through and then returned to the young Federal Republic and rose again. So much strange things happened during that time.

Another family member mentioned that Wilhelm's mother 'suffered her whole life in silence, maybe because she experienced what had happened as a personal destiny and felt ashamed'. Wilhelm rarely spoke about what had happened to him. When Wilhelm was older, Erika asked him about his time at the St Josefshaus. According to her, the only thing he said was '*die Andern hat es halt erwischt*', meaning that the others had very bad luck. Wilhelm never received any recognition of his victimhood, nor did he receive any (financial) compensation. For the rest of his life, he refused to fill out governmental forms about his disabilities or admitting that he had troubles to take care of himself. Therefore, he never received financial assistance for living expenses or aids. He lived on his income as a basket maker and on what Erika provided for him. The family moved on without any commemoration or redressing, until Wilhelm died and Erika's brother-in-law started to collect what he was able to find about Wilhelm, the St. Josefshaus and Grafeneck. Erika's photo collection shows that Wilhelm lived his life in poor financial circumstances. For example, he had no heating in his house, and the leaking roof could not be fixed, until he received a small inheritance from a childless great grandaunt in the 1990s. Besides that, it showed that he was loved dearly by Erika. Seeing the photos, I realised, that the Nazis' stories about disability, their policies and practices, are only a few decennia away.

Discussion

The study presented in this article aims to answer the question how Wilhelm's story can help us better understand the experience of persons with intellectual disability of eugenics practices during the Nazi regime and what lessons can be drawn when understanding the experiences from a social justice perspective.

How can Wilhelm's story help us better understand the experience of eugenics practices during the Nazi regime?

Wilhelm's story provides valuable insights into the broader context of eugenics practices during the Nazi regime, particularly in relation to the discrimination and marginalisation of individuals with intellectual disabilities, with sometimes horrible outcomes. Unveiling the roots of these ideas, that trace back to Francis Galton's theory of selective breeding to create a highly gifted human race, gave insights into the apparatus of disability. Including Foucault's concept of biopower in the data, expanded by Tremain's apparatus of disability, illustrates how governments in a related trace, were leading to societies perception of individuals with disabilities as burdens. In response to this perception, society began to

define and standardise what constituted 'normality'. Those who did not conform, such as Wilhelm, were labelled 'abnormal' and devalued. By defining and controlling 'normalcy', the Nazi's system of power has been able to marginalise and prosecute those who fell outside these boundaries (Tremain, 2018). The atrocities against persons like Wilhelm did therefore not emerge solely from the minds of criminals but were deeply rooted in all parts of society and influenced ordinary people—teachers, doctors, midwives, and even parents—who became complicit in the dehumanisation of people with intellectual disabilities.

The context of Wilhelm's story, the so-called Big Story, gave us insights that Wilhelm's life must have been profoundly impacted by his classification as 'abnormal'. He faced early discrimination, including bullying by his teacher, which likely led him to leave school. Eventually, he was segregated from his family and sent to Herten, with the gas chambers as his final destination. Those involved in his segregation and eventual death were never prosecuted, and Wilhelm's suffering went largely unnoticed. Like many other victims, he received no recognition or compensation, the story has been left veiled by society but also by his family, leaving us only to speculate on the trauma he endured and the loneliness he must have felt facing it alone the rest of his life.

The role of his mother or other family members during the events remains unclear, as does the identity of those complicit in his transfer to Herten. The findings suggests that some parents not only abandoned their children with disabilities but even requested their death. Medical professionals, including doctors, nurses, and midwives, were complicit in the system of eugenics.

As written, Wilhelm, like many others with disabilities, was never formally recognised as a victim of eugenics persecution. His fear of being persecuted again persisted throughout his life, preventing him from filling in forms in which he would have been labelled disabled to get financial and other assistance, and he lived in poverty the rest of his life. He seemed fully aware of the fate that befell other children in Herten, acknowledging to Erika, '*Die Andern hat's halt erwischt*', a sign that he understood the fate of the other children and the dangers he faced himself.

Wilhelm's fate took a turn when he was rescued by the nuns and his aunt. Foucault's notion that where there is power, there is resistance does not explain their choices and actions enough, as their precise motivations remain unknown (Foucault, 1978). The nuns may have been guided by their Christian beliefs, which allowed them to recognise and resist the injustice around them. Their efforts were supported or caused by the Catholic Bishop Clemens von Galen, who, in a 1941 sermon, condemned the Nazi euthanasia program against persons with disabilities (Gedenkstätte Deutscher Widerstand, n.d). Probably, these nuns saw the children in their care as humans with inherent value, rather than as

mere numbers of persons not worthy, a perspective perhaps shared by Wilhelm's aunt, who later protected him on her farm.

It is unknown how Wilhelm thought about himself and whether he internalised the label of 'unfit' imposed on him by the Nazi system of power. From a contemporary perspective, we can observe that people often adhere to norms, values and laws without fully understanding their implications for others or for themselves.

The Nazi euthanasia program was framed as a 'good death' for those deemed 'unfit for life,' and many individuals, socialised within that system, accepted this as truth and turned into killers or killers' henchmen. Wilhelm's story can serve as a reminder of how deeply entrenched power structures, and their offspring ideologies and values can lead to horrific outcomes.

What lessons can be drawn when understanding Wilhelm's experiences from a social justice perspective?

Wilhelm's story reveals firstly that concepts of social justice are not only context-dependent but also precarious. It challenges the idea of a neutral, detached perspective, such as that argued by Rawls, which was unattainable under the Nazi regime and remains unlikely today. Through the lens of Foucault (1980) and Tremain (2018), we understand that the apparatus, the interconnected systems of discourses, institutions, laws, and practices, produces and sustains power. These systems regulate knowledge, maintain power relations, and shape how individuals perceive themselves and their place in society (Foucault, 1980). Socialisation within these power structures makes it difficult to recognise their influence, much like a fish cannot perceive the water it swims in. Thus, we must acknowledge that laws and regulations alone are insufficient to protect individuals categorised as 'abnormal'. Furthermore, societal values and norms should be critically examined, as they often reflect the interests of those in privileged positions (Walker, 2007). Social justice is therefore not universally benevolent, but an ambiguous concept shaped by the apparatus in power. This system can either protect or harm individuals, depending on their position within it (Walker, 2007). Many people find their rights inaccessible, further emphasising the fragility of these protections (White & Tronto, 2004). The fluidity of power systems underscores the uncertainty that what protects individuals today may not do so tomorrow.

From Foucault's perspective, the solution lies in a critical analysis of how contemporary power systems function, shape knowledge, and construct 'truth'. Social justice involves challenging and exposing power relations, particularly how governments regulate populations through health, education, and social norms, often treating certain groups as 'abnormal.' The forces that create standards of behaviour and social expectations must be

questioned and resisted. Foucault and Tremain would likely agree that true social justice requires resisting the power dynamics that define what is considered normal, healthy, or worthy.

A second lesson can be derived when we critically examine the contemporary CRPD. The CRPD is primarily a theoretical framework, grounded in normative, universal principles and regulations, including rights, duties, responsibilities, and the balancing of individual interests against collective interests. In this social justice concept, individuals are conceptualised as autonomous, independent entities (Held, 2015; Sandel, 1998).

In contrast, Walker (2007), from the perspective of care ethics, emphasises that the moral good arises from practice, not theory. She argues that individuals must explore their relationships with others, identify shared core values, and understand the responsibilities that stem from these relationships, determining to whom they feel accountable. People's perceptions of social justice are then shaped by how individuals from diverse contexts interact and share responsibilities in a dynamic and equitable manner (Tronto, 2013). This perspective advocates for a pluralistic approach to social justice, grounded in situated practice rather than in theory (Walker, 2007). Walker refers to her approach as the 'expressive-collaborative model', which respects the diversity among actors in practice and focuses on what motivates individuals to care for others or causes, as well as their willingness to take responsibility for doing so.

This is also evident in the example of the nuns in Herten. Their daily care for the children led them to make a life-affirming choice rather than one oriented towards death.

During our research, it became evident that Wilhelm's story is particularly difficult to reconstruct. This is largely due to the lack of documentation about the fate of people with disabilities during the Nazi era, as the government at the time recorded very little about their life, especially if they survived. Another reason is that his family paid minimal attention to his story while he was still alive. Most significantly, we are unable to hear the story from Wilhelm himself. From this, a third lesson can be drawn: it is crucial to give more attention to the life experiences and stories of individuals with intellectual disabilities. This underscores the need for further research into how we can better listen to these individuals, especially when they may struggle to advocate for themselves, find spoken language challenging, or are hindered by trauma in sharing their stories.

Trustworthiness

With respect to credibility of the study (Abma & Stake, 2014; Guba & Lincoln, 1982), the first author had a prolonged engagement with participants and persons at relevant places, and a prolonged period studying documents and other sources to identify characteristics of the context and the problem. Member-checking in different rounds has been applied to assess the presentation of the realities of participants. The study continued until data saturation.

The second, third, and fourth author supervised the first author's draft versions of the article and validated the consistency of findings.

With respect to confirmability of the study (Guba & Lincoln, 1982), audio recordings were made of interviews and later transcribed. Detailed accounts of conversations, dialogues, and observations were documented in notes and thick descriptions in a logbook. Potential bias on the part of the first author cannot be disregarded, as she is a relative of the individual who inspired Wilhelm's story, and of most of the study's participants. To address this potential bias, she maintained a research diary and consistently engaged in reflective discussions with the fourth author regarding her thoughts and feelings on the subject. However, the study was carried out looking back in time from our current perspective, which is inevitably shaped by the prevailing social context and power system, thereby introducing its own bias.

Generalization from the case study to other contexts is possible, as we have provided detailed context-bound descriptions (Abma & Stake, 2014).

Conclusion

Wilhelm's story enables a deeper understanding of the experiences endured during the Nazi regime's eugenics practices. It painfully highlights the relativity of laws and values meant to safeguard individuals from atrocities, which are perpetrated by those in power and widely accepted within society. Wilhelm was both a victim and survivor of people living within the disability apparatus, which deemed his life unworthy. While we have not heard his experience directly from him and acknowledge the limitations of hindsight from our present time, we have drawn lessons from how we interpret such experiences. Through these lessons, we aim to advocate for the ongoing evaluation of social justice concepts within societies, guided by criteria that reflect the realities and voices of the individuals involved. Additionally, we seek to enhance possibilities to unveil stories and honour the memory of individuals with intellectual disabilities who endured the atrocities of the Nazi era.

Future research is needed to enriching approaches aimed to unveiling stories and listening to and understanding voices of marginalised persons or those encountering obstacles in articulating their stories.

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Chapter 4

Interspace. The work that needs to be done and the work that is done together



(. . .) There is also an old trailer that is too heavy for me to push from its place. I put it behind the car and tried to push it aside. The trailer did break loose and damaged my car. That's how I used to be when I was a kid and my bike broke down: despondent, angry and filled with self-reproach. As hard as being alone and self-blaming can be. The experience brings forth this shame for how I ended up here. The question "how did I get in this position?" fills me with self-blame. I am disappointed with myself. From this point I do not ask for help, try to solve it all alone although I cannot oversee what needs to be done. (. . .)

Then help appeared. My wife and daughter came to help; I noticed the difference in together or alone. The heavy load to move forward but not being able to do, or the ease of the extra hands that suddenly makes everything lighter. A lot has been done in little time. Together. I know from bamboo projects how we built with bare hands. Vulnerable next to excavators on a festival site. Together and confident so much more is possible. (. . .).

Photo and story: *Images of meaning*. Stemerding & Zimmermann. Unpublished

DESIGNING ART-BASED COMMUNITIES TO FOSTER SOCIAL JUSTICE

This chapter addresses research question b), which asks how art-based communities are designed and in what ways they foster social justice. The chapter presents the following published article:

Zimmermann, A., Hermsen, M., Visse, M., & Leget, C. (2025). Arts-Based Communities Fostering Social Justice for Persons with Intellectual Disabilities: A Qualitative Interpretive Synthesis Scoping Review of Design Elements, Approaches, and Artistic Expressions (Communautés artistiques favorisant la justice sociale pour les personnes ayant une déficience intellectuelle: une synthèse d'étude de la portée interprétative et qualitative des éléments de conception, des approches et des expressions artistiques). *Canadian Journal of Art Therapy, 38*(2), 139–164. https://doi.org/10.1080/26907240.2025.2548737.

The Supplementary Material file can be downloaded from: https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/suppl/10.1080/26907240.2025.2548737.

Abstract

This scoping review explores the design elements, approaches, and artistic expressions of arts-based communities (ABCs) with the potential to foster social justice for individuals with intellectual disabilities. Using a qualitative, interpretive synthesis methodology, the review includes 27 peer-reviewed studies identified through a prior systematic search aligned with PRISMA guidelines and evaluated for methodological quality. Despite significant differences, ABCs share key features: co-creative collaboration, audience engagement, person-centered and improvisational methods, and expressive storytelling rooted in lived experience. These communities function not as fixed models but as relational, transformative spaces that promote narrative agency and challenge ableist norms. The findings contribute to a growing body of knowledge informing a social justice-oriented creative arts therapies praxis. It highlights how ABCs can expand the role of art therapists beyond clinical settings, emphasising community-based practices grounded in the social model of disability. However, challenges remain. More attention is needed to understand how individuals with intellectual disabilities experience and shape these communities and how they understand their meaning and impact in the context of social justice. Future research should centre on these voices, acknowledging the diversity of lived experiences across different societal and cultural contexts.

Introduction

Social justice is based on the idea of human rights and how they are manifested in everyday lives of people in society. Whereas human rights are applicable to everyone, social justice targets the marginalised groups of people in society (Holcomb-McCoy, 2007). Social justice principles such as equity and social cohesion are embedded in the World Health Organization's definition of health and well-being (World Health Organization, 2011). Fancourt and Finn (2019, p. 2) highlight that the World Health Organization also connects the arts to health by stating, "arts activities can be considered as complex or multimodal interventions in that they combine multiple different components that are known to be health promoting." These components involve aesthetic engagement, involvement of the imagination, sensory activation, evo-cation of emotion and cognitive stimulation. Depending on its nature, the arts may also involve social interaction, physical activity, engagement with health-related themes, and interaction with healthcare environments (Fancourt & Finn, 2019). These components may occur in everyday life, arts programs with health or well-being goals, or therapeutic arts programs led by trained arts therapists.

However, the World Health Organization's expanded concept of health (which emphasises self-management, the ability to reach one's potential, and active social participation with some degree of independence) often overlooked individuals with more complex needs (Boelé, 2017), even in its recent arts and health initiative (Fancourt & Finn, 2019). In the literature, complex needs are defined as the co-occurrence of intellectual disability with additional health, social, and economic challenges, alongside a mismatch between support needs and available services (Cook & Hole, 2021). Similar to the World Health Organization's concept of health, the *Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD)* (United Nations, 2006) does not distinguish between intellectual disabilities and other forms of disability. This perspective emphasises that disability is not primarily defined by a specific impairment but rather arises from the interaction between individuals with health conditions (such as cerebral palsy, depression, or blindness) and various personal and environmental factors. These factors include negative attitudes, inaccessibility of public transportation and buildings, and limited social support (World Health Organization, n.d.). Inaccessible environments create barriers that hinder the full and effective participation of persons with disabilities in society on an equal basis with others (Goodley, 2016; Wickenden, 2023). According to the World Health Organization (2025), an individual's environment significantly influences both the experience and extent of disability. Disability is therefore best understood as a dynamic, relational, and political identity shaped by exclusionary structures (Goodley, 2016). Consequently, disability is regarded in policy circles as "not simply a medical issue but also a human rights concern" (Barnes, 2019, p. 26). This perspective calls for a shift from deficit-based models toward inclusive frameworks that recognise dignity, agency, and the value of diverse ways of thinking and being (Goodley, 2016).

Next to socially unjust inequality because of disability, individuals often face multiple, intersecting forms of inequality (Kafer, 2013; Wickenden, 2023; Yi & Moon, 2020). Even though disability as a category of identity is often omitted in rhetoric about intersectionality (Wickenden, 2023), an intersectional lens highlights how identities (such as ability, gender, ethnicity, class, and age) interact to shape lived experiences (Crenshaw, 1991; Kafer, 2013; Wickenden, 2023). For example, women with intellectual disabilities from ethnic minority backgrounds may face compounded, complex discrimination that exceeds the sum of individual forms of discrimination (Goodley, 2016).

Research shows that despite growing advocacy for social justice and inclusion, persons with intellectual disabilities continue to face widespread social injustices, including stigma, discrimination, and marginalisation (Scior et al., 2020). They are at heightened risk of violence and abuse (Cook & Hole, 2021; Starke et al., 2024; Sutherland et al., 2024), sexual assault (Dunkle et al., 2018; Mailhot Amborski et al., 2022), bullying (Cook & Hole, 2021; Maïano et al., 2016), social isolation (Clifford Simplican et al., 2015), and poor health outcomes generally (Frawley & Bigby, 2015). These experiences can result in chronic stress, emotional dysregulation, and increased vulnerability to mental health issues, including posttraumatic stress disorder (Breiding & Armour, 2015; Mikton & Shakespeare, 2014). Over time, these experiences may deeply affect self-perception, relationships, and overall well-being (Hughes et al., 2019; Santoro et al., 2018).

In mental health and care contexts, art therapy is widely used to support individuals with intellectual disabilities in various settings, including clinics, private practices, group homes, and community-based studios (van Laar et al., 2025; Miller et al., 2020). Art therapy and other creative arts therapies, such as music therapy supporting individuals with disabilities, are recognised for their proven benefits. Benefits are for example cognitive function improvement, enhanced psychological resilience and other social-emotional function and mental health outcomes, enhanced social skills, engagement and communication, positive physical outcomes, personal growth and self-expression by providing non-verbal outlets for communication, and improvements in overall quality of life (van Laar et al., 2025).

Despite these benefits, traditional art therapy, which is largely populated by cisgender, European American, heterosexual, able-bodied women and is shaped by patriarchal and Eurocentric theories and discourse, has faced criticism (Talwar et al., 2004). One major critique from within the art therapy community is that it reinforces a medical deficit model, which promotes normalisation and prioritises able-bodiedness (Hewitt-Parsons, 2021; Miller, 2020; Yi & Moon, 2020). Miller (2020) argues that this focus on normalization grants professionals' excessive control over the lives of individuals with intellectual disabilities. Miller and colleagues (2020, p. 83) emphasise that art therapists often act as gatekeepers with considerable power, and the "power of people with intellectual

disabilities, their culture, and their communities is seldom recognised" due to medicalised and charity narratives that position them as dependent and burdensome. They suggest that art therapists can shift this dynamic by respecting autonomy, advocating for clients, and fostering trust. Therapists who view disability as both tangible and political are more likely to recognise creativity and agency in their clients (Miller et al., 2020).

Another critique of art therapy is its often-applied individualised approach, which can depoliticise and decontextualise the cultural expressions of disabled people (Talwar & Sajnani, 2022; Yi, 2018). Recognising disability as cultural expression and identity in this discourse aligns with a feminist political model rooted in civil rights movements. This model defines disability, similar to Goodley (2016), the United Nations (2006), and the World Health Organization (2011), as a socially constructed experience. It encompasses physical, mental, cognitive, sensory, and developmental conditions that result from injury, illness, or aging (Yi & Moon, 2020). Representatives of the feminist political model are fighting against the grain of normalisation and advocate for radical social change to ensure all individuals can live in a more just world (Kafer, 2013).

In response to this criticism, Talwar and Sajnani (2022) advocate for community-based art therapy programs to improve the lives of individuals with intellectual disabilities. This perspective (that inclusive, community-based approaches can challenge negative attitudes and promote the visibility and participation of people with disabilities) is also supported by the World Health Organization (2011). Finkel and Bat Or (2020) highlight the growing integration of community life into art therapy through open studio art engagement, expanding the practice beyond more traditional, individual methods. They assert that this approach is "especially relevant today in light of the prevalence of postmodern approaches to mental health, such as the recovery approach and well-being theory, which discard the medical approach" (p. 3). This trend underscores the renewed recognition of community-based art therapy as a valuable approach for promoting health and well-being through social cohesion, equity, advocacy for social change, and opposition to normalisation practices.

Arts-based communities' framework

In an earlier scoping review (Zimmermann et al., 2024), we expanded the scope from open studio art therapy approaches, as studied by Finkel and Bat Or (2020), to encompass a broader range of community- and arts-based groups. We refer to this overarching framework as arts-based communities (ABCs). The rationale for broadening the scope is that only 4% of the publications included in the Finkel and Bat Or systematic scoping review of the open studio approach specifically addressed the population with disabilities (2020). ABCs as explored in our review refer to diverse groups of individuals with intellectual disabilities who engage in various artistic activities, including performing arts, visual arts, literature, and digital arts (Fancourt & Finn, 2019).

Our earlier scoping review (Zimmermann et al., 2024) to understand the potential for ABCs to improve social justice for people with intellectual disabilities identified five key concepts through which ABCs promote social justice: social interaction, belonging and inclusion; empowerment and self-advocacy; awareness and stigma reduction; social change and advocacy; and skills and employment. However, this review left several questions unanswered related to what exactly ABCs are. Particularly, we would like to further explore how ABCs are designed, and what approaches and artistic expression forms they apply to realise their potential to foster social justice for persons with intellectual disabilities. Further investigation into this underexplored area is necessary to provide greater clarity on the subject.

This interpretive synthesising scoping review aims to answer the question: What are the design elements, approaches, and artistic expression forms of arts-based communities that have the potential to contribute to social justice for people with intellectual disabilities?

Sub questions are:

(1) What are the design elements of ABCs that have the potential to contribute to social justice for people with intellectual disabilities?
(2) What are the approaches of these ABCs?
(3) Which artistic expression forms are employed in these ABCs?

Method

Methodological approach

To answer the research questions, we carried out a qualitative interpretive synthesis scoping review to identify and describe designs, approaches, and artistic expression forms. We found that the field of arts-based communities research is characterised by a diversity of ABC practices, interpretations, and with a broad variety of study focus, study design, and samples. We employed a qualitative methodology to optimise specification of operational models (Dixon-Woods et al., 2005). More specifically, we conducted a thematic analysis for identification of prominent or recurrent topics in the literature and summarised the findings under thematic headings (Dixon-Woods et al., 2005).

Study identification and selection

A re-analysis of the findings from the 2024 scoping review by Zimmermann and colleagues (2024) aimed to explore the open questions regarding the designs, approaches, and artistic expression forms of ABCs including all artistic mediums, building systematically on past findings (Yoon & Kim, 2017; Zimmerman, 2008). This re-analysis involved a deeper examination of 33 articles from the original review.

Selection criteria

We selected studies featured in the 2024 scoping review by Zimmermann and colleagues (2024). Those were primary studies conducted in accordance with the systematic approach proposed by the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA) guidelines (Moher et al., 2009). A systematic search was completed in March 2023 to identify records published between the start of the databases and March 2023 using electronic databases: APA PsycInfo (Ebsco), CINAHL Plus with Full Text (Ebsco), Medline (Ebsco), SocINDEX (Ebsco), Web of Science Core Collection, ERIC (Ebsco), and Embase (OVID).

Within each database, papers were searched for containing at least one term or synonym from the block "intellectual disability," "social justice" and "arts-based." These terms (including synonyms and closely related words such as learning disabilities, cognitive impairment, fairness, human rights, social equality, equity, empowerment, art therapy, creative arts, drawing) were used as index terms or free-text words to represent the concepts mentioned above. For each database, a customised search was constructed, considering the unique properties of each database, such as syntax and thesauri. For search terms and search strings used for all professional domains in the databases, see the Supplementary Material file. Quality appraisal has been carried out by three authors independently evaluating and rating records, assessing quality using the Standard Quality Assessment Criteria for Evaluating Primary Research Papers from a Variety of Fields guide (Kmet et al., 2004) (see **Table 2** and **Table 3** at the Supplementary Material file).

The data in this review are studies of English-language, peer-reviewed journals focusing on relevant information about ABCs that show a relationship to social justice for people with intellectual disabilities in terms of inclusion, social change, human rights, and empowerment, for example. A variety of art expressions were included, to detect all arts-based approaches and artistic expression forms in communities, such as visual art, theater, dance, music, and poetry. We included publications that reported qualitative, quantitative, mixed-methods, case studies, and action-research studies. There were no restrictions in relation to the design of or approach in the ABC. Therefore, we included diverse spectrum of ABCs.

During the selection process for this qualitative interpretive synthesis of literature, we excluded all studies that did not achieve at least half of the maximum possible quality assessment points, as determined by our previous scoping review (Zimmermann et al., 2024) using the Standard Quality Assessment Criteria for Evaluating Primary Research Papers from a Variety of Fields guide (Kmet et al., 2004). To enhance the rigor and reliability of your scoping review this exclusion ensured an average methodological quality of the included publications. The first author conducted this process, and it was discussed with the second and fourth authors.

Data analysis

For data extraction, a data-charting form, including a topics map (Supplementary Material file, **Table 5**) was developed by the first author. This tool, based on the research question, included classification of findings according to: (a) reference, date, and country of publication; (b) focus of study; (c) study design and sample; (d) quality assessment score; (e) elements of design; (e) elements of approach; (f) art medium, and contribution of the arts in the ABCs.

The first author extracted text fragments from the selected publications line-by-line and enter them into the data-charting form. Next to the characteristics of the selected publications, topics regarding designs, approaches, and artistic expression forms at arts-based communities were identified and entered into the topics map. After the inductive, open coding of text fragments, the emergent patterns of shared meaning were iteratively united into qualitative categories and transferred into the thematic map (Supplementary Material file **Table 6**) (Braun & Clarke, 2021; Thomas & Harden, 2008). These categories were reviewed by the other authors to gain a deeper understanding of the data. While we have firstly separated our findings into topics and categories, they are not discrete but rather interlocking, informing each other to deepen our understanding of each. Therefore, we synthesised the data iteratively into overarching themes using the thematic map (Thomas & Harden, 2008). The key concepts of ABCs' contribution to social justice for people with intellectual disabilities, identified in our scoping review, served as sensitising concepts (Zimmermann et al., 2024). We discussed and updated the finding in different rounds with each other.

Overview of the findings

Number of included articles after the screening process

From the 33 articles selected through a systematic search for the scoping review (Zimmermann et al., 2024), six were excluded because they did not meet the selection criteria, specifically failing to achieve at least half of the maximum possible quality assessment points. In this review, 27 publications were included (**Table 1**).

Publication characteristics

The 27 findings resulting from the systematic search process include articles and studies published between 1999 and 2021 (see **Figure 1**). **Figure 1** reveals a large number of studies published between 2011 and 2020 in comparison to other time periods. In this period, the first mixed-methods and quantitative studies were published. Since our search concluded in March 2023, there was limited information on the research available after 2021. It is possible that the number of publications in this period was influenced by the

Covid-19 pandemic, during which ABCs faced challenges in meeting in person, potentially hindering research and publication efforts.

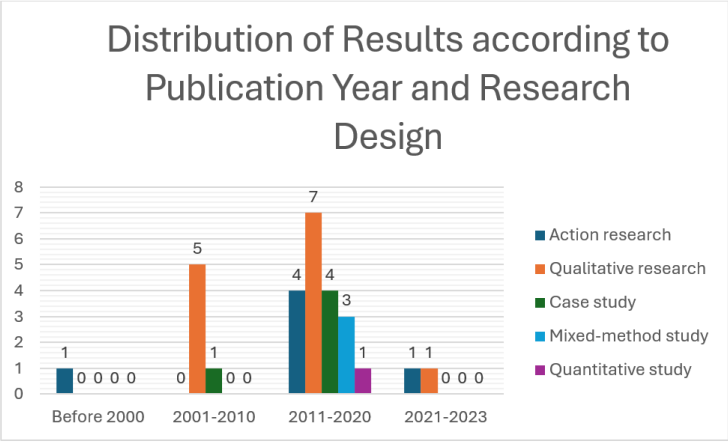


FIGURE 1. Distribution of results according to publication year and research design

The focus of the included articles varies greatly. Since this review does not aim to examine the impact of ABCs on participants' lives, but rather to explore the described design elements, approaches, and artistic expression forms, we have not excluded any studies based on study focus or research question. **Figure 1** shows the distribution of publication types by year. A total of 13 studies were identified as qualitative, five as case studies, five as action research, three as mixed-methods studies, and one as a quantitative study. Three studies were described explicitly as inclusive studies.

Among all the included articles, 12 studies were identified from the United Kingdom, four from the United States, three from Canada, two from Norway, Australia, and Sweden, and one each from South Korea, Ireland, and Finland (see **Figure 2**). The particularly high number of studies from the UK is notable, though no explanation has been found to account for this.

The quality assessment points of the selected articles (**Table 1**) ranged from 10 to 20 out of a possible 20 points for qualitative studies, indicating a wide variation in methodological quality within the minimum average quality required for inclusion. For quantitative and mixed-methods studies, the scores ranged from 26 to 28 out of a possible 28 points, indicating high quality. Notably, in nearly one-third of the articles, the number of research participants or studied cases was either partially unclear or assessed as small. This can be explained by the high proportion of qualitative studies and case studies (see **Figure 1**).

In analysing the selected papers, we prioritised examining elements and perspectives that illuminate the ABCs' design elements, approaches, and artistic expressions. Consequently, all papers that met at least half of the quality assessment points were included. For future research investigating perceived impact, it is essential to consider the quality of the publications to understand the results accurately and determine if caution is needed when including findings from average-quality articles, especially publications with a small or unclear sample size.

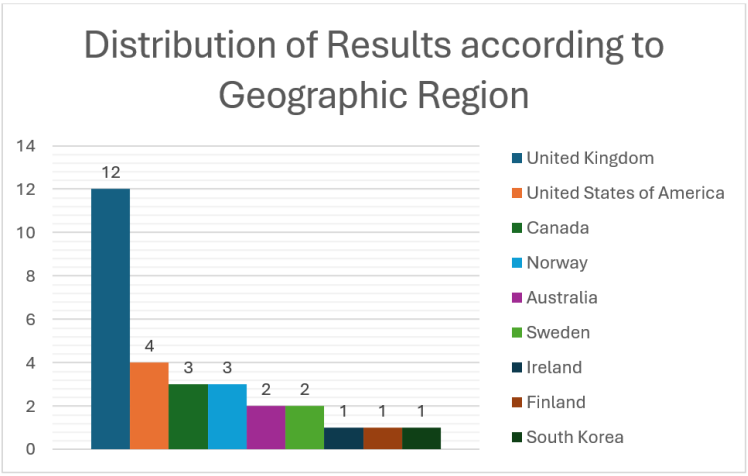


FIGURE 2. Distribution of results according to geographic region

The art medium in the ABCs of the included studies (**Figure 3**) has been identified as follows. Theater, including drama therapy, appeared 14 times. Visual arts, including fine arts and filmmaking, appeared 12 times. Music, including music therapy, appeared eight times. Dance appeared six times. Other media, including poetry, puppetry, and ceremony, appeared six times. Many ABCs included more than one medium.

The operational domains of ABCs identified in the studies include: (semi-) professional arts companies and art studios in 12 articles; education and research projects in 11 articles; autonomous groups in four articles, (expressive) arts therapy programs and daycare each in three articles; healthcare programs in one article; and additional examples such as music workshops run by a registered charity and inclusive arts organization classes providing music experiences in three articles (see **Figure 4**). Notably, there is a relatively large number of (semi-) professional arts companies and art studios, followed by a significant number of ABC projects focused on research and education. Additionally, the small number of (expressive) art(s) therapy programs stand out. Articles cover each of the operational domains of expressive arts therapy, music therapy, and drama therapy. For example, Cook (2020) describes an inclusive therapeutic theater production for young

people with disabilities, were drama therapy and music therapy are used to teach empathy and acceptance. Similarly, Caldwell and colleagues (2008) discuss 'Express Yourself,' an expressive arts program partnering university students with adults with intellectual disabilities. Curtis and Mercado (2004) also describe a community music therapy ensemble for adults with and without disabilities. The small number of arts therapies suggests that ABCs are still relatively underrepresented within the field of (expressive) arts therapies and/or have received limited attention in (expressive) arts therapies research. Additional information about ABCs in their domains can be found in the Supplementary material file.

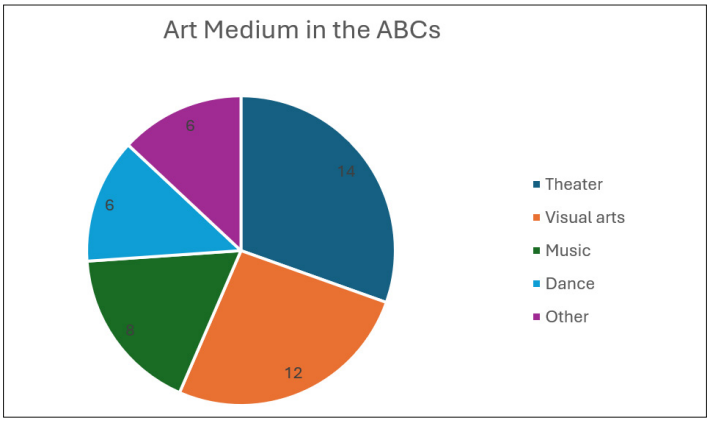


FIGURE 3. Art medium in the ABCs of the included studies

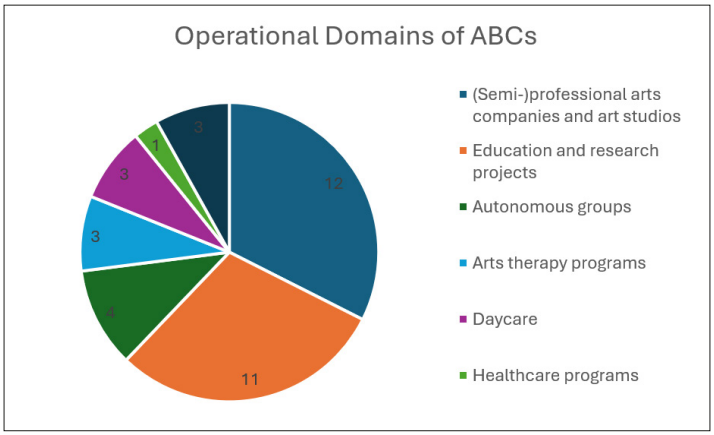


FIGURE 4. The operational domains of ABCs in the included studies

TABLE 1. Overview of the 27 studies included in this review (in chronological order)

Reference author(s); date of publication. *Geographic region*	Focus of Study
Price & Barron (1999) ***United Kingdom***	Does drama offer opportunities for education, social contact, and recognition for disability arts?
Curtis & Mercado (2004) ***Norway***	The power of a performing arts program.
Ineland (2005) ***Sweden***	To describe and analyse the institutional settings and normative environment surrounding Olla and the way Olla relates to different institutional rules and expectations.
Harter et al. (2006) ***USA***	How discourses of difference sustain the separation of people with disabilities from community life and highlights the efforts of one organisation, Passion Works, as members perform a counter-narrative of disability.
Whitehurst (2006) ***UK***	Evaluation of drama production. What did the young people with disabilities think of the inclusion project?
Caldwell et al. (2008) ***USA***	Experiences of non-ID students during participation in inclusive expressive arts program with adults with ID.
Hall (2010) ***UK***	The ways in which people with ID develop feelings of attachment and belonging within artistic spaces.

	Study Design & Sample	Quality Assessment Qualitative studies: points/ out of 20 Quantitative studies: points/ out of 28	Art Medium	ABC Operational Domain
	Action research 5 members of the theater company with intellectual disabilities (ID), 1 coordinator, 8 self-selected participants. Nightclub participants up to 100 of which 30 had learning disabilities: n= unclear	11/20	Theater/ drama	Autonomous Communities
	Qualitative research Participants with disabilities, their caregivers, and public attending performances. N= unclear	10/20	Music	Education and Research Projects Arts Therapies
	Qualitative research Supervisors: N= unclear	10/20	Theater	Daycare
	Qualitative research Participant observation; in-depth interviews; discourse analysis with narrative sensibility. Staff members: N= 8. client-artists: N= unclear	13/20	Theater & visual arts	Daycare
	Qualitative research Inclusive research Students with moderate to severe disabilities: n= 6	13/20	Music & theater	Education and Research Projects
	Qualitative study Students without ID participating the program. N= unclear	16/20	Visual arts & dance	Education and Research Projects Arts Therapies
	Case study N= 2 Case 1: actors, staff, artistic director, volunteer supporters, funders. Case 2: ABC participants. ABC participants N/n= unclear	10/20	Theater & visual arts	(Semi-) professional arts companies and art studios

Reference author(s); date of publication. ***Geographic region***	Focus of Study
Stickley, Crosbie & Hui (2012) ***UK***	Effects upon people with ID/ capturing people's opinions and ideas regarding taking part in the activities, engaging in the art program on individual and group level
Hall (2013) ***UK***	Exploration of the nature of transformative becoming towards belonging for those participating in two learning disability creative arts organizations.
Saur & Johansen (2013) ***Norway***	Can theater contribute to democratic participation for people who are seldom heard and taken seriously in official debates?
Schlosnagle et al. (2014) ***USA***	Developing and implementing an evaluation tool that would enable a fine arts program to become a self-improving system.
Goddard (2015) ***UK & Sweden***	Charting the course of a group of young people with ID using theater to explore ways in which they can express the emotions and dilemmas they face in transitioning from young people "participating" in their world to more actively engaging in arts leadership roles.
Macpherson & Fox (2016) ***UK***	What can we learn about listening through arts materials and activities?
King et al. (2016) ***Canada***	Examining the culture, intentional design, and features of the program of a 30-year inclusive arts-mediated summer program called Spiral Garden

	Study Design & Sample	Quality Assessment Qualitative studies: points/ out of 20 Quantitative studies: points/ out of 28	Art Medium	ABC Operational Domain
	Qualitative research Artists with ID: n= 6 facilitators: N= 3 support workers: N= 4 organizers: N= 3 friends and family of participants: N= unclear	14/20	Theater & music	Daycare
	Case study N = 2 Lung Ha's: n= 9 Garvald participants (group interviews and observation): n= 12, staff n= 6	15/20	Theater & visual arts	(Semi-) professional arts companies and art studios
	Action research Participants and staff N= unclear	14/20	Theater & dance	(Semi-) professional arts companies and art studios Education and Research Projects
	Mixed- method (qualitative & quantitative) followed by an action research model. Collaborative methods. Participants of the program: artists with different disabilities N=more than 100, n= 8	19/20 27/28	Visual arts/ fine arts	(Semi-) professional arts companies and art studios Education and Research Projects
	Action research Participants: actors with ID a- KIC (UK) n= approximately 10 young people with ID. b-Moomsteatern (Sweden) n= 3 young actors with ID	15/20	Theater & dance	(Semi-) professional arts companies and art studios
	Qualitative study Artist (non-ID) working with 12 artists with ID. N= 1	18/20	Visual arts & dance	(Semi-) professional arts companies and art studios Education and Research Projects
	Qualitative study (multi-method) Historical document analysis (n=64) & interviews with staff members. N= unclear	18/20	Fine art & music & storytelling & puppetry & ceremony	Healthcare Programs

Reference author(s); date of publication. *Geographic region*	Focus of Study
Levy et al. (2017) ***UK***	Insight into the impact of participation in an inclusive music program through the voices of the disabled young musicians, their parents, and tutors.
Parry (2017) ***Ireland***	Reporting perceptions of learning-disabled choreographers
Johansen & Saur (2018) ***Norway***	In what way was equality an issue at the theater group, and what were the artistic consequences of choosing equality as a dramaturgical point of departure?
French & Jones (2018) ***UK***	By sharing Leah's story of Positive You, this article will demonstrate the value of artmaking in developing self-esteem, but also that learning disabled people can develop their own employment opportunities with the right support
Dickinson & Hutchinson (2019) ***UK***	The impacts of a theatre company on understandings and perceptions of people with ID from multiple perspectives.
Richards et al. (2019) ***UK***	Is community-based arts research an effective way in which to challenge the misconceptions concerning people with learning disabilities?
Kivijarvi & Poutiainen (2019) ***Finland***	The potential for social capital that music learning, making, and experiencing offers.
Viscardis et al. (2019) ***Canada***	Investigates the potential of disability arts to disrupt dominant conceptions of disability and invulnerable embodiments and proliferate new representations of bodymind difference in health care.

	Study Design & Sample	Quality Assessment Qualitative studies: points/ out of 20 Quantitative studies: points/ out of 28	Art Medium	ABC Operational Domain
	Qualitative study Participatory approach, participants as co-researchers to inform the research design and analysis of data. Data from Tutors: n=7, parents: n=11, and young musicians with disabilities N=28, n=8	20/20	Music & visual arts	Other
	Case study Members of Speckled Egg Dance Company with ID: N= 12 & 1 non-dis facilitator (author & artistic director)	14/20	Dance	(Semi-) professional arts companies and art studios Autonomous Communities
	Action research Participants and staff, actors with ID: N= 15	11/20	Theater & dance	(Semi-) professional arts companies and art studios Education and Research Projects
	Qualitative research Inclusive research N= 1	18/20	Visual arts	(Semi-) professional arts companies and art studios Autonomous Communities
	Qualitative study Participants with ID: N= 14; focus groups with significant people in their lives: N= 11; community supporters: N= 10	20/20	Theater	(Semi-) professional arts companies and art studios Autonomous Communities
	Case study Participants with learning disabilities: N=40 (men); weekly approximately n=15	19/20	Visual arts & poetry & drama & film making	Other
	Mixed- method Questionnaire for audience N= 350, n= 63. group discussions with the students, teachers, and audience members n=11	19/20 28/28	Music	Education and Research Projects
	Case study. Health care providers: N= 8	14/20	Film	Education and Research Projects

Reference author(s); date of publication. ***Geographic regio*****n**	Focus of Study
Cook (2020) ***USA***	Does involvement in the inclusive therapeutic theatre production for young people with disabilities, mental illness, and medical conditions affect self-advocacy skills, specifically assertiveness?
Yoon, Ellison, & Essl (2020) ***Australia & South Kore***a	This research study focused on exploring what support inclusive arts organisations and society have provided for artists living with a cognitive disability to pursue professional careers.
MacGlone et al. ***(2020)*** ***UK***	Understanding the wellbeing effects of a community music program for people with disabilities.
Scott & Watfern (2021) ***Australia***	What does it mean for Lisa to become an artist and, in the process, share the story of other big changes in her life?
Schnellert et al. (2021) ***Canada***	To disrupt sexual ableism and traditional theater hierarchies, we collaboratively turned to participatory and disability theater with the aim to advance and promote the sexual citizenship of individuals with IDD, who refer to themselves as self-advocates.

	Study Design & Sample	Quality Assessment Qualitative studies: points/ out of 20 Quantitative studies: points/ out of 28	Art Medium	ABC Operational Domain
	Quantitative study Participants with disabilities: n= 13	28/28	Theater & music (musical)	Education and Research Projects Arts Therapies
	Qualitative study. Art organizations n= 4 (2 in Australia and 2 in South Korea); participants proxy intervention interview: n= 8; observations.	19/20	Visual arts	(Semi-) professional arts companies and art studios
	Mixed method person-centred study N= 45 Group 1: 17 group 2: 16 group 3: 12	14/20 26/28	Music	Other
	Qualitative research Inclusive research Artist with ID: N=1	18/20	Visual arts	(Semi-) professional arts companies and art studios
	Participatory action research N=unclear; Six focus groups: roles (not number of p's): Self-advocates: N= 13 Technical support: N= 5 Steering Committee Member: N= 9 Inclusion facilitator: N= 3 Theater Artist: N= 6 Researcher: N= 3	16/20	Theater	Education and Research Projects

Thematic findings

The thematic findings are presented in the following order of sub questions, which were informed by the initial research questions:

(1) What are the design elements of ABCs that have the potential to contribute to social justice for people with intellectual disabilities?
(2) What are the approaches of these ABCs?
(3) Which artistic expression forms are employed in these ABCs?

(1) What are the design elements of ABCs that have the potential to contribute to social justice for people with intellectual disabilities?

To identify design elements, we categorised domains and contexts in which ABCs operate, including collaboration within and beyond the ABCs, the roles of facilitators/staff, references to disability discourse, and the programs offered (Supplementary material **Table 5**). The synthesis of the domains that we found is included in Supplementary material **Table 6**. Since we found little to no variation in approaches, art forms, or engagement with social justice concepts within the different domains and ways of collaboration, we focused on the distinguishing design elements that set ABCs apart from art-based groups not related to social justice.

Our synthesis shows two main themes with subthemes that we judged to be essential design elements outstanding for ABCs. The elements are: (a) Co-creative Connections; and (b) Performing and Sharing with Audience (**Table 2**).

TABLE 2. Design-elements: Themes and Sub-themes.

Themes	*Sub-themes*
Co-creative Connections	Artistic Collaboration
	Creating Discursive and Empowering Spaces
	Learning and Unlearning as a Reciprocal Process.
Performing and Sharing	Visibility and Perception Shift
	Bridging Social Gaps and Building Connections
	Personal Fulfilment and Identity Transformation

Co-creative Connections

Co-creative Connections describe the design element of collaborative relationships between participants with and without intellectual disabilities within the ABCs. This element captures the essence of interaction, mutual learning, and shared creative processes, highlighting the transformative impact of these connections on both the artistic processes and the individuals involved in ABCs.

Artistic Collaboration. Many articles emphasise the importance of particularly co-creative, arts-based collaborations that involve participants with and without intellectual disabilities working together (Caldwell et al., 2008; Cook, 2020; Curtis & Mercado, 2004; Goddard, 2015; Hall, 2013; Harter et al.,2006; Johansen & Saur, 2018; King et al., 2016; Kivijärvi & Poutiainen, 2019; MacGlone et al., 2020;Macpherson et al., 2016; Parry, 2017; Richards et al., 2019; Saur & Johansen, 2013; Schnellert et al.,2021; Scott & Watfern, 2021; Viscardis et al., 2019; Whitehurst, 2007; Yoon et al., 2021). These collaborations occur especially within (semi-) professional arts companies and art studios where artists with intellectual disabilities engage in creative practices with staff or other artists, fostering a sense of community and shared purpose. These collaborations serve as a platform for mutual learning, joy, and the exchange of creative ideas.

The nature of these co-creative connections often extends beyond the core community, engaging with partners such as university students in theater productions (Saur & Johansen, 2013; Schnellert et al., 2021), professional artists without intellectual disabilities (Hall, 2013; Kivijärvi & Poutiainen, 2019; Saur & Johansen, 2013; Schnellert et al., 2021; Yoon et al., 2021), and sometimes with care staff from the individuals residence (Saur & Johansen, 2013), or other care organizations (Viscardis et al., 2019). Furthermore, articles report on creative collaboration between children of a hospital and children from a community (King et al., 2016).

Joy about the co-creative connections has especially been expressed in testimonies of the participants with intellectual disabilities. In the article by Kivijärvi and Poutiainen (2019, p. 10), one of the artists with intellectual disabilities says "[i]t is so great that we can play [music] together with guest artists." In Johansen and Saur's research (2018, p. 54) some of the actors said that it was "fun being together with the students and teaching them what I can do."

One example of co-creative connections between artists with and without intellectual disabilities is described in Cook's article (2020). The therapeutic theater production thematically centered on the characters advocating for their needs. The idea for the show came from two cast members who wrote a screenplay and then brought it to the organization, where it was adapted into a musical by a dramatherapists and a music therapist on staff. Once the initial draft was completed, the cast of actors with intellectual disabilities were invited to meet individually with the drama therapist to discuss their characters in the play. This step allowed space for the actors with intellectual disabilities to add to and shape the dialogue in the script, according to how they would like their story to be told. The final draft was read at the first group meeting, and the actors were able to change any lines that relate directly to their personal story, so that they felt it accurately portrayed their story.

Creating Discursive and Empowering Spaces. Co-creative connections in ABCs foster discursive spaces where the power of co-creation of art is harnessed to foster mutual and empowering interactions (Harter et al., 2006; Macpherson et al., 2016; Saur & Johansen, 2013). Macpherson et al. (2016, p. 1) call the art studio a "[l]istening space," defining listening as form of "being-with" and responding to a person. These spaces allow for a dialogue between artists with and without intellectual disabilities, emphasizing the importance of artistic co-creation as a tool for empowerment and self-advocacy.

Learning and Unlearning as a Reciprocal Process. Some ABCs are described as environments where learning and unlearning occur reciprocally among all participants, including the participants with intellectual disabilities, professional and staff artists, and external collaborators (Goddard, 2015; Schnellert et al., 2021). This learning process is not unidirectional but rather a shared experience that benefits all stakeholders, fostering an atmosphere of inclusivity and continuous growth. For instance, the artists with intellectual disabilities, called Rocket artists, meet weekly, sometimes in collaboration with artists without intellectual disabilities and sometimes with students from the University of Brighton. The studio has been designed "to support a mutual beneficial two-way creative exchange that enables the artists to share an artistic journey, [to] learn (and un-learn) from each other" (Macpherson et al., 2016, p. 4).

Performing and Sharing

Performing and Sharing, another remarkable element in the design of ABCs, extends them beyond the internal community circles by engaging with external audiences through public performances, exhibitions, and other forms of sharing artefacts. The essence of the element lies in these external interactions, offering visibility of persons with intellectual disabilities and challenging societal perceptions.

Most of the articles report on ventures into public spaces (Hall, 2013), connections to statewide social networks for people with disabilities (Schlosnagle et al., 2014), reverse-integration models (King et al., 2016), gifting or selling art to people in mainstream society (Hall, 2013; Scott & Watfern, 2021;Yoon et al., 2021), sharing videos on the Internet (Viscardis et al., 2019), and especially public theater and dance performances, concerts, and visual art expositions. Descriptions of ABCs without this design element are by Price and Barron (1999), and Caldwell and colleagues (2008). The performances and exhibitions are held at mainstream venues such as museums (Richards et al., 2019), theatres, cultural or arts centres, such as the Centre for Contemporary Arts in Glasgow (Levy et al., 2017), the Namsos Kultuurhus (Johansen & Saur, 2018), or the Savoy Theater where the 700 seats were sold out (Kivijärvi & Poutiainen, 2019). Other venues are public outside places like a pier (Parry, 2017). Furthermore, clubs, churches (Kivijärvi & Poutiainen, 2019), public galleries (Yoon et al., 2021), Facebook (MacGlone et al., 2020) and websites (Viscardis et al., 2019) are places to perform or exhibit artwork.

Visibility and Perception Shift. By participating in exhibitions, performances, or online sharing, ABC participants challenge societal norms and perceptions. Public engagements in mainstream venues such as museums, concert halls, theatres, and online platforms—serve as powerful vehicles for shifting the public's understanding of people with intellectual disabilities. For instance, public theater performances and visual art exhibitions are helpful in making the lives and talents of these individuals more visible to wider society (e.g. Johansen & Saur, 2018; French & Jones, 2018). An example comes from MacGlone et al. (2020) who wrote about a performance at the end of the music workshops program for a group of young adults with disabilities. According to the authors, the performance showcases their talents to family, centre staff, the public and invited guests. The event was also live streamed on Facebook and had approximately 500 views.

Bridging Social Gaps and Building Connections. Performing and sharing can bridge social divides and foster connections between people with and without intellectual disabilities. Public performances, like concerts and theater productions, do more than entertain; they create spaces for interaction and mutual understanding among diverse audiences. The emotional responses from audience members, such as those moved to tears during a concert, illustrate the powerful impact these events have in dissolving barriers between people of different abilities. One parent reflected on this, noting, "It is not important who has special needs and who does not. We're all the same" (Kivijarvi & Poutiainen, 2019, p. 11). These interactions promote reciprocity and meaningful relationships.

Personal Fulfilment and Identity Transformation. Engaging with public audiences not only provides a platform for self-expression but also facilitates personal growth and identity transformation. Participants describe feelings of empowerment and fulfilment from sharing their work, which in turn helps them to redefine their sense of self and their roles within their communities. For instance, James, who performed at a pier, described the experience as "[y]ou can hear the wind, when it's blowing into you. It's telling you… It's in your body too. It's like when your body's lifting off in the air. Like an aero plane lifting off. It's very spectacular" (Parry, 2017, p. 379). Another ABC participant, Lisa Scott, expressed that having her artwork exhibited allowed others to see "a new side of me. Sometimes, they are shocked. I feel wonderful" (Scott & Watfern, 2021, p. 288). She concluded that "becoming an artist has been transformative, helping her demonstrate her capabilities to friends and family" (Scott & Watfern, 2021, p. 291).

(2) What are approaches at ABCs with a potential for contribution to social justice for people with intellectual disabilities?

We have identified two key approaches that to our understanding are outstanding for ABCs. These approaches are (a) Person-Centred Approach, and (b) Improvisatory Methodical Approach. An ABC does not rely on just one of these approaches; rather, the approaches are interconnected and mutually reinforcing.

TABLE 3. Approaches: Themes and Sub-themes.

Themes	*Sub-themes*
Person-Centred Approach	Individualised Artistic Expression and Personalization
	Empowerment
	Advocacy
Improvisatory Methodical Approach	Flexibility and Participant-Driven Creativity
	Real-Time Problem Solving and Collaborative Creativity
	Empowerment Through Improvisation

Person-Centred Approach

This approach puts a person-centered, participant-led ethos in ABCs. The essence of it lies in prioritizing the unique needs, preferences, and cultural contexts of each participant, fostering self-expression, empowerment, and advocacy. This approach is deeply embedded in the arts-based practices of ABCs, and we recognise it as a key approach.

The person-centered approach has been described in fourteen articles: Dickinson & Hutchinson, 2019; Goddard, 2015; Hall, 2010; Harter et al., 2006; King et al., 2016; Levy et al., 2017; MacGlone et al., 2020; Macpherson et al., 2016; Parry, 2017; Richards et al., 2019; Scott & Watfern, 2021; Schnellert et al., 2021; Stickley et al., 2012; Yoon et al., 2021.

Individualised Artistic Expression and Personalisation. At the heart of the person-centered approach is the emphasis on individualised artistic expression, where participants are encouraged to explore and express their own voices. This approach is characterised by a blend of collaborative, performance-based projects and more personalised artistic endeavours. As noted by Levy et al. (2017), this personalisation and capability approach aims to make various art forms accessible and inclusive, allowing participants to work at their own pace and in ways that are most meaningful to them (Dickinson & Hutchinson, 2019). This ethos is reflected in arts-based activities that are tailored to the preferences and contexts of each group and its members, providing unique opportunities for self-expression and interaction (Richards et al., 2019; MacGlone et al., 2020).

Empowerment. According to the data, participants experience empowerment through self-expression and performance opportunities. In ABCs, participants are often encouraged to explore their unique modes of expression, whether through storytelling, photography, poetry, drama, or filmmaking. This creative freedom enables individuals to challenge societal stigmas and misperceptions about intellectual disabilities (Dickinson & Hutchinson, 2019). For example, Hall (2010) and King et al. (2016) discuss how ABCs provide platforms for participants to perform and showcase their talents, which can be a transformative experience. This empowerment is further highlighted by participants' testimonies, such as one individual who described how engaging in arts-based community practice allowed him to "do what he loved without being directed on how to create,"

finding it a refreshing and liberating change (Richards et al., 2019, p. 11).

Advocacy. The person-centered approach in ABCs is also a powerful tool for advocacy. By centering the voices and experiences of individuals with intellectual disabilities, these communities actively work to disrupt societal misperceptions and advocate for broader rights. This includes promoting sexual citizenship and challenging societal norms that marginalise people with intellectual disabilities (Schnellert et al., 2021). The individualised support strategies employed in these ABCs are crucial for enhancing the artistic capacities of participants and ensuring their stories and experiences are heard and respected (Yoon, Ellison, & Essl, 2020; Scott & Watfern, 2021).

Testimonies of ABC participants with intellectual disabilities highlight the importance of person-centered approaches in arts-based practices. For example, French and Jones (2018, p.13) noted that "the arts activities that [were] created support people to reflect on things in their lives that contribute to their self-esteem (. . .), their dreams and aspirations, their achievements and their ability to take risks".

Improvisatory Methodical Approach

This approach, synthesised from similar approaches in the data, is characterised by flexibility, responsiveness, and an emphasis on participant-driven content. It allows creativity to emerge organically from participants' skills and expressions rather than being confined to preexisting scripts or rigid structures (Goddard, 2015; Johansen & Saur, 2018; King et al., 2016; Richards et al., 2019; Saur & Johansen, 2013; Schnellert et al., 2021; Scott & Watfern, 2021; Viscardis et al., 2019).

Flexibility and Participant-Driven Creativity. At the core of the improvisatory methodical approach is its inherent flexibility, which serves as a scaffolding structure that supports participants in exploring and expressing their creativity. This approach encourages participants to take ownership of the creative process, allowing their ideas to shape the direction of the activities (e.g., Goddard, 2015). For example, in a theater project, the absence of a pre-given script allowed actors to leverage their own qualities and authenticity, with improvisation serving as a method to enhance the actors' personal expressions (Saur & Johansen, 2013). This practice was further enriched by techniques reminiscent of Boal's Theater of the Oppressed (Boal, 2023), where movement improvisation and physical imagery were employed to deepen engagement (Goddard, 2015). This participant-driven creativity is further exemplified in visual arts, where participants appreciated the autonomy provided by this approach. One participant noted, "I sit down, and I draw and paint and I have to make decisions myself. The staff members help if you need it" (Scott & Watfern, 2021, p. 288). This autonomy fosters individual expression and allows participants to navigate their own creative journeys.

Real-Time Problem Solving and Collaborative Creativity. The improvisatory methodical approach fosters addressing challenges in real-time, facilitating an emergent creative process that adapts to the needs and interests of the participants. This adaptability is evident in practices where ideas were developed into scenes through play-building, creating tableaux, and then bringing them to life in an improvised drama process (Schnellert et al., 2021). The flexible and person-centered nature of some ABCs underscores this approach, offering participants open opportunities to explore activities based on their interests, thereby facilitating self-expression, social interaction, and a sense of community belonging (Johansen & Saur, 2018; King et al., 2016).

Improvised drama plays a significant role in collaborative creativity, where participants or facilitators suggest topics that are then acted out through dialogue, mime, or other forms of expression. This method allows for the coconstruction of stories that are shared, examined, and explored on stage through various arts activities, including group brainstorms, improvisation, and cowriting scenes (Richards et al., 2019; Schnellert et al., 2021). This approach not only disrupts dominant narratives but also opens possibilities for creating new understandings of difference, thereby fostering connections within the ABC and beyond (Scott & Watfern, 2021; Viscardis et al., 2019).

Empowerment Through Improvisation. Participants with intellectual disabilities have expressed positive perceptions of the improvisatory methodical approach, particularly its role in fostering creativity and personal expression. This approach empowers individuals to take ownership of their creative processes, enhancing both individual and collective artistic expression. For instance, Damian, a dancer in the Speckled Egg Dance Company, explained that using sheeting in his dance "helped my thoughts, feelings, my actions. It brought all my ideas for the dance together" (Parry, 2017, p. 376). Similarly, Richard described his solo dance performance as "travelling, a journey" (Parry, 2017, p. 376), reflecting the sense of exploration and self-discovery enabled by this approach.

In visual arts, participants appreciated the autonomy this method provided, as one remarked, "Isit down and I draw and paint and I have to make decisions myself. The staff members help if you need it" (Scott & Watfern, 2021, p. 288). This approach also supported collaborative creativity ingroup settings, as one participant noted, "We did lots of improv at the beginning and I got to create the first scene" (Schnellert et al., 2021, p. 13). These experiences illustrate how the improvisatory methodical approach empowers individuals to take ownership of their creative processes, enhancing both individual and collective artistic expression.

(3) Which artistic expression forms are employed in ABCs?

The artistic expression that we judged to be most outstanding in ABCs are (a) Expression of Life Stories and (b) Embodied Expression of Self (**Table 4**).

TABLE 4. Artistic Expression Forms: Themes and Sub-themes.

Themes	*Sub-themes*
Expression of Life Stories	Storytelling
	Personal Expression
Embodied Expression of Self	The Integration of Mind and Body
	Attunement to Body Language
	Emotional Connection

Expression of Life Stories

Expression of Life Stories is a remarkable artistic form found in arts-based communities. This form supports individuals in creatively articulating their experiences and emotions through various artistic mediums, offering a platform for sharing narratives that might otherwise remain unheard (Caldwell et al., 2008; Curtis & Mercado, 2004; Dickinson & Hutchinson, 2019; Hall, 2010; Harter et al., 2006;Ineland, 2005; Johansen & Saur, 2018; Parry, 2017; Price & Barron, 1999; Richards et al., 2019; Saur & Johansen, 2013; Whitehurst, 2007). By supporting individuals to express their stories, ABCs foster narrative agency, challenge dominant narratives, and promote a deeper understanding of participants' lived experiences.

Storytelling. A core aspect of this artistic form is the co-creation and sharing of narratives, empowering participants through the act of storytelling. By facilitating a space where their voices can be heard, ABCs allow individuals to collaboratively construct and express stories that might otherwise remain hidden. This practice is evident across various projects, where participants use mediums such as sculpture, theater, and visual art to express their experiences and emotions. For example, in one project, participants jointly created a sculpture as a response to the infringement of their rights, using the symbolic act of sculpting hands to represent their feelings (Richards et al., 2019). Similarly, in a therapeutic theater intervention the portrayal of a disabled princess in a fairy tale provided a framework for exploring complex themes (Cook, 2020). The coconstruction of stories in theater (through activities such as improvisation and collaborative scriptwriting) allowed self-advocates and community partners to shape narratives together, using diverse forms of communication (Schnellert et al., 2021).

Personal Expression. This form of artistic expression focuses on individual storytelling and self-representation, emphasizing the importance of unveiling personal narratives and fostering narrative agency (Cook, 2020; Curtis & Mercado, 2004; Harter et al., 2006; Ineland, 2005; Johansen & Saur, 2018; Parry, 2017; Price & Barron, 1999; Richards et al., 2019; Saur & Johansen, 2013). ABCs encourage participants to share their own lived experiences, creating a sense of ownership over their stories and challenging dominant narratives.

This focus is reflected in projects that promote autobiographical solos, self-portraits, and other forms of personal expression, where individuals present their unique perspectives. Through these activities, participants can construct counter-narratives to established histories and challenge societal perceptions. For instance, in one project, actors performed versions of themselves, sharing personal stories about their lived experiences, challenges, talents, and resilience (Cook, 2020; Parry, 2017).

An example of narrative agency can be found in the work of Lisa Scott, an art studio participant who used her artwork to share stories about significant life changes, such as moving homes and losing loved ones. Through her art, Scott was able to reflect on her past and contemplate her future, stating, "I wanted to put some words on the dress, words from my book. They are words for my mum. It's a personal thing, and an emotional thing. It is a way to remember the past and think about the future" (Scott & Watfern, 2021, p. 290). Her story illustrates how personal expression in ABCs not only highlights participants' personal journeys but also challenges dominant narratives, encourages a deeper understanding of lived experiences, and provides a medium for emotional reflection and healing.

Embodied Expression of Self

Embodied Expression of Self emerged from the data as an important artistic expression form in ABCs, emphasizing the integration of mind and body to foster non-verbal communication and interaction. This form of expression allows participants to engage physically, cognitively, and emotionally, facilitating a deep connection between their internal experiences and external expressions. Through techniques like movement improvisation, physical imagery, and attunement to body language, participants explore new dimensions of self-expression that go beyond spoken language (French & Jones, 2019; Goddard, 2015; Hall, 2013; Harter et al., 2006; Johansen & Saur, 2018; Macpherson et al., 2016; Parry, 2017; Saur & Johansen, 2013).

The Integration of Mind and Body. At the heart of embodied self-expression is the integration of mind and body, which fosters a unique form of communication and interaction among participants. This integration, sometimes referred to as "embodied rhetoricity" (Harter et al., 2006, p. 14), involves a co-creative exploration of unique talents through physical, cognitive, and emotional means. Hall (2013) notes that such engagement often bridges gaps of exclusion, as embodied and emotion-driven encounters create deeper connections between participants. For instance, the act of dancing with others requires participants to listen to their bodies while simultaneously responding to their movements, creating a "physical dialogue" between participants (Saur & Johansen, 2013, p. 255). Techniques like movement improvisation and physical imagery further enhance this embodied interaction, enabling participants to explore their physical capabilities and express emotions through movement (Goddard, 2015).

Attunement to Body Language. Attunement to body language is a key component of this artistic form, involving the careful observation of visual language in artwork and a heightened awareness of bodily expressions (Macpherson et al., 2016). This attentiveness enables dancers, for example, to use their bodies as sites of agency, asserting their identity as artists and expanding the expressive boundaries of their physical form (Parry, 2017). One dancer described generating movement content for a performance by using his imagination to "wish for something" and then embodying that wish through dance. He explained, "I put the wish in my body and dance that" (Parry, 2017, p. 378). This exploration of bodily expression allows participants to discover new possibilities for their subjectivity, contributing to broader democratic processes by challenging societal norms and expectations (Johansen & Saur, 2018).

Emotional Connection. Embodied self-expression also serves as a powerful medium for engaging cocreators, partners, and audiences beyond spoken language. Through body language, music, movement, and multimedia, participants evoke strong emotional connections with their audiences (Schnellert et al., 2021). This non-verbal communication allows participants to convey complex emotions and experiences that may be difficult to articulate in words alone. One participant with an intellectual disability described this process, saying, "I got to act with my face, my hands, and my heart" (Schnellert et al., 2021, p. 16). Another participant, James, reflected on how he generated movement content fora performance, stating, "…using my imagination to wish for something, I see it in my mind, and it's a really big thing to wish for something—it could come true. So…I put the wish in my body and dance that" (Parry, 2017, p. 378). When asked where in his body he experienced the feelings he used to create his dance, James explained, "It comes from inside, in the middle. Not the sternum, the H.E.A.R.T. My heart. It's not tight, it's loveliness" (p. 379). These testimonials highlight how embodied self-expression allows participants to communicate their innermost feelings and connect with others on a deeply emotional level.

Discussion

The aim of this scoping review is to provide an interpretive synthesis of various research methodologies, including qualitative, quantitative, mixed-methods, case studies, and action research. It focuses on design elements, approaches, and artistic expression forms found within the umbrella term "arts-based communities" (ABCs). This scoping review seeks to contribute to existing knowledge of ABCs (Zimmermann et al., 2024) and inform the development of future ABC initiatives as approaches of social justice-based art therapy. In this study, we selected and reviewed 27 articles that featured a broad variety of study focuses and samples. To enhance the rigor and reliability of this scoping review, each included article met at least an average quality assessment score of the Standard

Quality Assessment Criteria for Evaluating Primary Research Papers from a Variety of Fields guide (Kmet et al., 2004). Our qualitative analysis aimed to identify prominent or recurrent topics in the literature. We summarised the findings under thematic headings to organise the data into clear, distinct categories, facilitating a better understanding of the main findings (Dixon-Woods et al., 2005).

Our review shows that ABCs are methodologically heterogeneous, that there are no fixed models, and that contexts or domains in which they perform, or the art medium they prefer, does not seem to matter in relationship to design elements, approaches, or artistic expression forms. Each of the ABCs studied in the selected publications has more differences compared to others than commonalities. At the same time, we found commonalities in two design elements that essentially determine ABCs fostering social justice for persons with intellectual disabilities, answering our first sub question. The arranged Co-creative Connections foster connections of participants with different abilities to engage in a dynamic and reciprocal process of artistic creation, learning, and empowerment. Co-creative Connections not only enhance the creative experience making it into a joyful, engaging journey, but also seem to contribute to personal empowerment of the individuals involved, ultimately fostering a more power balanced, collaborative community. Performing and Sharing with an audience is another essential element increasing the visibility of individuals with intellectual disabilities through public performances and exhibitions. These not only challenge societal perceptions but can also build bridges between persons, with possibilities to foster deeper connections. These external engagements seem to serve as catalysts for personal transformation among the participants, for example enhancing their sense of self-worth and social identity.

Our review further shows similarities in the ABC approaches, answering our second sub question. A Person-Centered Approach with individualised artistic processes and expression can, according to the included studies, lead to personal empowerment, which in turn fuels advocacy efforts for social justice. The approach not only allows participants to express themselves creatively but also empowers them to take ownership of their narratives and challenge societal stigmas. The Improvisatory Methodical Approach prioritises fellow-driven creativity, real-time problem solving, and collaborative and personal expression. This approach seems to enable individuals to explore their own artistic potential while also contributing to a shared creative process. This flexibility and responsiveness can foster an inclusive environment that challenges dominant narratives, enhancing the lived experiences of individuals with intellectual disabilities.

Two themes answer our third sub question about artistic expression forms. First, the artistic Expression of Life Stories, where collective and individual storytelling serves as a powerful tool for empowerment and plays a key role in fostering narrative agency. By creating spaces where participants can express their personal and life stories, ABCs

enable individuals to explore, express, and share their narratives, promoting a deeper understanding of their lived experiences. This form of storytelling not only highlights participants' personal journeys but also has the potential to shift how audiences perceive and value the experiences of individuals with intellectual disabilities. Similarly, the second artistic expression form of Embodied Self-Expression fosters physical, cognitive, and emotional engagement. By integrating mind and body, participants communicate non-verbally, assert their identities, and expand their expressive capabilities. This form of expression supports narrative agency and empowerment, allowing participants to convey their inner experiences through movement and body language, further challenging societal perceptions of persons with intellectual disabilities and promoting inclusion and feelings of belonging.

It can be concluded that the ABCs described in the included studies predominantly align with elements of the social model of disability such as participation, social inclusion, personal dignity and respect (Zimmermann et al., 2024). Notably, this alignment is evident despite our search strategy also incorporating terms associated with the medical model, such as "Down syndrome" and "impairment" (see Supplementary Material file, **Table 1**). The ABCs appear particularly well suited to facilitating a transformation in the conceptualization of disability. As Wickenden (2023, p. 1) noted, "an impairment [is often] only of importance to the extent that it means that the person needs some reasonable adjustments in order to participate on an equal basis with others." The ABCs seem to respond directly to this principle: through co-creative artistic processes and shared engagement with audiences, the ABCs establish a relational space grounded in interaction and equity. The fact that some individuals with intellectual disabilities may require adjustments (Cook & Hole, 2021) (as observed in some of the ABCs within the reviewed literature) does not constitute a barrier to full participation. On the contrary, each of the included ABCs appears to have developed its own tailored strategies for providing varying degrees of support, ranging from assistance in developing a theatrical production (Cook, 2020) to offering an inspiring space for exploring personal themes through visual art making and sharing the artwork with an audience (Scott &Watfern, 2021).

Regarding their methodological orientation, the findings indicate that the ABCs constitute inclusive frameworks that acknowledge dignity, personal and narrative agency, and the value of diverse ways of thinking and being. The lived experiences of individuals from diverse identities (intersecting social positions (Crenshaw, 1989; Goodley, 2016; Wickenden, 2023; Yi & Moon, 2020), as well as challenging life events) are explored and shared in ways that centre on the individual and affirm their humanity. The focus is on the person, their background, and their unique way of engaging with the world and participating in society. While relationships between individuals of all abilities are emphasised, verbal language becomes secondary within the embodied approach that characterises many ABCs.

Implications for art therapy praxis

Art therapist, artist, and disability rights activist Yi (2018) advocates from a critical disability culture perspective for a shift away from the traditional medical model of disability. Instead, she calls for a narrative that embraces disability as a cultural identity that exists alongside and interacts with other cultures. According to Yi (2018), a sustainable, social justice-oriented art therapy praxis that integrates disability culture within healthcare systems has the potential to catalyse long-term, systemic change from the grassroots level.

Our scoping review contributes to this vision by offering insights that can inform a social justice-oriented art therapy praxis. Grounded in a social model of disability, the ABC approach broadens the role of art therapists and other creative arts therapists in addressing structural inequities. Such a perspective acknowledges that the mental and emotional challenges and harm experienced by individuals with intellectual disabilities are often, at least partly, deeply intertwined with social inequities and systemic discrimination (Brown & McCann, 2021; Clifford Simplican et al., 2015; Frawley & Bigby, 2015; Hove et al., 2019; Maïano et al., 2016; Scheffers, 2023; Starke et al., 2024; Sutherland et al., 2024).

The design elements identified in this review highlight the importance of collaborative, inclusive practices in which individuals cocreate in all-ability communities. These practices emphasise both the aesthetic and artistic dimensions of art making, as well as the importance of sharing the outcomes with an audience. Presenting artwork in open, participatory contexts fosters mutual understanding and power-balanced interactions. While this may represent a change for art therapists and other creative arts therapists accustomed to private, clinical settings, the ABC design elements (and the theoretical benefits they suggest) underscore the added value of co-creation and public presentation.

Arts therapists are uniquely positioned to facilitate such inclusive, community-based processes. Beyond artistic facilitation, we bring expertise to community-based work. Our knowledge of group dynamics, mediation skills, understanding of mental health challenges and trauma, cultural competence, flexibility, and ethical practice all contribute to creating safe and supportive environments (Ottemiller & Awais, 2016). Furthermore, research has shown that art therapists' awareness of risks of harm and their skills to prevent harm during art sessions are higher compared to artists (Boudrias, 2022).

However, despite this potential, the art therapy field has not yet fully engaged with the underlying conditions that lead to social exclusion, mental distress, disempowerment, and discrimination of persons with disabilities (Yi & Moon, 2020). Our review shows that this also applies to the other creative arts therapies. To respond meaningfully to ableist social structures and norms that construct disability as a deficit (Barnes, 2019; Goodley, 2016; Scior et al., 2020), we must critically examine, understand, and transform our roles (not merely as powerful mental health experts and helpers) but as active participants in reshaping the social conditions of marginalised people (Miller et al., 2020).This

transformation must be informed by an intersectional lens. As written in the introduction, intellectual disability does not exist in isolation but is experienced in relationship to other identities such as race, gender, and class (Crenshaw, 1989; Kafer, 2013). An intersectional lens enables us to move beyond one-dimensional understandings of disability. Such a response entails a fundamental reorientation toward relational, participatory, and justice-based practices in which individuals with intellectual disabilities are recognised as experts of their own lives, with the inherent right to autonomy, agency, and full social participation (Barnes, 2019; Goodley, 2016; Yi & Moon, 2020).

Many art therapy practices for persons with intellectual disabilities closely align with the approaches and artistic expression forms that we found in the included articles of this scoping review. This involves improvisation and responsiveness to what evolves in the moment and centering personal experiences and stories through arts-based methodologies. Such practices allow individuals to be seen, heard, and recognised, which are key elements in processes of healing and empowerment (Rutten-Saris, 2002). Nevertheless, challenges remain. Art therapists and other creative arts therapists trained within a medical model may struggle to recognise, acknowledge, and transform power dynamics in the therapist-client relationship. Even in community-based approaches, as they are described by Ottemiller and Awais (2016), there is a risk that the therapist's specialised skills and knowledge may unintentionally reinforce power imbalances between trained professionals and untrained participants. As Talwar (2016) reminded us, power differentials must be acknowledged when an external professional enters a community to facilitate a project.

To address the challenges in power differences, ongoing reflection is essential (Miller et al., 2020). We believe this should include joint reflection with participants, allowing all involved to explore and interpret their experiences together (Hermsen et al., 2024). By complementing the medical model of disability with perspectives rooted in the social model and critical disability culture to achieve a multifactorial account of disability (Shakespeare, 2013), art therapy and other creative arts therapies can contribute to a more just society and by doing so, improve health and well-being for people with intellectual disabilities (Fancourt & Finn, 2019). The creative arts therapies do not exist in a political vacuum; they are inevitably shaped by dominant and alternative models of disability.

Limitations

The selection criteria and the search strategy limited the review. First, no grey data were included, such as videos, live performances or presentation papers. Grey data could elaborate knowledge on the subject by adding empirical data, perhaps even from an evaluative perspective of participants with intellectual disabilities. In the selected publications, we barely hear the voices of the individuals with intellectual disabilities themselves. Whitehurst (2007, p. 55) explained that "[v]ery often, the thoughts of young

people with intellectual disabilities are not included because professionals do not have the resources or experience to conduct the interviews." Stickley and colleagues (2012, p. 253) acknowledged that "interviews with service users themselves elicited very short answers and it is difficult to quote them." Nevertheless, in some of the included publications we could hear their voices, sometimes only some words or one sentence. We elaborated these testimonies with a risk of bias in the balance of data. Second, the language restriction in the inclusion criteria has led to a lack of geographical/cultural variation of data and are mainly limited to Western, high-income societies, which restricts the generalizability or transferability to non-Western, low- and middle-income societies or less neoliberal cultures. Within contemporary Western societies, the challenge of stigma of individuals with intellectual disabilities lies in its focus on dependency and incompetence (Pelleboer-Gunnink, 2020). This may be different in other societies. Third, our interpretation of the included studies leaves open the possibility for revision or further validation because our synthesis includes studies with different methods and epistemological foundations. At the same time, this multiplicity may reinforce the transferability of findings, as the convergence of insights across diverse methodological approaches and theoretical perspectives suggests that the findings are not limited to a single research tradition or context. Instead, their recurrence across varying frameworks points to their potential relevance and applicability in a broader range of practice settings (Finfgeld-Connett, 2010).

Conclusion

This scoping review has illuminated the diverse landscape of arts-based communities with the potential to foster social justice for people with intellectual disabilities (ABCs) through co-creative, person-centered practices. Despite their heterogeneity, ABCs share foundational elements (particularly co-creative connection and performing and sharing with an audience) that foster empowerment, relationality, and social visibility. These elements not only challenge prevailing ableist narratives but also reimagine what inclusive communities can look like when centered on artistic expression. Furthermore, the reviewed literature reveals that ABCs are less about fixed models and more about responsive, evolving processes rooted in person-centered and improvisatory approaches. Artistic expressions (especially those grounded in life storytelling and embodied expression of self) serve as vehicles for personal and collective transformation, offering powerful means for narrative agency.

Together, these insights suggest that ABCs represent a praxis that is aligned with the social model of disability, challenging deficit-based views and promoting equitable participation. They offer a compelling framework for art therapists and other creative arts therapists seeking to work in community settings in ways that honour diversity,

resist systemic marginalisation, enhance understanding of the voices of those historically silenced, and enhance health and well-being of individuals with intellectual disabilities.

Yet realising this vision is not without challenges. To fully realise the potential of ABCs within art therapy, practitioners must reflect critically on their own roles, power dynamics, and the frameworks they operate within. Integrating an intersectional lens and embracing disability as a cultural identity can support a meaningful shift toward social justice-based practice. As agents of change, art therapists and other creative arts therapists are uniquely positioned to facilitate spaces where individuals (regard-less of ability) can engage in authentic, collaborative, and socially impactful creative expression.

Ultimately, ABCs invite us to reimagine a socially just society not as one in which marginalised persons integrate into existing structures, but as co-creation of new cultural forms, relationships, and possibilities for belonging. Let this be not only a call to action but a call to imagination, where the transformative potential of the arts becomes a vehicle for equity and social justice.

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Chapter 5

Interspace. Performing your best life. Social justice in the neighbourhood?



(. . .) I thought that there was maybe another problem. My father was a lovely person, but at times he was stubborn and dominant. What he had in mind was exactly what was going to happen. I asked my father if he had spoken to the neighbors about his plans for the summer party and what they thought about a performance of a musical play with everything he had in mind.

"No," he said. "I just do what I want to do. I am not interested in what others think about this".

I felt an inner restlessness or even a dilemma: was it or wasn't it important what others thought of his plans? Was he allowed to control a party that was probably the last one in his life? Should I ask the neighbors even if he did not ask me to do it? Were others interested in his ideas? Would they provide him space at the party and even compliment him afterward? Or, if taken by surprise, would the neighbors make this a big disappointment for my father? (. . .).

Photo and story: *Images of meaning*. Stemerding & Zimmermann. Unpublished

PARTICIPANTS' EXPERIENCES OF CREATIVE AND EXPERIENTIAL PRACTICES

This chapter addresses research question c), exploring participants' experiences within the field of art therapy practices. The article presented here has been published as:

van Laar, C., Bloch-Atefi, A., Grace, J., & Zimmermann, A. (2025). Empowering voices-learning from NDIS participants about the value of creative and experiential therapies: A mixed methods analysis of testimonials and academic literature. *Psychotherapy and Counselling Journal of Australia, 13*(1). https://doi.org/10.59158/001c.128556.

Abstract

In this study, we investigated the research question "What is the value of creative and experiential therapies for disabled people in the National Disability Insurance Scheme[3] (NDIS)?", an Australian scheme informed by the principles of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD). The NDIS aims to support disabled people to increase their independence, social and economic participation, and inclusion in community life as equal members of society. The findings are intended to inform policy regarding access to creative and experiential therapies.

Using a mixed methods approach, we analysed testimonials submitted by disabled persons to the online petition *Creative and Experiential Therapies Belong in the NDIS*. We also conducted a literature review of reviews and meta-analyses, adhering to PRISMA guidelines, investigating "What is the current evidence for the efficacy of creative and experiential therapies for disabled people?"

The thematic findings are contextualised within recent academic literature, emphasising the personal and social impact of policy changes on disabled people. Five key themes emerged from participant testimonials: having choice, being understood, self-efficacy, belonging, and accountability. The literature review provides evidence of the efficacy of creative and experiential therapies from medical, social, and overall wellbeing perspectives.

The urgent need to address threats to funding for creative and experiential therapies within the NDIS is highlighted by the voices of NDIS participants and underscored by the evidence of the therapies' efficacy. The findings are discussed with reference to the specific socioeconomic and sociopolitical context of Australia as an original signatory to the United Nations *Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities*.

3 The National Disability Insurance Scheme (NDIS) is an Australian government-funded scheme introduced in 2013 that provides individualised support to individuals with permanent and significant disabilities. The NDIS aims to enhance participants' independence, social and economic participation, and access to community life by offering personalised funding packages based on individual needs rather than diagnosis or service availability.

Introduction

In this mixed methods research, we prioritise the voices of disabled[4] individuals[5] utilising creative and experiential therapies (CET) services through the National Disability Insurance Scheme (NDIS) to answer the question "What is the value of CET for disabled people in the NDIS?" Our analysis focuses on public testimonials from an online petition, *Creative and Experiential Therapies Belong in the NDIS* (van Laar, 2024). These testimonials offer qualitative data, illuminating the lived experiences of NDIS participants. In addition, we present a comprehensive review of studies on CET and disability published since 2023, situating these testimonials within current evidence on the efficacy of CET for disabled persons.

By integrating these findings, our discussion demonstrates the importance of NDIS participants having the option to choose CET, and evidence of the efficacy of CET for disabled persons. We put forward actionable recommendations for enhancing sustainable access to these vital services within the NDIS.

Significance of this research

Our mixed methods study is significant in providing multiple perspectives: the testimonial voices of NDIS participants (qualitative analysis of empirical data) and evidence for the efficacy of CET in disability care and support (literature review).

We employ these perspectives to examine the value of CET for disabled persons within the NDIS. By synthesising these data sources, our research contributes to the ongoing discourse about improving access to and ensuring the quality of CET in disability services. Through our findings, discussion, and recommendations, we aim to provide useful information that informs policy development and enhances the sustainable integration of CET within the NDIS framework.

Structure of this article

This research is situated within the Australian context, focusing on disability care and support. We begin by detailing the demographics of disabled individuals and Australia's commitment to the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD; United Nations, 2006). We explore the NDIS and its role in providing access to therapeutic supports, especially CET. A brief history of CET in Australia highlights their

4 In this study, participants are considered as belonging to the NDIS definition of "people with disability," meaning they have a permanent and significant impairment that substantially reduces functional capacity and affects daily life activities, and were under 65 years of age at the time of their NDIS application. (Australian Government NDIS eligibility criteria).

5 The authors have consciously chosen to use identity-first language in solidarity with the Australian self-advocacy movement, which approaches disability as an integral part of identity (Iwanek, 2024).

integration into practice. We also examine public responses regarding potential threats to accessing CET for NDIS participants.

We then present our research methods and findings, which align closely with the NDIS Quality and Safeguards Commission's (2023) Evidence Informed Practice Guide. In Part 1, we prioritise the rights and perspectives of disabled persons, in keeping with the NDIS guidelines, ensuring that their voices and experiences shape the services they receive. We present the methods and findings from a thematic analysis of public testimonials from the Creative and Experiential Therapies Belong in the NDIS petition, revealing key themes and participant perspectives on CET efficacy. In Part 2, we highlight the importance of using the best available research and evaluation evidence to inform practices and support services. We then outline our literature review of recent meta-analyses on CET effectiveness, providing a scholarly evidence base. In the Discussion section, we integrate and broaden the findings from Parts 1 and 2. We highlight the important contributions of CET professionals to disability care and support and address unique socioeconomic and sociopolitical challenges specific to the Australian context.

Context of this study

Being disabled in Australia. We invite you to recall the last time you gathered with a group of four other people. Perhaps it was on Christmas Day or New Year's Eve? Or maybe in a random grouping, such as a supermarket queue? Whenever or wherever it was, if you were in a group of five people, the odds are that one person in that group was disabled (Australian Bureau of Statistics [ABS], 2024). The disability might have been more visible or less visible, and could have included a wide range of disabilities, including limitations to mobility, deafness, brain injury from head trauma, cerebral palsy or stroke, intellectual disability, blindness, Parkinson's disease or various neurodivergences such as autism, attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) or post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), or limitations to social functioning because of PTSD, severe anxiety or depression (ABS, 2024). Disabled people are incredibly diverse. In Australia, 5.5 million people (or 21.4% of the Australian population) are disabled, and 7.9% of Australians are profoundly or severely disabled (ABS, 2024).

Disability and social disadvantage are closely linked. If you are a disabled person in Australia, your average personal weekly income is about half the average personal weekly income of a non-disabled person. It is more difficult for you to access public transport, you are more likely than your non-disabled peers to experience discrimination in restaurants, your workplace, and on the street. Because of this, you are more likely to avoid situations like visiting family and friends, going out to a cafe or bar, or going to the shops (ABS, 2024).

As a disabled person in Australia, you are also less likely than you were 10 years ago to become institutionalised. The proportion of disabled people living in care accommodation, such as hospitals, nursing homes, or group homes for disabled people, has decreased since

the last review in 2018 to just 3.3% of all disabled people in Australia. Most disabled people (96.8% or 5.3 million) now live in households. Of all the people with a disability living in households, 793,600 (24.8%) require daily assistance with cognitive and emotional tasks, and in 2022, less than half the people who needed daily assistance had their needs met (ABS, 2024). It is estimated that less than 2% of these 793,600 people accessed art and music therapy as part of the assistance that they need using their NDIS funding (Ministers for the Department of Social Services, 2024).

Australia's version of the UNCRPD: National Disability Insurance Scheme-the NDIS. The UNCRPD, adopted in 2006 at the United Nations headquarters, aims to enhance the social status of individuals with disabilities by promoting independence and active participation in society (United Nations, 2006). It seeks to create an inclusive society with equal rights and opportunities, allowing full engagement without barriers. Comprising the convention and its optional protocol, the UNCRPD respects the dignity of disabled persons and ensures their enjoyment of human rights and fundamental freedoms (United Nations, 2006; Zimmermann et al., 2024). Opened for signature on March 30, 2007, the UNCRPD was ratified by Australia and came into force on August 16, 2008, with the optional protocol following in 2009 (Australian Human Rights Commission, 2012; United Nations, 2006; World Health Organization, 2011). Australia's NDIS is grounded in the UNCRPD and guided by Australia's Disability Strategy 2021–2031, founded on values of dignity and respect and a commitment to enabling choice and control for disabled people in accessing supports that work for them (Australian Department of Social Services, 2021).

Creative and experiential therapies as therapeutic support and care within the NDIS. Since the establishment of the NDIS in 2013, allied health therapeutic supports including CET have been available for disabled people to access by using their NDIS funding via a category called "capacity building" (National Disability Insurance Agency [NDIA], 2024b). These therapies provide individuals with tailored, holistic care. In Australia, the NDIS has played a pivotal role in facilitating access to such therapies, ensuring that disabled people can exercise choice and control in selecting supports that align with their unique needs and preferences (NDIA, 2024b).

Brief history of creative and experiential therapies (CET) as an allied health profession in Australia. CET include, but are not limited to, the creative arts therapies such as art therapy, drama therapy, dance/movement therapy, multimodal creative arts therapy, and music therapy. In Australia, the field began with the establishment of the Australian Music Therapy Association in 1975, followed by the introduction of the first undergraduate degree in music therapy at Melbourne University in 1978. Later, art therapy was formalised through the formation of the Australian National Art Therapy Association (ANATA) in 1987. Postgraduate diploma-level training in music therapy was introduced at Melbourne University in 1990. In 1992, Edith Cowan University launched the first government-

accredited master's level art therapy program, which was followed by the development of accredited creative arts therapies programs at Western Sydney University, La Trobe University, the Royal Melbourne Institute of Technology (RMIT), the MIECAT Institute, the University of Queensland, the IKON Institute, Murdoch University, and Melbourne University during the 1990s and 2000s (Westwood, 2019). The Australian Creative Arts Therapies Association (ACATA) was formed in 2000 by graduates of the RMIT master's program. This established creative arts therapy as a recognised allied health profession, with qualified and registered creative arts therapists assuming roles in various sectors, including disability, health, mental health, corrections, community, and education. In 2018, the Australian and New Zealand Arts Therapy Association (ANZATA, formerly ANATA) and ACATA dissolved. Approximately 900 former members of the two associations voted to establish a new international organisation called the Australian, New Zealand and Asian Creative Arts Therapies Association (ANZACATA). ANZACATA represents creative arts therapists in 50 countries within its geographical reach and operates as a company limited by guarantee. The Australian Music Therapy Association (AMTA) remains active with about 900 members, all of whom are music therapists. In 2022, a group of creative arts therapists transitioned their professional registration to the Australian national peak body for tertiary qualified counsellors and psychotherapists—the Psychotherapy and Counselling Federation of Australia (PACFA), a registered charitable organisation which has a membership of over 10,000. They established a specific division called the College of Creative and Experiential Therapies (CCET) within PACFA. Creative and experiential therapists are part of the broader psychotherapy and counselling allied health workforce of Australia (Bloch-Atefi et al., 2021). CET are intermodal therapeutic approaches that employ more-than-verbal methods to engage participants in creative processes and experiential knowing for the purpose of improving overall quality of life in many different ways, depending on the unique needs of individuals, groups, or communities. According to CCET (2023), creative processes are collaborative, exploratory, expressive, invitational, meaning-making, multimodal, and relational processes that engage people in more-than-verbal exchanges. These processes utilise a range of practices including, but not limited to, drama; drawing; embodiment; engaging with nature, the environment and/or animals; movement; mindfulness; music; painting; play; sand play; sculpting; and writing.

Experiential ways of knowing are the ways in which people come to know themselves and the world. Experiential knowing is characterised by the knowing that occurs through doing, being immersed in the present moment, and multisensory experiencing in the here and now. Experiential knowing prioritises lived and living subjective experiences as our primary sources for understanding ourselves and our relationships in and with the world (CCET, 2023). These developments over the past 50 years indicate a consistent evolution of professionalisation and regulation of creative and experiential therapists as valued members of Australia's allied health workforce.

In the NDIS, art therapy + music therapy = creative and experiential therapies. Under the current NDIS guidelines, professionals approved to provide music therapy must hold current registration with Australian Music Therapy Association, and those who provide art therapy services must hold registration with ANZACATA, the Australian, New Zealand and Asian Creative Arts Therapies Association (National Disability Insurance Agency, 2024b). ANZACATA invites membership from creative arts therapists across diverse disciplines, including art therapists, drama therapists, dance/movement therapists, and multimodal creative arts therapists. Music therapists can join ANZACATA but maintain their professional identity through AMTA. Consequently, practitioners from various creative arts therapy disciplines can offer therapeutic support within the NDIS using the line-item code "art therapist". In Australia, this designation refers broadly to a range of creative and experiential therapies, rather than being limited to visual arts as in other countries. For these reasons, throughout this paper, we use the terms creative and experiential therapies (CET) and creative and experiential therapist.

Recent threats to accessing creative and experiential therapies within the NDIS. Recent policy changes and proposed funding cuts have raised concerns about access to CET services (Gentle, 2024). On November 26, 2024, an announcement by the NDIA revealed planned funding cuts for art therapy and music therapy in the NDIS (NDIA, 2024c). These cuts, due to come into effect on February 1, 2025, were designed to reduce access to CET as allied health services and proposed that CET should be reclassified as community arts participation (NDIA, 2024c).

Public campaign in support of access to creative and experiential therapies. In response to the proposed changes, Dr. Carla van Laar, creative arts therapist, launched a time-critical public petition on November 26, 2024 (see **Figure 1**). The aim of the petition was to advocate for the inclusion of CET as recognised therapeutic supports within the NDIS (van Laar, 2024). In two weeks, this petition gathered over 31,000 supporters and resulted in more than 2,000 testimonials, offering diverse perspectives on the significance of CET from individuals within the Australian community. The testimonials gathered during this time-limited campaign form the data source for analysis in this research article.

Independent review of pricing of art and music therapy commissioned by the NDIS. On December 13, 2024, the NDIA announced an independent review led by Dr. Stephen Duckett AM to evaluate the NDIS pricing for music and art therapy (NDIA, 2024a). This review, planned for completion by March 14, 2025, aims to assess the effectiveness of these therapies for disabled people, examine the qualifications of practitioners, and compare pricing with other allied health services. The review will provide stakeholders with opportunities to contribute evidence and will inform the NDIA's understanding of the potential benefits of CET while ensuring alignment with evidentiary standards under the *National Disability Insurance Scheme Act 2013* (Australian Government, 2026).



FIGURE 1. Feature Image from the Creative and Experiential Therapies Belong in the NDIS Petition on www.change.org

This research paper responds to the review's call for evidence of the value of CET in the NDIS, centralising the voices of NDIS participants who access CET in the NDIS, supported by evidence in scholarly literature.

PART 1: TESTIMONIALS METHOD

To answer the question "What are the perspectives of NDIS participants on the value of CET in the NDIS framework?", we used thematic analysis to examine the public testimonials from the online petition Creative and Experiential Therapies Belong in the NDIS (hosted on www.change.org).

Thematic analysis of testimonials

The testimonials provide a qualitative dataset that reveals the lived experiences and perspectives of various stakeholders, including NDIS participants, their families, members of the general public (including support workers, allied health professionals, and educators), and creative and experiential therapists. By doing so, testimonials can be viewed as a bridge connecting theory to daily practice, thereby enhancing the body of knowledge on the value of CET within the NDIS framework (Choperena et al., 2019).

Thematic analysis is a qualitative research method that allows for the identification, analysis, and reporting of patterns or themes within qualitative data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). This approach was chosen to uncover key themes and insights within the responses to the petition, highlighting the underlying views and experiences regarding the value of CET in the NDIS framework.

Data source

The dataset for this study comprised publicly available comments from individuals who had signed the petition. At the time of signing, supporters who used a laptop or desktop computer, rather than a phone or tablet, were automatically prompted to provide their "reason for signing". The responses to this prompt are the testimonials that have been used as data in this study. The original data are available on the petition webpage: https://www.change.org/creativetherapiesNDIS.

Selection criteria

All publicly available testimonials submitted to the petition were included in the initial analysis which is summarised in **Table A1** in the Appendix. Following the initial analysis, the 93 testimonials written by self-identified NDIS participants who have experienced CET for themselves were selected as the data source for our qualitative analysis. We acknowledge that focusing on statements written by self-identified NDIS participants means that statements written by family members and carers of disabled people who are unable to write for themselves were excluded. We also acknowledge that our data does not capture the perspectives of people who were uncomfortable with leaving a public testimonial.

Timeframe

Between November 26, 2024, and December 18, 2024 (24 days), the petition received 31,000 signatures, and 6.7% (n = 2,057) of respondents also provided comments.

Ethical considerations

Under section 5.1.17 of the National Statement on Ethical Conduct in Human Research (National Health and Medical Research Council, 2023), publicly available data is considered exempt from ethics approval. Since our data source was publicly available testimonials, approval from a human research ethics committee was not required.

We used artificial intelligence (AI) in the analysis process and took great care to follow ethical guidelines, paying particular attention to the transparency of the analytical process. All findings generated through the AI-assisted analysis were subsequently validated by the first two authors to maintain the integrity and accuracy of the results.

Data analysis

The data analysis process was supported by both manual coding and the use of AI-assisted technology. The thematic analysis was conducted using a text-based large language model (LLM) AI-based tool, *Grammarly* (Superhuman Platform, 2026), which uses a variety of natural language processing tasks and assisted in identifying and categorising recurring patterns and themes within the dataset. While the initial stage of the analysis involved familiarisation with the data, the LLM was utilised primarily for the identification and organisation of themes based on the content of the responses.

The analysis procedure was as follows. The first author (CvL) reviewed the entire dataset to gain an understanding of the content and context of the responses. Following this, she used AI to conduct a preliminary thematic analysis. She prompted the AI tool to identify themes related to the benefits, challenges, and personal experiences of petition-signers who left testimonials regarding creative therapies. The tool's output included suggested themes, which were then reviewed and refined.

The identified themes were discussed in detail with the second author (ABA) who cross-checked the results for accuracy, consistency, and alignment with the data. The authors worked collaboratively to ensure that the themes were representative of the participants' views and accurately reflected the content of the responses. This process involved resolving any discrepancies through discussion and consensus, ensuring that the final thematic categories were well grounded in the data.

After the themes were collaboratively refined, a final manual review was conducted to ensure that the analysis was both rigorous and robust. Although AI technology played an important role in improving the efficiency of the analysis, the final interpretation and categorisation of themes were made through careful consideration and discussion between CvL and ABA.

Initial analysis of all petition testimonials

An analysis of all the comments from the full dataset of 2,057 revealed descriptions of benefits of CET for people with a diverse range of disabilities, including intellectual disabilities, physical disabilities, mental health conditions, autism and other forms of neurodiversity, and chronic illness. The thematic content from the full dataset of testimonials including participants, families, creative and experiential therapists, and the general public is summarised in Appendix **Table A1**.

Following the initial analysis of the entire dataset, the authors agreed that in this study, it is important to privilege and empower the voices of participants. This approach reflects the values that we hold as practitioners who value deep listening to the people we work alongside (van Laar, 2023; Neville & van Laar, 2020). To this end, the dataset was separated into four sets: voices of NDIS participants who have experienced the value of CET for themselves, voices of family members of NDIS participants, voices of creative and experiential therapists providing services for NDIS participants, and voices of the general public.

A thematic analysis was performed on the full dataset of participant testimonials, with assistance from AI, using the prompt "What are the top 10 themes in these quotes from NDIS creative therapies participants? Analyse and provide a summary in 500 words." The full dataset of responses from family members was analysed by prompting AI with "What are the top 10 themes in these quotes from family members of NDIS creative therapies

participants? Analyse and provide a summary in 500 words." A similar thematic analysis was also performed on a representative sample from both creative and experiential therapists and the general public.

The authors agreed to centralise participant voices in this study and focus on further analysis of the participant testimonials. CvL and the third and fourth authors (JG and AZ) met to refine the themes of participant testimonials via review, discussion, and consensus to ensure that the findings of this qualitative analysis were consistent with the genuine concerns of participants who access CET in the NDIS. The themes identified in the testimonials of participants illuminate important firsthand information about how disabled people themselves responded to the announcement of NDIS policy changes.

RESULTS

Empowering voices-learning from NDIS participants: findings of the thematic analysis

This section presents the key themes identified through the thematic analysis of the full dataset of 93 NDIS participants' petition comments (see **Table 1**). These themes are discussed in detail, highlighting the recurring patterns that emerged from the participants' petition responses and supporting each theme with illustrative quotes from the data. The results reflect the importance of CET for disabled people, particularly within the NDIS framework, as expressed by petition-signers who left testimonials, centralising the voices of NDIS participants themselves. As authors, we have made the decision to keep participant testimonials intact, rather than breaking them down into short phrases. We do this because the testimonials act as short stories, providing personal context for the expressions of real people, about what is important to them and why.

The content analysis reveals the profound impact of CET on numerous disabled individuals, highlighting the importance of CET in their lives. Many participants convey that CET provide a unique and effective means of self-expression, communication, emotional processing, and community engagement. Several accounts emphasised how this therapeutic approach has been transformative, helping individuals cope with trauma, anxiety, depression, and various psychosocial issues.

Furthermore, participants voiced their concerns about proposed cuts to funding for CET under the NDIS, arguing that such actions threaten their wellbeing and overall quality of life. They stressed that CET are not merely supplementary social activities, but an essential lifeline that promotes wellbeing, resilience, and personal agency. Thereby, the testimonials underscore a clear call for recognising and supporting CET as valid and necessary components of disability-specific allied health and mental health care and

support, advocating for the preservation of sustainable funding and access to these vital services through the NDIS.

TABLE 1. Emergent themes from participant testimonies: qualitative data

Theme	*Brief description*	*Example quote*
Choice and validation: human rights	Having choice	"We do not want to be controlled and told how to live."
CETs enable expression and communication	Being understood	"Art therapy helps me communicate. Art therapy helps me regulate. Art therapy helps me understand myself."
Empowered transformation	Self-efficacy	"I discovered art therapy during one of the hardest times in my life and it was nothing short of transformative."
Stability strengthens community engagement	Belonging	"This therapy makes such a difference in mine and my children's ability to cope in the world. Listen to the NDIS participants—we know this is an essential pathway to supporting our ability to function and participate in life."
Socioeconomic concerns: a call to action	Accountability	"This is a mistaken decision. People with disabilities should be the primary arbiters of what they/we need. Arbitrary restrictions on the type of services a disabled person can access are a violation of rights."

Choice and validation: human rights—having choice

Participant testimonials regarding CET in the NDIS highlight important concerns about participant autonomy, particularly regarding access to choice of therapeutic supports. The data show that many participants were dissatisfied with restrictions to therapeutic options that play a significant role in emotional wellbeing and self-expression. Participants emphasised the need for their input in choosing therapies that align with their individual experiences, indicating that medical-model and evidence-based measures may not adequately capture the value of lived experiences. One participant voiced this strong desire for autonomy in choosing therapeutic modalities by writing:

> NDIS was set up to allow disabled people choice and control with therapies. With no notice we have been stripped of therapies that we choose for ourselves because they are genuinely life changing and saving. Evidence based is such a rigid measure for human experience—what about evidence informed? Listening to people with lived experience is critical! This isn't a matter for Medicare, because we wouldn't need the therapy if it weren't for our disabilities.

Additionally, the data indicate a common frustration with talk therapies, which some participants find do not meet their needs. This suggests a strong preference for CET as essential avenues for personal growth and self-determination, as this person highlights in their response: "Art therapy has provided me with a language to understand and articulate my emotions that I did not previously have".

The data also reveal a strong desire for policies that validate and acknowledge individual experiences, challenging current NDIS approaches that may overlook the importance of choice. Ultimately, participants advocated for reforms that would restore their right to select therapeutic modalities, promoting a sense of empowerment and control in their options for therapeutic supports. One of the participants voiced the importance of choice by writing, "I am an NDIS participant who currently receives creative therapy in my plan. I DO NOT want to lose it! It has helped me immensely". Participants also expressed frustration at the prospect of losing access to CET, which they describe as essential for their overall wellbeing. For example:

> This is a mistaken decision. 1. People with disabilities should be the primary arbiters of what they/we need. 2. Arbitrary restrictions on the type of services a disabled person can access are a violation of rights. 3. Restrictions on access to art and music therapies, which are evidence-based disciplines, is not only a violation of rights but also a false economy. 4. Dismissing the therapeutic relationship between skilled arts and music therapists and their clients is philistinism of the highest order. Arts and arts therapy matters [sic].

CET offer disabled individuals, particularly those seeking varied therapeutic options, a vital avenue for personal autonomy and wellbeing, as one of the participants stated by writing:

> As someone who has done art therapy I cannot [over]state how important this therapy is for people. NDIS are cherry picking their evidence to suit their agenda and this goes against everything it should be standing for. Stop dictating our lives, this should not be another Centrelink!

Participants frequently expressed that having the choice to engage in CET was crucial for their emotional health and overall quality of life. As one participant noted: "You've taken all the things people need to live a full life, give us back our funding!". Family members resonated with this perspective, with one stating: "I know as both a parent and professional how important these therapies are to kids. Having support options allows for choice and control and individualised support for participants". The desire for autonomy in therapeutic choices was especially pronounced among individuals with limited access to traditional therapeutic methods. The data revealed a strong need for acknowledgement and validation of participant experiences. When participants talked

about the NDIS restricting access to CET, they often felt their struggles were dismissed, which undermined their sense of self-worth and validity:

> Because this affects me personally! Creative arts have really helped me since NDIS! The outdated ideals on cutting this from NDIS need to be scrapped and this put back in NDIS!!!! We are not in 1924; we are in 2024!!!!! We do not want to be controlled and told how to live. Let us choose what makes us happy and helps us and that includes creative arts!!!!!!

This theme highlights the crucial importance of acknowledgement and validation of experiences in the context of the NDIS and its impact on access to CET. One responder wrote with passion:

> Art therapy has been the ONE CONSTANT SUPPORT I've had over the past four years, my weekly time with my art therapist creating options to express and frame difficult emotions that heretofore would have had me spiralling into self-harmful behaviour. We've worked through a lot of poison together, but there's still so much more work to do. Losing access to my therapist is the single most harmful thing the NDIS could ever do and it feels like punishment for not being like everyone else—when the bean counters say that this isn't valid therapy, they're saying that my chosen outlet to explore the darkest issues IS NOT VALID, THAT I AM NOT VALID. It is pure evil and an obvious attempt to push us over the edge, back into suicide, just to get us off the books to save money.

Quotes from participants revealed profound feelings of invisibility and questioning of their experiences. Ultimately, participant voices underscored the urgent need for policies and practices that prioritise validation within therapeutic approaches to ensure individuals receive the recognition and support they deserve.

Creative and experiential therapies enable expression and communication—being understood

The voices of participants in CET revealed a profound connection between emotional expression and the need for understanding. The data sourced from firsthand accounts highlight a common theme: individuals often find traditional therapeutic methods insufficient for conveying their complex feelings. Many participants expressed a strong preference for CET, as CET facilitate a safe environment for self-expression and communication, allowing the exploration and articulation of inner experiences that are not suited to verbal expression. This participant highlighted the links between creative expression and communication:

> I've had access to art therapy through the NDIS. It's one of the few things which works really well for me, as [an] autistic [person] who also has a psychosocial

> disability, because I can focus on the art. It enables me [to] disclose things which I might otherwise be unable to talk about (in things like traditional talk therapies).

The role of CET in facilitating safe emotional expression was a recurring theme:

> I have been an art therapy participant, initially in a group setting and now one on one, due to trauma. This type of therapy has allowed me to express myself in a safe place when I have not felt able to do so verbally. This decision is both unbelievable and extremely distressing to myself as a participant.

Participants articulated a newfound ability to communicate complex feelings through artistic means, especially when traditional therapies have failed them:

> These changes will really impact me negatively. I can't do group therapy sessions. I can't express myself in front of others. Art therapy has been helpful for me to manage my disabilities. It helps me connect with myself in a safe environment with my therapist.

Many respondents articulated a preference for CET over traditional therapy, with numerous participants stating that CET had saved their life:

> My art therapist has been pivotal in my learning to live with severe complex PTSD and its associated symptoms in my case the worst being intrusive thoughts, suicidal ideation, panic attacks and agoraphobia. She has helped ameliorate the impact my illness has on my daughter and to improve our relationship. I have found a form of self-expression that is not painful. Art therapy truly works for PTSD. In my experience nothing else has. Art therapists save lives. I cannot be more grateful.

Some individuals expressed dissatisfaction with conventional therapies, highlighting CET as more effective:

> I didn't find much help from psychologists. However, art therapy really made a difference for my anxiety and emotion regulation skills. For neurodivergent and disabled people like me who think and process things differently, art therapy works better than traditional talk therapy.

For respondents, the struggle with traditional methods often leads to feelings of hopelessness, while CET offer a path toward healing and psychosocial wellbeing. One participant put it like this:

> As a person who has experienced and healed long bouts of depression and anxiety with many years of counselling, I can say with confidence that art is the number one practice that contributed to my overall healing and learning of self-expression and mindfulness.

Through thematic analysis, the data support the notion that CET are instrumental in fostering emotional expression and enabling individuals to navigate their experiences of trauma, anxiety, and other psychosocial challenges. Participants articulated how these therapeutic approaches enhance their communication skills, and this contributes significantly to their overall psychosocial wellbeing. The narratives emphasise a collective sentiment that being understood is essential to the maintenance of their wellbeing and capacity to function, illustrating how CET can provide a lifeline for many. This underscores the importance of recognising and validating the unique therapeutic needs of individuals for whom traditional therapies can be inaccessible and inappropriate.

Empowered transformation—self-efficacy

The theme of "empowered transformation" through creative therapy is evident in participant testimonials describing their experiences of personal development and empowerment. Many individuals facing psychosocial challenges have found traditional therapy inadequate, turning instead to CET. Participants emphasise that these approaches allow them to confront painful feelings while also discovering their strengths in a compassionate framework. CET emerge as a vital coping mechanism, enabling respondents to process painful life experiences associated with disability, building their capacity and motivation for community engagement. The experiences shared by multiple respondents underscore the importance of CET in fostering personal agency and self-efficacy. Personal transformation is a common experience for people who access CET in the NDIS:

> I discovered art therapy during one of the hardest times in my life, and it was nothing short of transformative. After struggling with depression and feeling exposed and uncomfortable in traditional talk therapy, art therapy gave me a way to express parts of myself that words couldn't reach. Through creating with a skilled therapist, I began to uncover not just my confidence and strengths, but also the messy, painful parts of myself—and approach them with gentle understanding. Art therapy allowed me to connect with my inner world in a way that felt safe, natural, and deeply healing. It's not just therapy; it's a lifeline for anyone who feels like words alone can't hold their experiences.

Some participants described how CET are necessary for their day-to-day cognitive functioning, and this supports their psychosocial wellbeing:

> I use art therapy. I find it invaluable to have practical art with therapy as it helps me remember what was said and done during therapy. An acquired brain injury left me with memory difficulties.

For many participants, CET transform their capacity to meet life's daily challenges, and provide them with a coping mechanism:

> I've had talk therapy, medication, hospital admissions and other treatments for over 30 years due to mental illness. Results have always been patchy and inconsistent. However, I have utilised art therapy for 3 years under the NDIS which has made life changing impacts on how I manage and process intense emotions. Art therapy has provided me with a language to understand and articulate my emotions that I did not previously have. I would not have found this skill without art therapy. This has enabled significant community participation; so far, I've held 3 exhibitions of my work which has facilitated conversations with my medical team, family, friends and the wider community about my mental illness. I've even been able to sell some work! I've significantly increased social and community participation via art therapy. When I've been admitted to psychiatric hospital in the past, I've always utilised their art therapy courses. If this service exists as a means of self-reflection, understanding and processing of mental illness as an inpatient, why would the NDIS say it does not agree with this treatment modality? Participating in art therapy has actually prevented my admission to hospital on occasion, which would have cost society far more than art therapy does. I'm terrified about facing life without my NDIS-funded art therapist. The stability, safety, and enlightenment those sessions provide have become something I look forward to, something ALL of my medical professional support team believe is vital to the management of my mental illness. Removing this is a devastating move by the NDIS

Participants frequently mentioned CET as a crucial coping strategy for managing the impact of trauma, psychosocial distress, and mental ill health: "Art therapy has not only changed my life, it has saved it many times!". The creative therapeutic process not only aids in understanding their emotions but also prevents relapses into harmful behaviours:

> I'm an NDIS recipient who is autistic. My master's trained art therapist has done more for my capacity than any other. We spend most of our hour talking and I spend around 5 minutes drawing things we have discussed. This is going to be the end of my capacity.

The participant testimonials revealed that CET have fostered self-awareness and empowerment, with some participants noting CET have prevented hospital admissions. Concerns were raised about the potential decline in psychosocial capacity if access to these therapies is restricted through cuts to NDIS funding. Overall, the experiences shared demonstrate the necessity of CET as a capacity-building therapeutic resource that enables disabled people to have transformative experiences of personal agency.

Stability strengthens community engagement—belonging

Participant voices in this section revealed the vital connections between stability, support, community engagement, and belonging through CET. Many expressed deep

disappointments over recent NDIA funding cuts to art therapy, emphasising its crucial role in their psychosocial wellbeing. One participant's statement, "These therapies have made a difference to my life. I will be lost without art therapy", highlights the reliance on consistent therapeutic support for wellbeing. Participants also underscored how art therapy acts as a vital outlet, especially for those facing severe mental health challenges. As articulated by an autistic individual, these therapies not only alleviate anxiety and depression but also foster self-confidence and improve social interactions. Engaging in CET promotes connections and reduces isolation, reinforcing a sense of belonging within the community.

The following statement illustrates the impact of losing the stability and support provided by access to regular CET sessions: "Art therapy is a hugely beneficial support for my disability, and I am shocked that NDIA have arbitrarily decided to cut funding for it without any real notice or good reason. I am devastated". The regular sessions with creative and experiential therapists provide participants with a consistent source of support, which they described as vital for their psychosocial wellbeing and mental health management. This stability fosters a sense of safety and anticipation: "This stability fosters an essential sense of safety and anticipation". Engaging in the life of their communities can pose challenges for disabled people, contributing to isolation and poor mental health. This participant described how accessing CET supports them to build the self-confidence and social skills that are the necessary foundation for community engagement:

> I am an autistic person on NDIS. This specific therapy was brought to my attention by my OT when I was at my worst—having both suicide idealizations [sic] and severe depression. Art therapy is so important for so many reasons, and it is absolutely crucial for autistic children, teens and adults to be able to have access to this on their NDIS. Not only does art therapy give autistic people a safe, creative outlet to be able to express how it is they are feeling and to help process our own emotions, but it's been proven to also support and assist greatly with reducing symptoms of anxiety and depression, increasing self-confidence, improving problem-solving skills and due to the safe, creative, expressive environment, it's a wonderful place to support socialisation.

CET foster community participation:

> Music therapy allows me to manage my dementia through weekly therapy sessions. This has been the only therapy that helps have found [sic] to have helped me—it's counselling, music, fun, and a whole lot of empathy and love all rolled into one session. (community engagement, mental health, social connections, counselling, skill building, independence) [sic] And NDIS finds that not worth funding—please spare me!!!!!!

Individuals recounted hosting exhibitions and engaging with others, underscoring CET's role in building connections and reducing isolation. Through their experiences, participants advocated for the importance of accessible therapeutic supports and called for a reassessment of funding priorities, emphasising how stability in support systems can enhance individual wellbeing and community cohesion.

Socioeconomic concerns: a call to action—accountability

The pressing need for a critical re-evaluation of the NDIS's failure to recognise the value of CET for disabled people is poignantly highlighted through the testimonials examined in this study. These testimonials underscore the profound impact of socioeconomic changes on the lives of disabled individuals. Participants expressed their concern that recent funding cuts to CET threaten not only their access to essential support but also their overall quality of life. The testimonials reveal a troubling narrative: the prevailing ableist framework insists that individuals must strive for an unrealistic transformation into "abled" bodies to earn the right to agency, joy, and community. Echoing a consensus, participants argued that the NDIS was intended to facilitate participation and dignity, not to pathologise their existence through restrictive therapies that focus on "functional capacity building" without consideration for their unique needs.

This testimonial illuminate how socioeconomic concerns are distressing for respondents:

> The quality of life myself and my children had access to, previously, is to be no longer. These changes are ableist, they insist on us spending our lives in struggle, and pathologisation. The changes insist that somehow, if we spend all our time in ableist pathologising 'therapies', we will overcome disability and become abled. It seems, that only if one is abled, only then can you have access to choice and agency and joy and community and happiness for the sake of happiness. Disabled people seemingly have yet to 'earn' that right. We supposedly earn it by somehow becoming abled. Newsflash, disability is for life. The NDIS was never meant to be focused on eradicating our needs. It was meant to be about supporting those needs, so that we in turn, had the capacity for productivity. I will always need my so-called 'capacity building' therapies, and safe, trauma-informed ones at that. Disability affirming ones, not ableist ones with ableist goals. Capacity building isn't a one and done. It needs maintaining. Capacity creating and maintaining is how I need my NDIS funding to be. The alternative is the state paying for far more expensive interventions. And the loss of my contributions to society (my 'productivity').

Participants voiced concerns regarding the financial implications of losing access to CET, linking this to broader societal issues. They emphasised that cutting funding for CET could lead to adverse outcomes, potentially increasing healthcare costs in the long run. The combined voices of the testimonials are a compelling call to action:

> For over several years I have seen more therapists than I can count. Art therapy is the only thing that has been able to truly stick with me to make a difference. Please don't rip this away from us. Art therapy deserves to be funded wholeheartedly. I believe if it is cut lives will be lost. These supports need to be made more accessible, not less. Art therapy helps me communicate. Art therapy helps me regulate. Art therapy helps me understand myself. Art therapy helps me to connect with others. Art therapy helps me to feel human.

The quotes express urgency and a strong call for action, urging stakeholders to reconsider the value of CET within the NDIS framework. Participants advocated for increased accessibility and funding for CET to maintain their psychosocial wellbeing and quality of life. The emphasis on CET emerges as a crucial aspect of their lives, serving as a vital tool for self-expression, emotional regulation, and social connection. The participants passionately advocated for the crucial role these therapies play in their psychosocial wellbeing, warning that abandoning CET could lead to dire personal and societal consequences, including increased healthcare costs and diminished contributions to the community. Their testimonials call for immediate action to ensure that CET are adequately funded and made accessible, highlighting a collective urgency to preserve the dignity and humanity of disabled individuals in the face of systemic neglect.

This study sheds light on the limitations of current NDIS decision-making processes and urges stakeholders to recognise the intrinsic value of CET as essential components of holistic support for disabled people.

PART 2: LITERATURE REVIEW METHOD

The growing demand for CET in disability care has led to an increasing body of research evaluating their efficacy (Harpazi et al., 2023). We were interested in exploring the outcomes of published studies and whether these could provide a scientific basis to support the sustainable inclusion of CET within the NDIS framework. However, the limited timeframe available for our study necessitated a more limited approach to the literature review. We determined that focusing on reviews and meta-analyses published within the past 2 years would allow us to incorporate earlier research while situating it within the current body of knowledge. To address the question "What is the current evidence on the efficacy of creative and experiential therapies for disabled persons?" we conducted a literature review of reviews and meta-analyses. The method used for extraction of relevant information followed the systematic approach proposed by the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA) Guidelines (Moher et al., 2009).

The search was conducted by the fourth author (AZ) in a systematic, replicable, and comprehensive manner from December 16, 2024, to December 20, 2024. The search strategy consisted of steps following the PRISMA flow diagram. The first step was a preliminary search using a range of databases, including MEDLINE, Academic Search Ultimate, Complementary Index, Directory of Open Access Journals, APA PsycInfo, CINAHL Plus with Full Text, CINAHL Ultimate, Gale Academic OneFile, Biomedical Index, Psychology and Behavioral Sciences Collection, Supplemental Index, OpenAIRE, SPORTDiscus with Full Text, Business Source Ultimate, ScienceDirect, and Google Scholar. These databases were expected to contain academic publications on the topic. This search aimed to identify relevant keywords from titles and abstracts, as well as index terms used in pertinent papers.

Subsequently, a comprehensive search strategy was developed for these databases, incorporating the identified keywords and index terms (see **Table 2**). The search terms were adapted to the specific syntax and functionality of each database to ensure thorough coverage. The search was limited to peer-reviewed reviews and meta-analyses published in an academic journal, available in full text, and accessible in English.

TABLE 2. Logic grid: search terms used in literature review

Key concepts		
Disability	*Art therapy*	*Review*
disability OR disabilities OR disabled OR impairment OR impaired OR special OR special needs OR developmental disabilities OR physical disabilities	art therapy OR art psychotherapy OR creative arts therapies OR expressive arts therapies	review of literature OR literature review OR meta-analysis OR systematic review or scoping review OR integrative review OR review

The second step entailed screening titles, keywords, and abstracts of the 45 identified articles, and removing duplicates (n = 5) and articles without full text access (n = 1).

Study selection

The remaining 39 articles were screened independently by three authors (CvL, ABA, and AZ) according to the inclusion and exclusion criteria (see **Table 3**). Discrepancies between authors were discussed until consensus, and in some cases resolved by rereading definitions of what counts as disability in the NDIS documents. For example, persons who become disabled after turning 65 are not eligible to join the NDIS. Instead, they may receive support through aged care programs. As a result, we excluded two reviews on older adults with dementia. Finally, 21 of the articles identified through the systematic search were included in the review.

TABLE 3. Inclusion and exclusion criteria: literature review

	Inclusion criteria	*Exclusion criteria*
Population	Participants who identify as having a disability (physical, intellectual, sensory, psychosocial, or neurodevelopmental etc.) Participants with various types of disabilities (e.g., autism spectrum disorder, cerebral palsy, intellectual disabilities, mental health conditions, etc.) Studies involving both children and adults with disabilities.	Research that excludes or does not focus on the therapeutic impact on individuals with disabilities Participants older than 65 years as not funded by NDIS
Therapies	Studies that focus on CETs, such as art therapy, music therapy, dance/movement therapy, drama therapy, or play therapy Creative therapy processes used to address mental health, emotional wellbeing, communication, and other therapeutic goals Research on the application of CETs in clinical, community, or educational settings	Studies that do not focus on CETs (e.g., cognitive behavioural therapy, psychotherapy, talk therapies, etc.). Art education or arts-based interventions only Research that does not include creative or experiential therapists
Therapeutic outcomes	Studies evaluating the therapeutic impact of CETs on improving mental health, self-expression, emotional regulation, social interaction, and/or trauma recovery. Research examining the role of CETs in promoting personal empowerment, social inclusion, and wellbeing for individuals with disabilities Studies that provide evidence of the efficacy or effectiveness of CETs for disabled people	
Publication types	Peer-reviewed reviews, meta-analyses published in academic journals, full-text availability, English Published between January 2023 and December 2024	Non-peer-reviewed papers, single studies No method section included

Quality assessment

The quality of the included studies was not formally assessed because the inclusion criteria for publication types ensured a minimum standard of quality. For example, two articles were excluded during the second selection process as they did not contain a method section.

Data extraction

A data-charting form (see **Table 4**) was used to extract data from the included articles. Key characteristics, including the study focus (to judge relevance), study design, sample size, and conclusions were identified and documented to address the research question "What is the current evidence on the efficacy of creative and experiential therapies for individuals with disabilities?" AZ extracted text fragments and quantitative information (e.g., sample size) from the selected publications and entered them into the data-charting form. The text fragments in the conclusions column of the form were brought together iteratively into themes regarding wellbeing and functional capacity (Thomas & Harden, 2008). The other authors reviewed these themes to gain a deeper understanding of the data.

Results

The following section presents the findings derived from the included articles in response to the research question. First, the included articles and their findings, as recorded in **Table 4**, are outlined. Next, the emergent themes are synthesised interpretively based on the relevant conclusions drawn from the included papers.

TABLE 4. Data-charting form: literature review

No.	*Reference*	*Study focus*	*Study design*	*Number of studies*	*Study conclusions*
1	Alashram et al. (2023)	Role of music therapy in improving cognitive function post-traumatic brain injury	Systematic review	5 studies; *n* = 122	MT could be effective in improving executive function post-TBI, with limited evidence for the effects on memory and attention. MT might be safe in patients with TBI. The evidence for the effect of music therapy on executive function in patients with TBI is promising.
2	Duarte Machado et al. (2023)	Efficacy of dance interventions for the activity and participation of individuals with cerebral palsy	Systematic review and meta-analysis	14 studies in the review; 9 in the meta-analysis	There was a large overall effect for cognitive, motor, and social-emotional function outcomes, with a high degree of heterogeneity between outcome effects, attributable to differences in study design. Although recent studies provide support for the acceptance and efficacy of dance interventions for people with CP, the systematic review revealed significant limitations in study design (only 2 RCTs). High-quality research that measures outcomes across all dimensions of the ICF, particularly at the level of participation, are needed to improve the level of empirical support for dance-based interventions.
3	Elbeltagi et al. (2023).	Play therapy in children with autism	Comprehensive literature review	66 studies	Despite the weak evidence, play therapy still has a lot of potential benefits for patients and their families. It helps improve the child's social skills and communication in a relaxed environment, integrates the parents, strengthens the child-parent bond, and decreases the tension over the shoulder of the parents. In addition, play therapy has no significant side effects and is cost-effective.
4	Ivers (2024)	Therapeutic use of drama to support communication with young autistic children	Literature review	35 articles	About 86% of the case studies reported statistical improvement in the children's communication skills with persistence and generalization of these skills reported, averaging at 40%. About 31% of the studies report the children's increased expressiveness or use of words to communicate, and qualitative changes were reported across both datasets.
5	Keiller et al. (2024)	Children and young people's perception of the active ingredients of dramatherapy when used as a treatment for symptoms of emotional disorders	Meta-synthesis	8 studies	Six analytical themes emerged from eight studies: 1. dramatherapy as a learning and social experience, 2. dramatherapy as a positive intervention which supports self-expression and emotion regulation,3. the skill and professionalism of drama therapists, 4. Drama therapy is fun, 5. Drama therapy builds confidence, and 6. participants process difficulties through drama.

No.	Reference	Study focus	Study design	Number of studies	Study conclusions
6	Li et al. (2024)	The potential of arts therapies in PD rehabilitation	Comprehensive review	16 studies	Arts therapies have great potential for the rehabilitation of people with PD, confirming the efficacy of arts therapies in enhancing the motor, psychological and cognitive rehabilitation process of people with PD.
7	Lin et al. (2023)	Effects of music therapy on cognition, quality of life, and neuropsychiatric symptoms of patients with dementia	Systematic review and meta-analysis of RCTs	22 trials from 21 studies; *n* = 1780	Music-based therapies might improve the cognition and QoL of patients with dementia more than conventional interventions do. Music-based therapies could also reduce neuropsychiatric symptoms more significantly than conventional interventions do. Music-based therapies constitute a safe and effective alternative approach for patients with dementia.
8	Liu et al. (2024)	Use of creative activities in stroke rehabilitation	Scoping review	17 studies	Future stroke rehabilitation practices should tailor activities and intervention focus based on patients' rehabilitation needs, preferences, and cultural background. This analysis provides initial support for the potential positive role of creative activities in stroke rehabilitation.
9	López-Escribano & Orío-Aparicio (2024)	Creative arts therapy for autistic children	Systematic review	20 articles; *n* = 781	All but two of the reviewed studies showed benefits of creative arts therapy intervention. Most of the reviewed studies (18 out of 20) pointed to the fact that creative arts therapy intervention creates a variety of occasions for autistic children to express themselves and to cooperate with peers in natural settings with no adverse effects.
10	Luo et al. (2023)	Arts therapies for mental disorders in COVID-19 patients	Comprehensive review.	16 articles	Diverse forms of arts therapies are potentially effective in addressing related psychiatric symptoms. The integration of artificial intelligence might further enhance the efficacy and scalability of arts therapies in future implementations.
11	Malhotra et al. (2024)	Conceptual framework for a neurophysiological basis of art therapy for PTSD	Literature review of empirical research	19 articles	This review underscores the neurophysiological empirical evidence for art therapy through identification of five essential factors as they connect to PTSD symptomatology.

No.	Reference	Study focus	Study design	Number of studies	Study conclusions
12	Martínez-Vérez et al. (2024)_	Interventions through art and music therapy in autism spectrum disorder, ADHD, language disorders, and learning disabilities in children	Systematic Review	80 studies	The results demonstrate the efficacy and favourable perception of art and music therapy in the treatment of children with ASD, ADHD, language development disorders, and learning difficulties. The evidence of improvements in multiple areas of development indicates that these therapies offer significant benefits. However, the variability in the perceived value and adaptability of interventions indicates that it is crucial to consider individual and contextual factors when implementing these therapies to maximise their effectiveness and accessibility.
13	Mercier et al. (2023)	Music therapy and music interventions in spinal cord injury	Scoping review	43 studies	While qualitative data support the use of MT and music-based interventions in this population for a wide variety of outcomes, randomised controlled trials are needed. There is a lack of research on the use of individual MT in this population.
14	Orkibi et al. (2023)	Effectiveness of drama-based therapies on mental health outcomes	Systematic review and meta-analysis	30 studies; *n* = 1,567	The findings suggest that group drama-based therapies are effective in reducing mental illness and increasing mental health across a range of age groups and settings and provide justifications for the increasing use of these interventions in mental healthcare practice.
15	Pangestu et al. (2022)	The effectiveness of visual art on the psychological response in stroke survivors	Systematic review	8 articles	The benefits and effectiveness of therapy can be felt from 7 to >20 sessions with varying durations for each session. Apart from having a positive impact on psychology, visual arts therapy can also train motor, cognitive, and memory functions in post-stroke patients.
16	Pieri et al. (2022)	Mind-body and creative arts therapies for people with aphasia	Systematic review	22 studies	Improvements were noted across a wide range of wellbeing outcomes with more consistent positive results for anxiety and communication. The findings were synthesised into three broad themes: positive impact on self, empowering multifaceted experience, and relevance of needs-centred adjustments. Provisional findings about the benefits of mind-body and creative arts interventions on aspects of wellbeing for some individuals with aphasia were identified.

No.	Reference	Study focus	Study design	Number of studies	Study conclusions
17	Porras-Segovia, et al. (2024)	Creative writing therapy for the management of depression and suicidal ideation	Systematic review and meta-analysis	31 studies	Twenty-one of the 31 reviewed studies showed that creative writing significantly improved depressive symptoms, while five studies suggested improvement in other symptoms. The meta-analysis showed that narrative writing significantly reduced depression compared to those in a neutral writing or treatment-as-usual condition in both post intervention and follow-up. However, the number of studies exploring the effects of creative writing in suicidal ideation was too low to perform a meta-analysis. A structured and well-targeted intervention using creative writing could have beneficial results for the management of depressive symptoms.
18	Power et al. (2023)	Art therapy as a treatment for adults with learning disabilities who are experiencing mental distress	Systematic review	68 articles (41 clinical and 27 research)	Art therapy may be considered an accessible alternative psychological treatment for this population, which can complement biopsychosocial interventions, thus supporting the person and their network of care. There is a diversity of practice when offering both individual and group therapy to people with learning disabilities and mental distress. The systematic review demonstrates that evidence in the field is growing, and existing research highlights that art therapy can be both helpful and acceptable to many participants. However, we don't yet know what is most effective or for whom. Art therapy is a complex intervention which requires context-specific and systematically developed evaluation approaches in order to ensure intervention development, methodology and proposed outcomes take account of the complex mechanisms at play.

No.	*Reference*	*Study focus*	*Study design*	*Number of studies*	*Study conclusions*
19	Simpkins & Young (2023)	The effect of dance style and intervention duration on improving balance among people with Parkinson's disease	Systematic review with meta-analysis	14 RCTs; *n = 612*	The meta-analysis suggests that people with PD who participate in dance interventions show more significant balance improvements than non-dance control groups. Subgroup analyses indicated that no sufficient evidence endorses any dance style as superior to others in improving balance among people with PD; dance-based interventions of 12+ weeks duration could potentially outperform shorter interventions; 60- and 90-minute dance classes may be similarly effective in improving balance among people with PD.
20	Takahashi & Kato (2022)	Effectiveness of dance/movement therapy in individuals with intellectual disability	Systematic review	5 studies	DMT interventions improved motor skills, body knowledge, emotional wellbeing, skin temperature in fingers, and muscle relaxation in individuals with intellectual disabilities from young adults to middle-aged adults.
21	Twyford et al. (2024)	Functional outcomes in children and adolescents with neurodisability accessing music therapy	Scoping review	53 studies	Physical function was the most frequently reported outcome ($n = 27$), followed by communication ($n = 25$), social ($n = 22$), cognitive ($n = 17$), emotional ($n = 13$), psychological ($n = 13$), behavioural ($n = 8$), and sensory ($n = 5$). Evidence for functional outcomes experienced by children and adolescents accessing music therapy as part of their neurorehabilitation is limited. More than half of the included sources were clinical descriptions with small samples. High-quality studies involving children, adolescents, families, and interprofessional teams are needed to identify the most effective music therapy methods and techniques for functional outcomes in paediatric neurodisability.

Note. ADHD = attention deficit hyperactivity disorder, ASD = autism spectrum disorder, CP = cerebral palsy, ICF = International Classification of Functioning, Disability and Health, MT = music therapy, PD = Parkinson's disease, PTSD = post-traumatic stress disorder, QoL = quality of life, RCTs = randomised controlled trials, TBI = traumatic brain injury.

Recent evidence on the efficacy of creative and experiential therapies for disabled persons

By synthesising the relevant conclusions extracted from the included papers, six themes related to functional capacity and overall wellbeing were found (see **Table 5**).

TABLE 5. Synthesis of themes: literature review

Themes	*Description*
Cognitive function improvement	CETs can improve cognitive and executive function outcomes across various populations
Emotional and psychosocial wellbeing	CETs provide measurable benefits in reducing emotional distress, enhancing psychological resilience, social-emotional function outcomes, and mental health across a range of age groups and settings
Social engagement and communication	One of the significant outcomes of CET is its ability to enhance social skills, engagement and communication
Physical wellbeing	Positive physical outcomes, particularly motor function, are strongly supported
Empowerment and self-expression	CETs offer a platform for personal growth and self-expression by providing non-verbal outlets for communication
Overall quality of life	CETs foster significant improvements in overall quality of life

Cognitive function improvement. The results show that CET can improve cognitive and executive function outcomes across various populations. Evidence suggests significant enhancements, particularly for individuals recovering from traumatic brain injury (Alashram et al., 2023), stroke survivors (Pangestu et al., 2022), and persons with cerebral palsy (Duarte Machado et al., 2023). It further shows possibilities to improve the cognition of persons with dementia more than conventional therapies (Lin et al., 2023). The evidence confirms the efficacy of CET in enhancing the cognitive rehabilitation process of people with Parkinson's disease (Li et al., 2024), and children and adolescents with neurodisability (Twyford et al., 2024). There is evidence that memory functions of stroke survivors can be trained by CET (Pangestu et al., 2022), and the efficacy on memory of persons with post-traumatic brain injury has been noted, though these effects require further study (Alashram et al., 2023).

Emotional and psychosocial wellbeing. CET provide measurable benefits in reducing emotional distress, enhancing psychological resilience, social-emotional function outcomes, and mental health across a range of age groups and settings. Studies report reductions in depressive symptoms (Porras-Segovia et al., 2024), PTSD symptoms (Malhotra et al., 2024), and mental health challenges (Orkibi et al., 2023), with possibilities to reduce neuropsychiatric challenges even more significantly than conventional therapies among

individuals with neurodegenerative diseases (Lin et al., 2023). The results show that CET facilitate social-emotional growth (Duarte Machado et al., 2023), emotional expression, emotional regulation, and confidence-building (Keiller et al., 2024), overall emotional wellbeing (Takahashi & Kato, 2022; Twyford et al., 2024), and enhancement of the psychological rehabilitation process of persons with Parkinson's disease (Li et al., 2024). Creative and experiential therapists are creating a safe space for participants to process difficult experiences (Alashram et al., 2023; Lin et al., 2023). Orkibi and colleagues (2023) concluded that their findings provide justifications for the increasing use of CET in mental healthcare practice.

Social engagement and communication. One of the significant outcomes of CET is their ability to enhance social skills, engagement, and communication. CET foster cooperative interactions in natural settings, improving both verbal and non-verbal communication, especially for children with autism spectrum disorder and communication challenges (Elbeltagi et al., 2023; Ivers, 2024; López-Escribano & Orío Aparicio, 2024). Furthermore, results show that parent–child bonds were strengthened in therapeutic responses designed to integrate family members, creating holistic improvements in social environments (Elbeltagi et al., 2023).

Physical wellbeing. Positive physical outcomes, particularly motor function, are strongly supported in the included studies. Participants with Parkinson's disease (Li et al., 2024; Simpkins & Yang, 2023), cerebral palsy (Duarte Machado et al., 2023), and intellectual disability (Takahashi & Kato, 2022), and children and adolescents with neurodisability (Twyford et al., 2024) experienced improved balance, motor skills, and physical relaxation as part of their therapy. Stroke rehabilitation programs also highlighted motor skill improvements, with tailored creative activities aligning therapeutic responses to individual needs and cultural contexts (Liu et al., 2024).

Empowerment and self-expression. CET offer a platform for personal growth and self-expression by providing non-verbal outlets for communication, particularly for individuals who struggle to articulate emotions or needs, such as those with autism spectrum disorder or trauma-related challenges. CET also foster a sense of social connection and community engagement, encouraging personal empowerment through creative expression and collaborative experiences (Keiller et al., 2024).

Overall quality of life. The results indicate that CET foster significant improvements in overall quality of life. Lin et al. (2023) demonstrated that music-based therapies might improve not only the cognition but also the quality of life of people with dementia, even more than conventional therapies. Liu et al. (2024) provide initial support for the potential positive role of CET in stroke rehabilitation.

The holistic benefits include better mental health with consistent positive results for anxiety (Pieri et al., 2022) and COVID-19-related psychiatric symptoms (Luo et al., 2023), enhanced participation in daily life, and improved social relationships (Pieri et al., 2022). According to Pieri et al. (2022), 128 findings showed the benefits of CET in three broad themes: positive impact on self, empowering multifaceted experience, and relevance of needs-centred adjustments. The authors concluded that the provisional findings identified benefits of mind-body and CET responses on aspects of wellbeing for some individuals with aphasia. Furthermore, the results showed evidence of improvements in multiple areas of development that indicates that CET offer significant benefits (Martínez-Vérez et al., 2024). Mercier et al. (2023) reported that the qualitative data in their scoping review support the use of CET for a wide variety of outcomes for people with spinal cord injury. In line with Mercier et al. (2023), Power et al. (2023) argued that existing research highlights that CET can be both helpful and acceptable to many participants with an intellectual disability.

Tailored and well-targeted therapies addressing individual and contextual needs amplified these outcomes, underscoring the importance of personalised approaches that provide tailored responses to the needs of individuals (Martínez-Vérez et al., 2024).

Discussion

In our discussion, we explore the findings and implications of this study and return to our guiding question: "What is the value of CET for disabled people in the NDIS?" Utilising the themes from our qualitative analysis of NDIS participants' testimonies in concert with evidence from the literature as well as socioeconomic and sociopolitical perspectives, we frame our discussion around five key areas: choice and validation, expression and communication, empowered transformation, community engagement, and socioeconomic concerns. We have added an image for each theme. These images have been provided by creative and experiential therapists in response to the themes expressed by NDIS CET participants. This practice is known as response art (Nash, 2019).

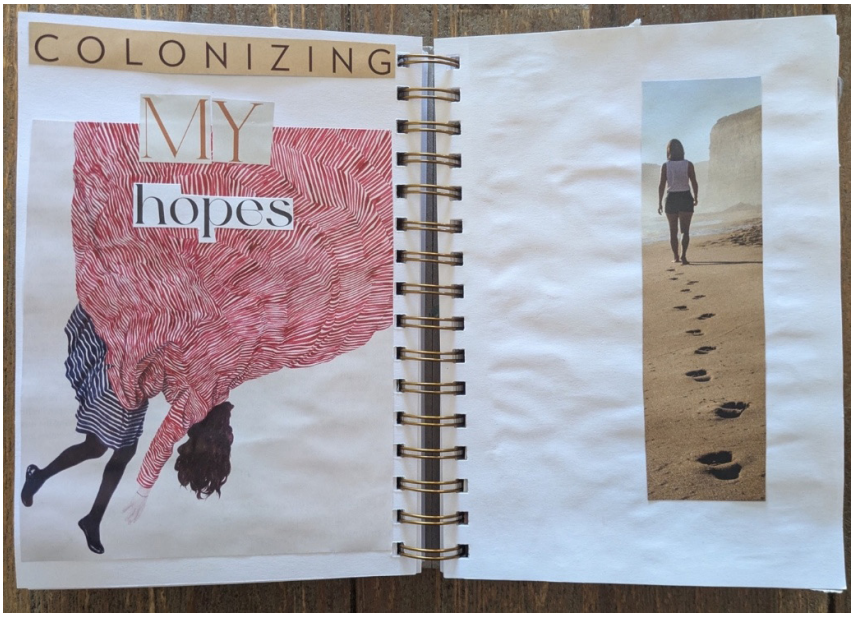


FIGURE 2. *Choice? Colonising My Hopes*. Angela Rose, 2024.

Access to choice and control: a human right

At the heart of our findings is the fundamental right to choice and control over therapeutic supports, as advocated by both the UNCRPD and NDIS (see **Figure 2**). The qualitative analysis of participant testimonials highlights the critical role of choice for NDIS participants regarding access to CET. Supported by evidence demonstrating the effectiveness of these therapies for disabled persons, this study offers actionable recommendations to enhance sustainable access to these essential services within the NDIS. The voices of participants, as illuminated through the thematic analysis of testimonials, underscore the profound personal and communal benefits of CET. Participants frequently highlighted the critical importance of choice and autonomy in therapeutic options. CET are described as not merely supplementary, but essential to participants' wellbeing and personal development. They serve as vital tools for emotional processing, self-expression, psychosocial wellbeing, and social connection, particularly for those who find traditional therapies inadequate. These insights can guide future decisions on policy and funding for CET, ensuring that individual experiences are validated within research backed framework in keeping with the NDIS's stated commitment to a practice-informed evidence approach to services in which disabled people are collaborators in the regulation of therapeutic supports (NDIS Quality and Safeguards Commission, 2023). Through our findings, we recommend the ongoing and sustainable integration of CET into the NDIS framework, ensuring that participants can benefit from choice over their options while receiving vital support.

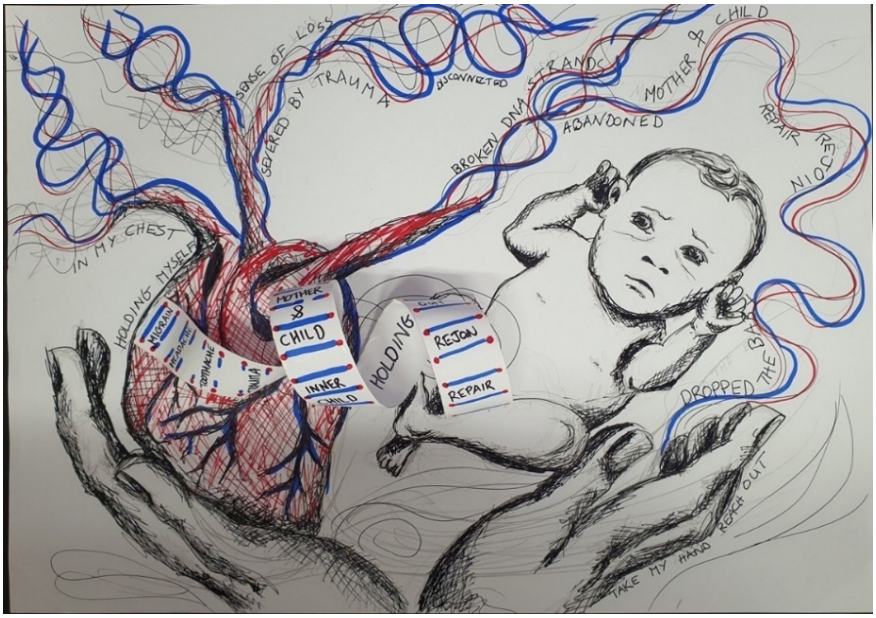


FIGURE 3. Holding Myself: Being Understood. Kerryn Knight, 2024.

Expression and communication: being understood by policymakers

CET play a crucial role in enabling expression and communication, which are essential elements of being understood (see **Figure 3**). While participants, families, and the literature confirm the value of CET in supporting and enhancing self-expression and communication, a notable divergence exists between participant experiences and the evidence-based literature in the realm of CET and disability support and care.

This is evidenced by a parent advocating for their child:

> Our son Tim got nowhere when going to a traditional talk-based psychologist. But when he switched to an art therapist, things took off for him. He was able to share about his anxieties, talk cathartically about having been bullied at school, and even has developed pride in his artistic skills, which he never thought he had. It would be a huge setback if he lost access to art therapy. For people like him and a range of neurodivergent people it's much more effective than the more common talk therapy.

Participants frequently highlight the importance of personal narratives, emotional relief, and sociocultural factors, while the literature tends to prioritise a medical-model perspective, emphasising quantifiable outcomes and cognitive improvements. This disparity illustrates a broader tension in disability services, where the richness of lived

experiences is often overshadowed by standardised empirical data.

Our study addresses this issue by employing a mixed methods approach, merging qualitative insights with evidence-based findings. It accentuates the multifaceted impact of CET, advocating for the need to privilege participant voices. By integrating personal testimonials with systemic perspectives, the study champions a more holistic understanding of the value of CET, ensuring that the emotional and cultural dimensions of disability are valued alongside conventional medical outcomes.

One implication of our findings for policymakers is to understand that medical-model evidence does not give a complete picture of what is important and what works for disabled people themselves. We recommend that the NDIS safeguards against an over-reliance on medical-model evidence and reprioritises listening to the voices of participants, in keeping with the stated values and evidence-informed practice guidelines of the NDIS itself (NDIS Quality and Safeguards Commission, 2023).

Self-efficacy and functional capacity: areas of convergence

Despite the differences between participants' lived experiences and the kind of evidence that is privileged within a medical model, our research underscores significant areas of convergence between participant experiences and empirical evidence regarding the efficacy of CET in enhancing wellbeing for disabled people. Both participants and scholarly literature recognise the positive impact of CET on physical, emotional, and psychosocial health, cognitive functioning, and community engagement. Notably, CET promote the development of communication skills while reducing isolation, emphasising the vital role played by CET in fostering a holistic sense of wellbeing (see **Figure 4**).

Our literature review aimed to provide an interpretive synthesis of existing meta-analyses and reviews published after 2023, thereby enriching the current knowledge regarding the efficacy of CET for disabled people. The analysis included 21 peer-reviewed articles with a total of 389 articles examined, revealing a diverse range of CET characteristics. Despite the lack of identified sample sizes in some instances, the studies adhered to our rigorous inclusion and exclusion criteria, ensuring a minimum standard of quality. This systematic approach enabled the identification of prominent themes within existing literature. Our findings demonstrate that CET produce substantial benefits across various populations. The evidence indicates improvements in cognitive and executive function, alongside measurable reductions in emotional distress. Additionally, CET enhance psychosocial resilience and support social-emotional functioning and overall wellbeing across different age groups and settings. One of the most significant outcomes identified is the capacity of CET to foster social skills, engagement, and communication.

The studies further provide compelling evidence for positive physical outcomes, particularly in motor function improvement. CET also offer individuals a platform for personal growth and self-expression, facilitating non-verbal communication of inner experiences that are beyond the capacity of words to express. Such creative expression encourages personal empowerment, fostering autonomy and self-confidence.

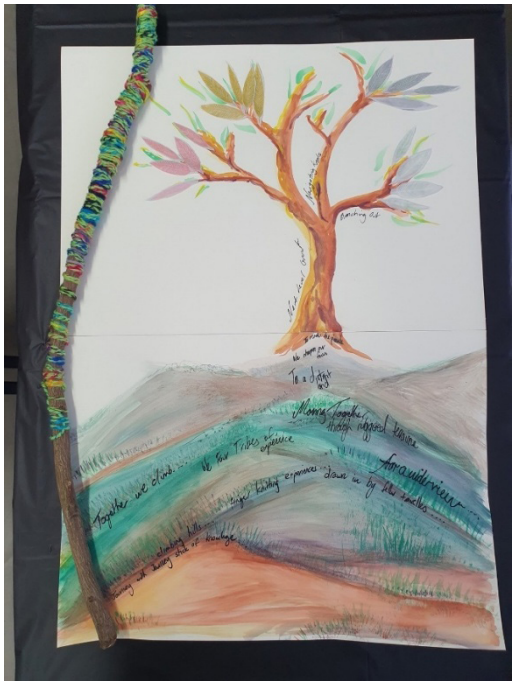


FIGURE 4. Navigating the Landscape, Self-Efficacy. Kerryn Knight, 2024.

Overall, these findings illustrate that CET significantly enhance quality of life for disabled persons, supporting the lived experiences of NDIS participants and highlighting the inherent value of these therapies. Additionally, the findings from the thematic analysis of participant testimonials collected during the Creative and Experiential Therapies Belong in the NDIS campaign align with the evidence presented in the literature. They demonstrate the critical role of CET in improving participants' functional capacity, which is experienced as increased self-efficacy, supporting personal agency, and self-determination. The therapies notably contribute to emotional regulation, motor skills, cognitive capacity, communication, social interaction, and community participation.

By offering evidence-based benefits, CET enhance psychosocial functioning and align seamlessly with the NDIS's definition of therapeutic supports. This alignment reinforces the NDIS's commitment to providing comprehensive support that helps participants build, maintain, and improve their overall wellbeing (NDIS Quality and Safeguards Commission, 2023).

We recommend that these findings are used to inform policy and support the sustainable integration of CET into the NDIS framework to improve outcomes for disabled people as valued citizens in Australia.

Belonging: disabled people belong in our communities—creative and experiential therapies belong in the NDIS

Belonging is a fundamental aspect of community engagement, especially for NDIS participants who often experience isolation due to stigma and discrimination in their daily lives (ABS, 2024; Zimmermann et al., 2024). As shown in the testimonies from participants in this study, the unique contributions of CET within the NDIS framework significantly enhance individuals' ability to participate in their communities and foster a sense of belonging. CET comprise allied health disciplines, all of which require practitioners to complete accredited tertiary degree training (certified under the Australian Qualifications Framework) and have professional oversight through registration with peak bodies that are members of Allied Health Professions Australia (AHPA). This structured approach ensures that CET provide tailored, person-centred care that addresses the needs of help-seeking individuals.

Unlike community arts engagement, which focuses on cultural expression and storytelling, CET employ an experiential psychotherapeutic model, highlighting the role of CET as a legitimate allied health service (Fancourt & Finn, 2019). Creative Australia (2023) has noted that there are distinct differences between CET and community arts practices. While both aim to enhance wellbeing and participation, CET are subject to rigorous regulatory standards that align with the UNCRPD and the goals of the NDIS. Integrating CET within the NDIS ensures quality regulation while fostering professional recognition for these essential services.

The presence of CET in the NDIS is vital for supporting individuals' psychosocial health and overall wellbeing, which ultimately contributes to community inclusivity. By enhancing coping mechanisms and resilience, CET enable participants to actively engage in their communities, reducing the social isolation that is all too common for people with disabilities. This benefits participants and enriches the fabric of Australian society as a whole.

Our findings show that it is crucial for policymakers to recognise that CET deserve the same respect and acknowledgement as other allied health professions. When creative and experiential therapists are treated on par with their peers from other allied health disciplines, it eliminates the discrimination they face and ensures that NDIS participants have equitable access to comprehensive support. We recommend the continued and sustainable integration of allied health services provided by creative and experiential therapists within the NDIS as a significant step toward fostering belonging, reducing

isolation, and enhancing the lives of disabled individuals by promoting their active participation in all facets of community life (see **Figure 5**).



FIGURE 5. Safety and Belonging. Lindsey Shepherd, 2023.

Complex accountability: dignity of risk, quality control, and risk of not responding to the call for action

The intersection of socioeconomic and sociopolitical concerns with disability rights is a critical area of inquiry that requires our immediate attention, particularly in the context of access to CET for NDIS participants. As articulated by disabled individuals themselves, the empowerment to determine their own service needs is paramount, emphasising the necessity for a rights-based approach to support systems. This mixed methods study has delved into the testimonials of disabled people, exploring their lived experiences and the implications of these narratives on policy and practice within the NDIS.

In this discussion, we situate CET as crucial therapeutic supports that are also vital mechanisms for capacity building and community inclusion (see **Figure 6**). By integrating systemic perspectives that align with the values outlined in the UNCRPD, we elucidate the distinct role of qualified creative and experiential therapists within the broader allied health workforce. Through a comprehensive analysis of qualitative testimonials with

reference to evidence in the included literature, we highlight the efficacy of CET while advocating for the regulatory standards necessary to uphold their quality and value within the Australian healthcare landscape.



FIGURE 6. Accountability and the Dignity of Risk. Susannah Morrison, 2024.

Quality of care

As shown in the analysis of their testimonials, when disabled people seek help from a qualified allied health professional—a creative and experiential therapist—they often do so because traditional therapies have not worked, and they are seeking a safe, therapeutic relationship with a professional that they can trust with their vulnerability. The skills required to establish a stable and supportive therapeutic relationship, where a participant can be confident in the practitioner's ability to respond with the appropriate evidence-based care, non-judgement, and confidentiality of an allied health professional, are different from the skills possessed by community arts practitioners (Creative Australia, 2023). As allied health professionals, creative and experiential therapists are part of Australia's broader psychotherapy and counselling allied health workforce and are subject to regulatory frameworks that are appropriate for this workforce (Bloch-Atefi et al., 2021).

Quality regulation of creative and experiential therapies

The regulation and identification of registered creative and experiential therapists present significant challenges, particularly in regard to use of the term art therapist, which lacks formal protection as a professional title in Australia. The proliferation of online and short-course programs touting accreditation creates confusion, misleading individuals into believing they are qualified to offer services within the NDIS. This ambiguity not only jeopardises the safety of NDIS participants but also raises concerns about the integrity of the NDIS framework itself, and may be a contributing factor to the recent announcements to cut funding for CET.

Professional associations may unintentionally contribute to this confusion through their registration structures, which sometimes permit individuals who do not meet comprehensive professional criteria to maintain membership via various levels that are not easily distinguishable. Such practices dilute public confidence in the profession and complicate the efforts of NDIS plan managers and administrators to differentiate between qualified creative and experiential therapists and those with minimal training.

The essential justifications for registration and certification, including public interest protection, the promotion of general professional knowledge, and the facilitation of informed hiring decisions, are undermined by ambiguous registration categories (Gershuni et al., 2023). This situation emphasises the need for stringent standards and clear guidelines, ensuring that all CET practitioners demonstrate the requisite allied health professional competencies and maintain their fitness for practice via continuous professional development, regular clinical supervision, current insurances, and national police checks. Such measures are crucial to uphold the quality and safety of services rendered to people seeking care and support (Bloch-Atefi et al., 2021).

The establishment of the CCET within PACFA marks a significant advancement in the regulation of creative and experiential therapists in Australia. All members of PACFA's CCET have a foundational registration with PACFA as counsellors and are part of the psychotherapy and counselling workforce of Australia. In addition, CCET-certified members have specific training and education in the use of creative processes and experiential ways of knowing in therapeutic supports. The integration of more-than verbal methods is what defines these therapeutic creative and experiential approaches (CCET, 2023).

The CCET initiative enhances CET practitioner credibility and recognition, providing a clearer framework for training, accreditation, and maintenance of professional competency. It aligns with broader healthcare trends, emphasising evidence-based practices and standardised training in keeping with the standards set by AHPA. By establishing a regulatory framework and easy identification of registered practitioners through highly recognisable digital badges, CCET ensures that CET practitioners meet professional standards, benefiting clients, the profession, and all stakeholders (CCET, 2023).

The recommendations and implementation of new national standards for counsellors and psychotherapists are expected in 2025, and these will provide a further layer of regulation, accountability, and ease of identification for therapists who are part of that workforce.

Socioeconomic value of creative and experiential therapies

Risks of reducing NDIS funding for creative and experiential therapies

In the context of disability services, supports, and care, risk management is a proactive, planned, and systematic process which identifies, assesses, and mitigates potential risks. Good practice in risk management incorporates the ability to dynamically respond to change and facilitate continuous improvement. The NDIS is founded on principles of coproduction, one of which is to "enable people with disability to exercise choice and control in the pursuit of their goals and the planning and delivery of their supports" (Australian Government, 2026, s118(1)(ii)). The notion of participant collaboration acknowledges the vital role disabled people play in co-regulating both the quality and safety of their chosen services and supports. In the NDIS, effective risk management empowers participants as collaborators in the management of risk (Australian Government, 2026, s4(1–17)). This approach recognises the importance of inclusion and citizenship, enabling the "dignity of risk" in choosing providers (Yates et al., 2024).

Dignity of risk includes affording disabled people the respect of choosing therapeutic supports that work for them and co-regulating the system by opting out of therapies that do not work. From a co-regulatory perspective, CET are important to disabled people who choose to participate in CET primarily because they do work. As Senator Jordon Steele-John, Greens spokesperson for disability rights and services, highlighted in the *Greens Statement on Cuts to Art and Music Therapies*:

> Engaging in any type of therapy requires significant time and energy. Nobody wants those therapies to succeed more than us, as disabled people. Implying that disabled people are purposefully engaging in therapies to waste time and money greatly disrespects our agency. (Australian Greens, 2024)

As evidenced by the testimonials in this study, respecting participants' agency to choose therapeutic supports that really work for them can prevent an escalation requiring more intensive supports from other areas of the healthcare system, including the mental health system (van Laar, 2024). This is an example of participant co-regulation of a service system.

Combining risk reduction with resilience-enhancing approaches is an evidence-based strategy for reducing psychosocial risks (McGovern et al., 2024; Morison et al., 2022). As shown in the analysis of testimonials (see Appendix **Table A1**), combined with the empirical evidence in this study, the availability of creative and experiential therapeutic supports plays an important role in reducing the risk of decline in functional capacity, psychosocial wellbeing, and mental health, along with other risks captured in **Table 6** (van Laar, 2024).

TABLE 6. Identified risks across stakeholder groups related to funding cuts to CET.

Group	*Identified potential risks*
Participants	Reduced functional capacity Isolation Decline in psychosocial wellbeing Reduced socioeconomic status Decreased quality of life Decreased access to meaningful participation in the community Decrease in social productivity Hospitalisation
Families	Feeling unsupported and overwhelmed Decline in communication and family relationships Potential family and household breakdown Potential homelessness of disabled people and carers
Creative and experiential therapists	Financial duress for small businesses providing CET Unsustainable CET businesses resulting in withdrawal of services Undersupply of accessible and appropriate CET support for disabled people, especially in regional areas
General population	Instability of CET service provision in regional areas Reputational damage for the government due to perceived: - breach of UNCRPD - lack of commitment to the core values of the NDIS

Social and financial return on investment of continuing access to creative and experiential therapies as a capacity-building therapeutic support within the NDIS.

An economic lens often emphasises the financial cost of services delivered by institutions or organisations. However, social return on investment (SROI) is an important tool that can highlight the diverse values of the investment in the delivery of programs and services to the community (Pham et al., 2024). SROI draws on quantitative data (SROI ratio) in combination with qualitative data to provide context for the stories of lived experience through stakeholder testimony (Krlev et al., 2013). SROI integrity relies on transparency about choices being made, acknowledging biases, and using relevant and reliable financial information from evidence-based research.

The impact of CET on reducing strain on public health systems is not yet quantified. However, one SROI analysis used conservative estimates for a CET program with current and former military and emergency services personnel with PTSD in Australia. The analysis concluded that $3.05 of social value was generated for every $1 invested (Bowen et al., 2024). In addition, Hutchinson et al. (2024) assessed the SROI for a disability-inclusive social enterprise at $1.47–$2.65 for every $1 invested (over 3 years) increasing to $8.48–$12.63 (over 20 years). These examples provide compelling evidence for the socioeconomic benefits of CET as disability support and care that promote community engagement and is consistent with the longer-term impacts of CET participation illuminated in this study.

Investigation of the broad-reaching socioeconomic value of CET within the NDIS would be a valuable topic for future research.

Summary

The urgent need to address threats to funding for CET within the NDIS is highlighted by the voices of NDIS participants, their families, and carers, as well as CET providers and the broader community. A proactive response from the NDIS to this collaborative call to action is essential to ensure the integrity, safety, and quality of therapeutic supports for disabled people, who count as 21.4% of Australian citizens. We recommend the continuation of a rights-based approach that assures ongoing access to CET as therapeutic supports within the NDIS, in keeping with the values of the UNCRPD.

Study limitations

This study carries potential author bias as CvL and AZ are creative and experiential therapists whose professional interests are implicated in the NDIS case. To address this, two authors from different professional backgrounds (ABA and JG) contributed to bias reflection.

Qualitative study limitations

The qualitative study relied on 93 written comments from NDIS participants. Although this is a limited sample that represents only a small fraction of all NDIS users, it is a typical sample size in qualitative research (Tomaszewski et al., 2020). The testimonials, while not held to a minimum quality standard, provided valuable insights based on lived experiences. Although the perspectives of other participants remain unknown, these accounts offer timely and unfiltered reflections that enhance understanding of how NDIS participants perceive CET cuts.

Literature review limitations

The review was constrained by selection criteria and search strategies. Language restrictions limited the inclusion of possible studies outside English-speaking, highly educated Western societies, which limits generalisability to these settings. For instance, two articles from Indonesia could not be selected due to language barriers. Additionally, research in highly educated Western societies often emphasises impairment and medical conditions or challenges of disability, which may not align with perspectives in other cultural contexts. Variability in study designs, sample sizes, and CET modalities also leaves room for further validation. However, this diversity may enhance the transferability of findings (Finfgeld-Connett, 2010).

It remains unclear whether there are any duplicates among the 389 studies in the included review articles. We conducted a sample check of three articles (Ivers, 2024; Li et al., 2024; Orkibi et al., 2023) and found no duplicates. However, this does not guarantee that duplicates are absent in the entire dataset.

Conclusion

This study presents compelling practice-based evidence that supports the sustainable continuation of CET within the NDIS, ensuring accessibility for participants who rely on CET as a vital service, and whose human right to self-determination must be guaranteed. By synthesising the perspectives of NDIS participants, alongside contemporary international academic research and specific contextual perspectives, this research underscores the significant value of CET in supporting the agency, community engagement, and overall wellbeing of most disabled people. This study further highlights socioeconomic and sociopolitical perspectives, including the distinction between CET and community arts engagement, new developments addressing the challenges surrounding professional regulation of CET, and the SROI vs financial costs associated with CET service delivery. The evidence presented in this study shows that access to CET offers fundamental therapeutic support for disabled people, providing value by mitigating risks to their health and wellbeing. Additionally, access to CET helps reduce strain on other areas of the healthcare system while promoting self-efficacy and a sense of belonging. Maintaining the integration of CET within the NDIS as a capacity-building, allied health therapeutic support is essential for cultivating, maintaining, and advancing a just Australian society for the equality, dignity, and full participation of disabled people in all aspects of life.

Author contribution statement

The contributions of each author are detailed according to the CRediT (Contributor Roles Taxonomy): Carla van Laar: Conceptualisation, Investigation, Formal Analysis, Writing: Original Draft, Writing: Review & Editing; Alexandra Bloch-Atefi: Methodology, Formal Analysis, Writing: Original Draft, Writing: Review & Editing; Jeremy Grace: Conceptualisation, Investigation, Writing Original Draft, Writing: Review & Editing; Anja Zimmermann: Conceptualisation, Investigation, Formal Analysis, Methodology, Writing: Original Draft, Writing: Review & Editing.

More specifically, Carla van Laar developed the original concept of the article and led the qualitative study of the participant testimonials. Alexandra Bloch-Atefi contributed to the outlining of the mixed methods methodology. Jeremy Grace contributed the social return on investment component. Anja Zimmermann contributed the social justice perspective, conducted the literature review, contributed to the qualitative interpretation of the testimonials, and participated in the ongoing calibration of the qualitative data analysis. All authors contributed to the interpretation of the findings and the development and revision of the manuscript.

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Chapter 6

Interspace. Man down



(. . .) What impresses me is when there is a difficult situation, I am speechless. (. . .). When I experience something out of my control, and I am impressed, I am unable to relate to others in words. My creature has no words immediately, he needs a moment, maybe lingering to express something difficult to experience. (. . .).

I must overcome shame and embarrassment to be able to express myself. Especially the feeling of helplessness is difficult to experience. The vulnerability of being unable to change a situation that does not fit with the image I have of myself is difficult to accept. Something happens to me, I can't intervene, and someone else can't offer help either. Everything is observed and experienced, and although these are common topics of conversation it is too uncomfortable or too embarrassing to bring them up. (. . .)

Photo and story: *Images of meaning*. Stemerding & Zimmermann. Unpublished

EXPERIENCING SOCIAL JUSTICE IN ART-BASED COMMUNITIES

This chapter also addresses Research Question c), focusing on how social justice is experienced in art-based communities from an insider perspective. The article in this chapter has been submitted as:

Anja Zimmermann, Maaike Hermsen, Suzanne Haeyen, Merel Visse, and Carlo Leget. Experiencing Social Justice in Art-Based Communities with Persons with Intellectual Disabilities. An Autoethnography (under peer review at *Arts & Health*).

Abstract

Persons with intellectual disabilities continue to face discrimination, violence, and exclusion despite increasing recognition of their rights. While the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities emphasises autonomy and self-determination, these principles often overlook the relational and collective dimensions of social justice. Art-based community approaches have been identified as promising environments for social justice; however, little is known about how justice is experienced through embodied, relational, and performative presence.

Using evocative autoethnography, this study drew on long-term engagement with five art-based communities in the Netherlands and Germany. This approach enabled a reflexive, sensory, and relational exploration of how justice is experienced within shared artistic spaces and processes.

The analysis highlights three stories and interwoven themes: experiences of a Listening Space Affirming Inherent Dignity, Participation Beyond Words, and Belonging Beyond Categories. These stories illustrate how art-based community practices can challenge normative expectations of autonomy and productivity. Instead, gestures, rhythms, and co-creation became pathways to presence, recognition, and collective meaning-making.

In conclusion, art-based community practices can foster relational forms of social justice that reach beyond formal rights and procedural inclusion. They show how meaning, recognition, and radical belonging are co-created through embodied encounters. These findings point toward how art therapy approaches, when attuned to relational interdependence and collective forms of dignity, may contribute to environments where processes of repair and emancipation can emerge, take root and flourish.

Introduction

Despite the growing recognition of the human rights of people with disabilities[6] and efforts to increase social justice (United Nations, 2006), many persons with intellectual disabilities remain disproportionately excluded from education, employment, healthcare, and social life (Scior et al., 2020). They experience higher rates of social isolation and loneliness (Bigby, 2008; McConnell et al., 2016; Reeves et al., 2025). They are also more likely to experience violence, abuse, bullying, and sexual exploitation (Ashby & Mander, 2026; Cook & Hole, 2021; Dunkle et al., 2018; Hall, 2005; Merrells et al., 2018; Power & Barlett, 2018; Strnadová et al., 2018; Sutherland et al., 2024). These experiences often contribute to chronic stress and long-term effects on mental health and well-being, including trauma responses and a reduced capacity for social participation (Hughes et al., 2019; Santoro et al., 2018). The persistence of these injustices against persons with intellectual disabilities demonstrate the urgent need for approaches that foster social justice, for example by full recognition of personhood, connections based on structural equality, and social belonging as a full member of community through relational, embodied, and expressive practices (Jansen-van Vuuren & Aldersey, 2020; Reeves et al., 2025; Scior et al., 2020).

In this article, intellectual disability is understood relationally, as emerging from interactions between individuals and their social, physical, and attitudinal environments (World Health Organization, n.d.). This perspective moves beyond medicalised definitions and acknowledges how discriminatory norms, inaccessible contexts, and institutional structures produce exclusion (Goodley, 2017). Disability is also shaped by intersecting identities, including gender, class, race, and age (Crenshaw, 1991; Wickenden, 2023). These intersections influence lived experiences of marginalisation and the ways persons are positioned within social systems.

To understand social justice in this context, we follow care-ethical approaches that conceptualise justice as relational, embodied, and practiced in everyday encounters (Tronto, 1993; Walker, 2007). Rather than framing social justice as an abstract entitlement, care ethics highlights how dignity and recognition are performed through responsiveness, attentiveness, and co-presence. From this perspective, social justice can emerge in shared activity, gestures, and rhythms, particularly within art-based communities where participants create together and meaning unfolds through relational engagement (Zimmermann et al., 2024, 2025b).

Art-based communities provide promising practices for social justice (Jansen-van Vuuren & Aldersey, 2020; Zimmermann et al., 2024). Defined through artistic, co-creative, and

6 In this article, we use person-first language ("persons with intellectual disabilities") in line with the preference of self-advocacy organization for people with intellectual disabilities in the Netherlands (LFB), where this research was conducted.

person-centered practices, they invite participants not as clients or patients but as co-creators in shared processes of expression and meaning-making (Zimmermann et al., 2024, 2025b). Art-based communities align with the growing emphasis on approaches that foster acceptance and belonging to people with intellectual disabilities (Jansen-van Vuuren & Aldersey, 2020). Prior research has shown their potential for social inclusion, a sense of belonging, and well-being (Zimmermann et al., 2024), yet the field knows less about how social justice unfolds through embodied presence, sensory communication, and shared artistic practice (Fleetwood-Smith et al., 2021; Pink, 2015).

This study addresses this gap by examining how social justice is lived and felt within art-based community practices. Using evocative autoethnography, we explore moments in which gestures, expressions, materials, and relationships create conditions for dignity, participation, and sense of belonging. Through three stories drawn from long-term engagement with five communities in the Netherlands and Germany, we highlight how justice becomes tangible in encounters that challenge normative expectations of autonomy, communication, and fixed identity categories.

Research questions:

1. How can art-based communities be understood as spaces in which persons across diverse abilities co-create moments of recognition, meaning, and sense of belonging?
2. How might these practices foster social justice through relational, embodied, and performative presence?

Methods

Design

This study is grounded in evocative autoethnography, which integrates personal narrative with ethnographic attention to culture and relationships (Bochner & Ellis, 2016; Ellis, 2004). Instead of aiming for distance or neutrality, evocative autoethnography values emotional resonance, embodied understanding, and the researcher's lived experience as meaningful sources of knowledge (Holman Jones, 2005). This approach is appropriate when working alongside people whose communication is often undervalued in traditional research contexts, including persons with intellectual disabilities.

The study is further informed by arts-based and sensory approaches to inquiry (Barone & Eisner, 2012; Pink, 2015). These approaches view artistic practice as a mode of meaning making and emphasise the body, materials, gestures, and sensory experience as legitimate forms of knowledge. Such methods are particularly suited to contexts in which communication is multimodal, non-verbal, or relational (Fleetwood-Smith et al., 2021).

Settings and participants

Between 2021 and 2025, the first author engaged in approximately 60 days of fieldwork across five art-based communities in the Netherlands and Germany. These included semi-professional art studios, a daycare program, a leisure and educational program, and two researcher-initiated communities, one in higher education and one in a day-care center for persons with profound intellectual disabilities. The sampling combined professional networks, social media, and snowball techniques. Communities were selected based on the presence of (a) visual art practices, (b) participation of people with intellectual disabilities, and (c) a stated commitment to social justice, sense of belonging, or social inclusion. An overview of the art-based communities is presented in **Table 1**. The choice to focus on the five communities prioritised depth and relational continuity over breadth.

Participants included adults and children with and without intellectual disabilities, parents, staff members, art therapists, volunteers, and support workers. Participation was voluntary. For individuals unable to provide verbal consent, willingness was assessed through behavior and supported by legal representatives and care staff. Participants who wished to be identified were permitted to do so.

TABLE 1. Overview of included art-based communities

Setting/ Location	*Participants*	*Duration/ Engagement*	*Social-Justice Focus*
Semi-professional art studio (Netherlands)	~12 adults with intellectual disabilities	5 days of fieldwork	Fostering autonomy and artistic identity ("being an artist")
Art studio & leisure programs (Germany)	5 adults and ~40 children of all abilities	6 days	Inclusion through encounters across abilities (CRPD-based)
Semi-professional art studio (Netherlands)	~25 adults with intellectual disabilities	5 days	Autonomy and belonging through creative identity
Day-care art community (Netherlands)	5 adults with profound intellectual disabilities	14 days	Authentic connection and expanded opportunities
Education- and research-based community (Netherlands)	9 adults of all abilities	30 days	Inclusive co-creation and exploration of social justice in relationships

Data collection

Data were collected by the first author through participant observation, shared creative processes, conversations, semi-structured interviews, video recordings, photographs of artefacts, and fieldnotes. Because many participants communicated through gesture, rhythm, material interaction, or presence rather than speech, sensory and embodied

aspects of communication were attended to closely (Pink, 2015).

As this study was exploratory in nature, it was necessary to collect a large, varied, and multilayered set of qualitative materials. The dataset included:

- over 60 days of field engagement
- 30+ short video fragments
- 100+ photographs of artefacts
- 9 interview or focus group transcripts
- extensive fieldnotes documenting atmosphere, gestures, relational dynamics, and emotional tone

Although heterogeneous in form, these materials were approached as elements of a single, unfolding inquiry. Rather than treating interviews, fieldnotes, and visual fragments as separate data sources to be compared, they were engaged as different modalities of knowing that resonated with and refracted one another. Visual materials such as the artefacts, video and photography were used not as distant observation tools but as relational traces (Visse & Niemeijer, 2016). They helped capture fleeting or sensory moments that could not be reconstructed from memory alone. Fieldnotes attuned the analysis to atmosphere and relational tone; interviews articulated participants' reflections and meanings. Together, they formed a layered constellation through which the relational dynamics of the art-based communities could be sensed, interpreted, and critically reflected upon.

Data analysis

Following evocative autoethnographic practice, analysis focused on moments that evoked emotional, ethical, or relational resonance (Bochner & Ellis, 2016). Materials were reviewed for scenes that illuminated patterns of attunement, recognition, disruption, or sense of belonging. Through iterative reflection, dialogue with co-authors, and input from two students 'expert by experience with intellectual disabilities', three stories were selected for their capacity to illuminate how social justice is experienced in practice.

Each story was reconstructed as a narrative that integrates description, reflection, and theoretical interpretation. Rather than coding or categorising data, the analytic process aimed to remain close to the relational, affective, and sensory texture of the encounters (Visse et al., 2020). This approach honours the modes of expression that are central to many participants' experiences, particularly those who communicate beyond or outside of spoken language.

Reflexivity and positionality

The first author's positionality as a sibling, art therapist, and researcher working with persons with intellectual disabilities shaped the research. Her longstanding commitments

to dignity, sense of belonging, and social justice informed the questions asked, the relationships formed, and the moments that resonated strongly in analysis. Reflexive writing and regular dialogue with co-authors and critical friends supported awareness of assumptions, power dynamics, and the risks of misrepresentation.

Procedures and ethics

Ethical approval was granted by the Ethics Committee of the University of Humanistic Studies (2020.16). Written and verbal information was provided in accessible formats to participants. Written consent was requested and provided for participation in interviews and activities, film recordings, photos, publication of findings, and the use of photo and video material in publications and presentations. Where participants were unable to provide written consent themselves, legal representatives were approached. In addition to this formal consent, the participants' responses were carefully observed during activities to ensure that they were comfortable with taking part. This included attending to non-verbal indications of willingness or discomfort. Participants were offered anonymity unless they explicitly requested to be identified. All video and photographic materials were used with permission and handled with attention to dignity, privacy, and relational accountability and responsibility (Adams et al., 2015; Holman Jones, 2005). In recognition of the politics of representation, and the dangers of speaking for others, this research project seeks to write *with* and *for* those whose lives are entangled with the research. The stories presented here are not case studies of others but situated reflections on the own position, informed by and responsive to the ethical imperative to avoid appropriating or oversimplifying the voices of people with intellectual disabilities (Goodley, 2017).

Findings

The findings are presented as three stories reconstructed from the first author's perspective. Each story captures a situated moment in an art-based community setting where social justice became tangible through embodied, relational, or performative presence. Rather than discrete cases, these stories illustrate patterns across settings: recognition, participation, and sense of belonging.

Story 1 On the death of the father. A listening space affirming inherent dignity

During fieldwork at a care-based professional art studio in the Netherlands, I met a woman whose quiet presence and detailed pencil drawings drew me into an unexpected moment of shared meaning. The art studio was calm that morning; several artists worked at their tables, surrounded by shelves of clay, textiles, and sculptures. I noticed that the woman was following me with her eyes, and when I looked at her, she smiled at me, and I felt welcome to approach her. I asked if I could sit beside her and if she would show me

her drawing. She nodded. The drawing depicts a building filled with fine lines and shaded areas, all carefully coloured in. Every part was done in delicate pencil strokes; it must have taken her years. In front of the building, she drew a field of hundreds of flowers: small circles with five or six petals, each with a stem and two leaves. All details are coloured with the same precision.

Curious about her artwork and the way she worked, I asked if I could create an artwork like hers while sitting next to her. She nodded again. I got a sheet of paper and copied one of her flowers, slowly, deliberately, mimicking her pace. I filled the petals with soft lines and drew another flower. The two tiny flowers appeared even smaller on enormous white paper. It felt like it could take forever, and it brought a calmness over me that I had not expected. The repetitive motion, the slow colouring, and the promise of something beautiful emerging from the repetition soothed me into a mellow feeling.

Drawing next to each other and doing the same thing at the same time, we settled into rhythm. Choosing a colour pencil. Petals. Pencil down. Choosing another pencil. Sketch. Petals. Pencil away. Colour again. Our rhythms merged. It felt good to sit beside her and draw. This rhythm slowed me down even more. In this rhythm, I felt that I got briefly closer to her world.

After a while, minutes, though it felt much longer, she asked, "More?" I took it to mean, 'Do you want to see more?' I said, 'Yes, I'd love to.' She stood up and fetched a stack of drawings from a large drawer and laid them on a table. All were pencil drawings, some in black and white and some in color. Buildings and flowers all filled with astonishing details.

She chose one drawing and placed it in front of us. Some of the surfaces inside the drawn building were filled with what looked like childlike handwriting—rounded letters connected in wavy lines that resembled words.

From my field notes:

> She placed her finger at the start of one of the curved lines and slowly traced it to the right. As she did, she began to speak:
>
> 'And then, and then… Papa sick… and fell. Heart. Machine. Hospital. We went to the hospital… and papa died.'
>
> Her finger moved to another line, again from left to right.
>
> 'Papa home. Mama was crying. Aunt was crying. I was crying'. Crying about papa.
>
> Then she said: 'I got a necklace. Look.'

I remember how moved I was, not just by the story, but by the way she told it. Slowly, solemnly, as if reading the story aloud not only to me but also to herself. This is clearly an important finding. Her gestures, tone, and presence became grieving voices. I felt her

story at the pace of her telling; in the way she drew and in the artwork she created. Not as a 'narrative,' but as a performative act of her life and feelings.

From my field notes:

> She told me about losing her father. First, I felt like a witness, but then I felt implicated. My father had died six months earlier. Her story called mine forward in what felt like a space for grief. Her words stirred images of my own grief although somewhat uninvited. I had to concentrate to stay with her and not fall into my own memories.

Looking back, this moment taught me something about her: even with limited words, her voice was strong and clear as it emerged in the space of being together. Her story came through in how she moved with her pencils, in what she drew, how she let me sit beside her, and in what I experienced as an invitation to slow down and listen differently.

Sitting in the train home, I wrote in my notebook:

> Her drawing, her pace, our shared presence and performance became a language in themselves. A way of saying: this is what matters. In the rhythm of drawing, my senses opened. I listened differently, from deeper within. A space opened up: space for her grief, and for mine. For a moment, our worlds touched. Not as a loss of autonomy, nor as a claim to equality, but as a temporary merging: moving with one another, unveiling stories and feelings that might otherwise remain hidden. (. . .)
>
> This unfolded within an art-based community, where she was participating as an artist. Her artwork will later be presented in an exhibition, allowing others to encounter her story. Yet, I sense that something in the shared presence is essential to truly hear it. Perhaps this is what art-based communities add: they are more than places to make art. They create spaces where relationships and connections matter, where stories can be told and received in ways that might otherwise remain unheard. (. . .)
>
> It is here, in this felt co-creation of a story that matters, that I can glimpse mutual dignity: a recognition of her way of being as equally meaningful, and of shared humanity as something that can only be felt together.

Story 2 Drawings on a chair. Participation beyond words

At a daycare centre for adults with profound intellectual disabilities, I joined a group session around a large table covered in drawing paper. Crayons and paint were scattered across the surface. Two women, Vera and Sara, sat across from one another. Both used limited words, expressing themselves through intonation, and movement.

Vera's marks were small and tentative, drawn close to her body. Sara painted in broad strokes, dipping her brush, walking to the sink, returning with purpose. I tried to follow their pace without directing the activity, drawing near Vera's marks, adding color near Sara's yellow washes.

Then something unexpected happened.

Vera stood up and walked away. Almost immediately, Sara's brush swept across Vera's crayon marks, covering them with a wide stroke of yellow. My body tightened. I felt responsible for protecting Vera's work, imagining her marks as personal expressions that needed safeguarding. Yet Vera did not seem distressed or aware of the change.

Moments later, Vera returned, looked around, and then knelt beside Sara's empty chair. She began drawing directly on the chair seat with her crayon. I reacted reflexively: "Oh no, not on the chair," and reached to wipe the marks, which barely faded.

Later, in a focus group with art therapists, one colleague reframed the moment:' Maybe the chair was simply a new canvas. Maybe she was extending the artwork." This perspective stopped me on my track. What if the entire scene, the paper, the paint, the walking away, the chair, and even me wiping the marks were all part of a broader, emergent choreography of art making? Or was it her way of reclaiming space?

From my fieldnotes:

> I tried to follow Vera and Sara, not to lead or interpret but to be present in their worlds, on their terms. I wanted to let gestures, actions and silences, and unexpected choices guide me. My presence was not about directing them but about entering their tempo, their unfolding, embracing the unexpected, even when it made little sense to me.

Uncertainty. Not knowing. These words lingered as I replayed the film fragment of my encounter. What if the yellow paint covering Vera's marks was not an erasure, but an invitation? What if Vera's crayon lines on the chair were not a coincidence as the empty chair was just there but a claim to expand the space of her creativity? My urge to protect the furniture of the host of this art-based community project suddenly revealed itself as bound by a particular worldview: one where autonomy is sacred, boundaries are inviolable, and art belongs on paper.

However, perhaps for Vera and Sara, selfhood was not constructed through autonomy and separation, but through relationships and entanglement.

From my fieldnotes:

> Philosophies of a more relational self, reminded me that identity is not a fixed inner core but emerges in and through connection. From that view, painting over,

> walking away, drawing on the chair, these were movements like in a dance of relationship where meaning emerged in these relationships. (. . .)
>
> Looking again at the film fragment, I began to see the daycare room as a kind of social sculpture in Joseph Beuys's sense: a space where all gestures, however small, shape the community we are co-creating. Beuys famously declared "Everyone is an artist," not to flatten skill but to insist that every person contributes to shaping social reality. In this encounter, the "art" was not just the paper on the table but the relational field itself: Sara's bold strokes, Vera's crayon on the chair, my wiping hand. Together we sculpted a moment of community.

In this light, Vera's act of drawing on the chair was about expanding what counted as participation. She made visible an alternative frame: that art is not contained but diffuses into the environment, that expression can be relational rather than bounded, and that belonging is performed not through autonomy but through interdependence.

From my fieldnotes:

> For me, the experience was transformative. It asked me to reconsider what participation means for those whose words are few. Vera and Sara showed me that presence, gesture, and even disruption can be forms of voice. Social justice in this art-based community was not about guaranteeing equal "space" on the paper, but about cultivating attentiveness to what emerges together, even when it looks messy, uncertain, or incomplete. (. . .)
>
> Justice here was not equality as sameness, but dignity as being-with. As Walker's notion of expressive-collaborative morality suggests, values are created through the relationships we enact. Social justice, then, was performed when we stayed with each other's gestures, when Sara's yellow strokes met Vera's crayon, when my wiping hand became part of the artwork, when uncertainty and unpredictability itself were allowed to speak. It is not about protecting autonomy at all costs, but about honoring interdependence as a form of belonging.

Vera's marks on the chair remain with me. They remind me that participation is not always verbal, not always "proper," and not always predictable. It is sometimes disruptive but always relational. Recognizing this is to glimpse a lived and performed practice of social justice that includes those who are unfortunately often unheard, not by translating them into our categories, but by letting their gestures reshape what counts as meaning, as art, and as community.

Story 3 Like a platypus. Belonging beyond categories

The university-based art community met every two weeks, bringing together adults with and without intellectual disabilities, students, art therapists, and researchers. The group explored themes of identity and social justice through collaborative art. Over time it became a space where difference was not something to be managed but something that enriched the group's creative process.

Timo, a young man living in supported housing, had joined the group early on with encouragement from his coach. During an interview months later, I asked what the community meant to him. His story goes like this:

Timo: "I did not know if it was really for me at first. I was not sure that I was creative. It felt unfamiliar. But something changed because it turned out that I enjoyed it. I think I am more creative and open than I think. Everyone brought their own way of doing things into the group. That helped us connect."

Timo remembered a session that had stayed with him.

Timo: "When we used clothing to talk about identity. For me, clothes matter. I think about what I wear, depending on where I am going. It says something about who I am. And what I really liked was that we eventually went even deeper and started looking at the core of things. We began by asking," How do we look at things that seem completely normal in our society?' and" Are those things solid facts?'. For example, why is it considered normal for a woman to wear a skirt but not a man? What would happen if I wore a Scottish Kilt? Would you draw your attention? Would they judge me?"

I remember that day: large sheets of paper, crayons, and each person drawing an outfit that represented themselves.

Timo: "Some people said, 'I do not care about rules or style; I just wear what I like. That was beautiful too. Everyone sees them differently.

That day, I learned how quickly we formed opinions about people, based on how they looked. I have started seeing people differently since then. When someone dresses in a way that stands out, I try not to judge it. I think, maybe there is a reason for this. Maybe there's something I do not understand yet."

He paused, looking at the necklace around my neck.

Timo: "Oh, that's a platypus, right?"

Anja: "Yes. When I got the necklace, I looked up the animal, and I realised that it is an amazing animal."

Timo leaned forward.

Timo: "Yes… It really is. You cannot place it into one category. Although it is a mammal, it lays eggs. It has a fur and duck-like mouth. It produces milk but does not have nipples. It is a water dwelling and land-dwelling animal. It's everything. A unique animal. Like some people, it cannot be easily placed in a single box. That's what we were doing in the group too was not it? Not putting people in boxes.'"

His words struck me. The platypus became a symbol or language for me in our community. 'A creature that resists classification.' A reminder that being different does not mean being disconnected or belonging without being forced into categories. In many social systems, such as education, care, and employment, people with intellectual disabilities are classified, labelled, and sorted. Categories decide who receives support, who is included, and who remains at the margins. Categories are powerful; they carry promises of recognition, as well as risks of exclusion. However, in our art-based community, we were not reduced to categories. We were creators. Our differences were not erased, and neither were they fixed in the boxes. The platypus, resisting classification, reminds us that identity can be multiple, layered, and uncontainable.

Anja: "I also remember the sessions very well where we made the totem pole. We were all so creative, were not we?"

Timo: "I think so, too. Everyone is creative in their own ways. Some people are slightly more skilled with their hands, while others may be slightly less skilled. However, everyone is creative, and through that creativity, we come together. That created a bond."

Anja: "How does this work?"

Timo: "Oh, that's really a good question. Uhm... maybe it's because we were genuinely interested in why each of us made a certain piece of art, or just that we started, and what we were thinking about what we were making during that process. I think we really appreciate each other's creativity. That's probably it."

Finally, the totem pole was a tall, layered sculpture built from clay pieces, each created by a different participant and then assembled into one structure. To us, it felt like a community portrait.

Anja: "I wonder, is this group different for you compared to other groups?"

Timo: "This group has a learning experience to step outside the usual boundaries. But when you go back to other places, you do notice that people tend to put things back into boxes, and that can give clarity. Sometimes, it is just a fact of life that you must deal with, these frameworks, and boxes. We see that in this work. Things are often performed based on certain decisions, frameworks, or protocols. But I am happy with where I live. We have a great support team, and my neighbors are nice too."

Before I left, we circled back again to the totem pole.

Timo: "I showed photos of it to my family and the care staff. It means a lot to me. Maybe one day we will put it somewhere public, so more people can see what it means to us."

Today, Timo's words reveal a political edge in our practice. By resisting categorisation, the art-based community challenged normative systems that equated justice with sameness, and autonomy with independence. Instead, justice was performed in a relational manner: it appeared in our attentiveness to one another's expressions, in our willingness to let the process unfold without a predetermined outcome.

Belonging, as Reeves and colleagues (2025) argue, involves mutuality, agency, and fundamental acceptance. In our group, these elements were not explicitly stated as policy goals but lived in practice by doing. Timo's agency appeared in choosing how to draw, share, and give meaning to it. Mutuality was present in the way we responded to each other's creativity. Acceptance arose from the refusal to judge and the openness to whatever emerged.

Discussion

This study explored how social justice is experienced in art-based communities from an insider perspective through relational, embodied, and performative presence. Across the three stories, social justice did not appear as a principle, rule, or procedural expectation but as a lived and relational experience, something generated in the moment through attentiveness, responsiveness, co-creation, and the recognition of each person's inherent dignity and ways of being. While disability policy frameworks frequently emphasise autonomy, independence, and rights (United Nations, 2006), the findings show that social justice can also emerge in shared rhythm, gesture, and presence.

A listening space affirming inherent dignity

In Story 1, grief became legible by drawing side by side; justice emerged through recognition of the woman's subjectivity in the rhythm of her artistic practice. In Butler's (1990) terms, her identity as a grieving daughter is performed through repeated gestures, pencil strokes, pauses, and words, making visible a story that might otherwise remain unheard. This relational rhythm opened a listening space in which dignity and recognition were co-created. By slowing down to her tempo, we entered what Gadamer (2004) called a *fusion of horizons*, where understanding unfolds through shared presence rather than explanation.

This echoes Walker's (2007) expressive-collaborative morality, where values are created in the relational practices through which people act and respond together. Justice here emerges through attentiveness and responsiveness to another's presence. The mutual

attunement in Story 1 illustrates how making art together can serve as a moral practice that affirms dignity, undiminished by scarcity or the absence of words.

Participation beyond words: interdependence as justice

Story 2 deepens this relational view by challenging the assumptions about participation, autonomy, and boundaries. Vera's and Sara's gestures such as painting over, walking away, drawing on the chair, initially seemed disruptive but could be reinterpreted, following Kittay's (1999) ethic of dependency, as forms of relational choreography. Their acts illustrate that selfhood is not constructed solely through autonomy but through interdependence and entanglement.

Here, social justice was performed by staying uncertain and recognizing that gestures, disruptions, and even silence are articulations of voice. As Bredewold and van der Weele (2025) argue, such contexts require embracing *not knowing* as a part of relational ethics. This aligns with the United Nations *Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD)* broader understanding of social participation as embodied, sensory, and performative. It also challenges practices in art therapy and disability support that prioritise normative structures, autonomy, and individual expression. An anti-oppressive stance in therapy and support would suggest going beyond person-centered, affirming, diversity-positive, and inclusive approaches with which many therapists and supporters are familiar (Ansara, 2020). Therapists must engage in reflective practice to identify and reduce the impact of privileges, such as verbal and cognitive abilities, and the power that comes with them (idem).

Social justice thus lies not in enforcing conventional boundaries, but in attending to how people co-create meaning, even when expectations are unsettled. In this way, art-based communities can become what the German artist Joseph Beuys called *social sculptures*. For Beuys, art is a free activity in which rules and conventions can be followed or obeyed. New realities can be created if participants assert themselves against the conventions or rules given by the system. According to Beuys, society should not be seen as a system that individuals have to fit in, but a work of art that all people shape together, a network that gives space to everyone in the way that they are and what they need (Stachelhaus, 1995; Wildgen, 2015; Zimmermann & Hermsen, 2022).

Beyond categorisation: radical belonging

Story 3 illustrates how art-based communities resist the categorisation and labelling that often govern the social systems of care, education, and employment. Timo's reflection of the platypus as "a creature that resists classification" became a metaphor for belonging beyond boxes. Here, social justice was not about sameness or normalisation but about sustaining a community where difference and multiplicity are valued as sources of creativity and connection.

This reflects Lindo Bacon's (2020) call for radical belonging, which moves beyond tokenistic inclusion toward transforming relationships and structures so that no one feels othered. In the university-based art-based community, radical belonging lived in refusing categorical reduction and in the collective construction of a totem pole as a portrait of the community. Belonging involved mutuality, agency, and acceptance, echoing Reeves and colleagues' (2025) findings that belonging flourishes in difference are acknowledged and appreciated.

From a care ethics perspective, social justice is performed relationally in the shared space of recognition, creativity, openness to questioning norms, and in the co-creation of new social and care imaginaries (Visse & Abma, 2018). As Hannah Arendt (1958) reminds us, power to the people, or in our study, all ability participants, can be generative, emerging in moments of collective action and plurality. Thus, art-based communities can become both political and aesthetic spaces in which new forms of living together can be imagined and explored.

Together, these practices demonstrate social justice as a relational, lived, and performative presence. It appeared not as abstract entitlement but as attuned responsiveness drawing together, as acceptance of uncertainty in relational choreography, and as refusal of categorization in favour of co-created radical sense of belonging. Social justice was not outside these moments but was constituted through them.

Art-based communities as practices of social justice

Together, the stories demonstrate that art-based communities offer fertile ground for social justice because they value embodied presence, resist pressures for clarity, productivity, and linear communication, create structures where people can participate without needing to conform, enable collective meaning making that challenges normative assumptions about ability, and they encourage ethical attentiveness and shared responsibility.

These findings align with research suggesting that artistic processes can cultivate radical forms of belonging and relational inclusion (Jansen-van Vuuren & Aldersey, 2020; Visse et al., 2020). The study expands this scholarship by illustrating how social justice is lived not only through outcomes (e.g., increased participation) but through moment-to-moment relational practices.

Practical implications

Our introduction highlights that persons with intellectual disabilities are disproportionately exposed to violence, abuse, and exploitation. Herman (2023) emphasised that healing cannot rely solely on individual treatments. Genuine repair requires acknowledgment of the injustice, public apology and accountability, restitution, and rehabilitation that restores dignity, and prevents recurrence. Healing is, thus, deeply political, and social.

Therefore, our findings have important implications for art therapists. Focusing solely on autonomy and self-determination, as emphasised in contemporary CRPD-based policy, risks overlooking the systemic nature of harm (Goodley, 2014; World Health Organization, 2011). Art-based community approaches can offer more than creative exploration and expression: through radical belonging, relational interdependence, and co-creation, art therapy may support processes of repair that go beyond symptom reduction (Talwar, 2012; Yi, 2019). Thus, it aligns with both, healing and collective emancipation.

Limitations of the study

This study is based on evocative autoethnography and is therefore situated within the first author's lived experience, relationships, and interpretations. While, this approach provides depth and relational insight, it does not aim for generalisability. The findings emerge from specific communities and may not reflect all art-based community contexts. Video and photographic materials capture only partial aspects of the encounters, and participants who communicate different than spoken language may be represented through the researcher's interpretive lens. Nevertheless, with respect to transferability, purposive sampling to provide conditions for theory grounding has been applied, and thick descriptions (fieldnotes) were kept with information about the context, to facilitate judgements about the extent to which working hypotheses from that context might be transferable (Guba & Lincoln, 1982). With respect to credibility, the study's reflexive and collaborative analytic process, including consultation with students 'expert by experience with intellectual disabilities', the prolonged engagement at art-based community sites, and the variety of data sources including referential adequacy materials such as the videos, strengthens the credibility of the interpretations (Guba & Lincoln, 1982).

Conclusion

This research demonstrates that social justice can be experienced through relational, embodied, and performative practices within art-based communities. The three stories illustrate how dignity can be affirmed through attentive listening, how participation can unfold beyond normative expectations, and how radical sense of belonging can emerge from relational spaces that resist fixed identity categories. These findings challenge dominant views of autonomy, communication, and competence and highlight the need for relational, community-oriented approaches in art therapy and disability practice.

Art-based communities offer valuable sites for exploring, experiencing, and practicing forms of justice that extend beyond formal rights and procedural inclusion. They show that justice is something people create together: in gestures, rhythms, co-creation, and shared presence. Such practices contribute to healing, social repair, and emancipatory

processes by supporting radical belonging and recognizing the inherent dignity of every participant.

Future research should examine how these relational forms of justice evolve over time, how they influence participants' lives beyond the studio, and how art-based communities might contribute to broader cultural and structural changes toward a sense of radical belonging and dignity for people with intellectual disabilities.

Supplementary material

Table 1 is presented in the Supplementary Material. Other materials such as transcripts, field notes, videos, and audiotapes cannot be requested because of privacy considerations for the participants involved in the research.

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Maaike Hermsen: Resources, Supervision, Validation, Writing – Review & Editing; Suzanne Haeijen: Writing – Review & Editing; Merel Visse: Resources, Writing – Review & Editing; Carlo Leget: Supervision, Validation, Writing – Review & Editing

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Chapter 7

Interspace. Flow



"The first day of lockdown felt strange and suspended, so I wandered to the small creek near my home. My reflection shimmered in the water, never still, light and shadow flowing across ripples that moved. It looked like me, and yet it wasn't, slipping through shapes that I could not grasp (. . .). The creek flowed slowly around my toes, unconcerned with time. My feet pressed into the cold, damp sand, leaving faint impressions that the gentle current quietly erased (. . .).

I stood there, suspended between past and present, my weight balanced over what wanted to vanish. For a moment, I became part of the water's quiet movement, the small current that could never stand still. And in that endless, flowing change, I found a surprising calm, a sense of belonging in what simply passes by (. . .)."

Photo and story: *Images of meaning*. Stemerding & Zimmermann. Unpublished

GENERAL DISCUSSION

Bridging clinical art therapy and social justice-oriented art-based communities

In this chapter, the findings of the dissertation are brought together and interpreted to address the overall aim of the study, which is to deepen understanding of how art-based communities can foster social justice for persons with intellectual disabilities. As this dissertation is structured as a dissertation by publication, the discussion moves beyond the individual contributions of the separate articles to offer an integrated and reflective synthesis of the findings. By bringing the studies into dialogue, this dissertation argues that art-based communities can function as relational niches within existing political, social, and institutional structures, where new social realities can emerge. Through shared artistic processes, these communities reshape dominant norms of competence and belonging, fostering that persons with intellectual disabilities are recognised as valued members of community life.

The chapter is organised around the research questions guiding this study. First, the main findings related to the first three research questions are synthesised. These findings subsequently address *a) how social justice for persons with intellectual disabilities can be understood and meaningfully related to art-based communities*, *b) how art-based communities are designed and in what ways they foster social justice*, and *c) how participants experience art-based communities, and how these experiences can be understood in relation to fostering social justice.* Bringing these findings together makes visible recurring concepts, tensions, and patterns that cut across the different studies. Second, these synthesised findings are discussed and interpreted in relation to the research question *d) what can be learned from these designs and experiences to inform new practices that aim to foster social justice for persons with intellectual disabilities?* This interpretive step aims to clarify what the findings contribute to current understandings of how social justice for persons with intellectual disabilities can be fostered.

Subsequently, the chapter addresses the strengths and limitations of the study and discusses implications for the field of art therapy. This is followed by the dissertations' contribution to knowledge, recommendations for future research, and the overall conclusion of the study.

a) How can social justice for persons with intellectual disabilities be understood and meaningfully related to art-based communities?

Reframing social justice

The scoping review in Chapter 2 demonstrates that existing literature on art-based communities predominantly conceptualises social justice through Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD)-aligned concepts: empowerment and self-advocacy; social interaction, belonging and inclusion; awareness and challenging stigma; advocacy for rights and social change; and skills and employment (Zimmermann et al., 2024). Social justice, in this framing, is strongly associated with autonomy, participation, social inclusion, and access to opportunities (United Nations, 2006).

However, the historical case study of Wilhelm in Chapter 3 complicates any uncritical reliance on dominant justice frameworks (Zimmermann et al., 2025). By showing how a morally coherent system of norms justified exclusion and violence toward persons with intellectual disabilities, the study underscores that concepts of social justice are always embedded in specific constellations of power, knowledge, and moral reasoning (Foucault, 1980). Social justice cannot be assumed to be neutral and inherently beneficial simply because it is coherently articulated. Rather, it must remain subject to ongoing critical evaluation, guided by the lived realities of those directly affected (Zimmermann et al., 2025).

These findings changed the conceptual lens of this dissertation. Social justice was no longer treated as a fixed normative endpoint after the historical article, nor solely as policy alignment with instruments such as the CRPD. Instead, social justice is approached as something that must be continuously examined and navigated within practice.

Chapter 4 refines this understanding by examining how art-based communities are designed (Zimmermann et al., 2025b). The review shows that art-based communities are not standardised interventions but relational, co-creative spaces. These communities often challenge ableist norms through the reorganisation of relational dynamics, for example through co-creation approaches that redistribute agency, resist rigid expectations, and affirm narrative authority.

The empirical findings deepen this reframing from principle to practice. In Chapter 5, participants engaging in creative and experiential therapies within the Australian National Disability Insurance Scheme (NDIS) described social justice not abstractly but through experiences of having choice, being understood, developing self-efficacy, belonging, and accountability (van Laar et al., 2025). Here, justice is partly articulated within a rights-based policy framework, yet it is experienced relationally as recognition, responsiveness, and being taken seriously within national systems of disability care.

Chapter 6 moves beyond verbal communication to explore social justice as an embodied encounter (Zimmermann et al., 2026). Through evocative autoethnography, social justice is described as a listening space affirming inherent dignity, participation beyond words, and belonging beyond categories. In these shared artistic encounters, social justice is expressed as interdependence, presence, co-created meaning, and radical belonging. Gestures, rhythms, and shared artistic processes become modes of co-creative participation that challenge normative expectations of competence and autonomy as the primary indicators of doing together.

Across the five studies, a coherent picture emerges. Art-based communities can be understood as relational niches within broader institutional and societal structures that often normalise autonomy, competence, and self-determination as benchmarks of value (United Nations, 2006). They do not stand outside institutional systems such as day-care centres or national disability schemes. Rather, they operate within them while creating temporary spaces in which alternative forms of encounter become possible.

Unfortunately, no art-based community was identified that had emerged entirely outside existing institutional structures. This is probably at least partly due to the limited control that people with intellectual disabilities often have over how they organise their time. For example, day-care eligibility arrangements and transport costs made participation in the university-based, self-initiated art-based community difficult and for some impossible, highlighting how challenging it can be to engage in initiatives outside existing institutional structures. What initially appeared as a tension was later reconsidered as an argument to explore art-based communities within these structures. Not as another care intervention or facility, but as a movement towards structural change of equality issues. At the same time, the need for recurring reflection on how contextual conditions shape what becomes possible within these communities remains evident (Foucault, 1980).

The reframing of social justice during the study positions it as a relational practice grounded in lived experience, similar to how it is conceptualised in care ethics (Tronto, 1993; Walker, 2007). Rights-based frameworks remain important safeguards, as illustrated in Wilhelm's life (Zimmermann et al., 2025). Yet social justice becomes tangible in how people listen to one another, how difference is received, and how participation is made possible beyond normative expectations.

The central question therefore gradually shifted as the findings were brought together. Instead of asking how art-based communities align with social justice principles, this dissertation examined how their designs, approaches, and relational dynamics create conditions in which social justice can emerge, be lived and experienced, and remain open to critical reflection.

Connecting the findings to the urgency of the research

The urgency of this research stems from the persistent gap between formal recognition of the rights of persons with disabilities and the everyday realities of inequality experienced by them. Despite international frameworks such as the CRPD, many continue to face social isolation, stigma, limited participation in key areas of life, and violence (Scior et al., 2020; World Health Organization, n.d.). These patterns demonstrate that legal recognition alone does not transform the relational dynamics through which marginalisation is reproduced for the better (Foucault, 1980).

The findings of this dissertation answering question a) show that art-based communities address precisely this relational dimension. Rather than focusing primarily on protection or service provision, these communities bring people together in shared artistic processes to open possibilities that rely on doing and learning together instead of relying on historically dominant ways of communication and structuring the lives of persons with intellectual disabilities, or on predefined norms and values.

The added value of art-based communities therefore lies in the open space of listening and collaborative processes, enabling exploration of new ways of communicating, responding to difference, and recognising one another's contributions. In these interactions, the boundaries that often define intellectual disability as social distance can begin to shift, for example through a blurring of boundaries between people with strong verbal communication abilities and those without.

Seen in relation to the urgency outlined in the introduction, art-based communities may thus offer a complementary response to rights-based approaches. In doing so, they open possibilities for recreating participation, belonging, and social value in everyday practice.

b) How are art-based communities designed, and in what ways do these designs seek to foster social justice?

Designing relational conditions for social justice

If social justice within art-based communities is understood as relationally lived rather than normatively delivered, the question becomes how such relational conditions are intentionally designed and facilitated. Across the studies, art-based communities do not emerge as neutral creative gatherings. They are structured spaces in which aesthetic, relational, and ethical choices of participants can shape the possibilities for participation.

The scoping review of design characteristics (Zimmermann et al., 2025b) demonstrates that art-based communities are intentionally organised around co-creation, improvisation, sharing personal stories, and public engagement. These are not merely artistic preferences

but function as relational dimensions that redistribute dignity, agency, and can destabilise hierarchical distinctions between facilitator and participant, professional and client, ability and disability. For example, improvisational approaches suspend predetermined outcomes. By connecting without fixed methods or outcome-oriented expectations, participants can be invited into listening processes where responsiveness can challenge and replace dominant discourses and norms that often structure institutional disability contexts. In such listening spaces, value is derived from presence, attunement, and shared meaning-making, or in other words, being with, being for, and doing together. The art-based communities then allow participants to do things differently.

Similarly, expressing and sharing stories within listening spaces positions lived experience as aesthetic authority. When personal stories are translated into artistic form, they are not treated as clinical material to be interpreted by professionals, but as creative expressions that carry epistemic weight (Bolt, 2016; Leavy, 2015). In this way, artistic processes themselves can become social justice-oriented practices: they reconfigure whose knowledge and voice counts and how it is received.

Here, the interspaces included between the chapters of this dissertation offer more than aesthetic interludes. They demonstrate how such design principles operate in practice. The collaborative art-based narratives created with art therapist Robin Stemerding were not produced as illustrations of findings, but as sites of inquiry. Through photographs, collages, sculptural forms, and dialogical reflection, social justice was explored as moments of being heard, recognised, and responded to with care. These artistic dialogues enacted the very relational dynamics that the empirical chapters later identified: attentiveness, reciprocity, vulnerability, and negotiated meaning (Hübner, 2024; McNiff, 1998; Visse et al., 2019a). In this sense, the interspaces demonstrate that design is not separate from ethics but that the encounter is itself morally consequential.

Across the studies, three recurring design principles can be identified:

- Redistribution of agency through co-creation and shared authorship (Zimmermann et al., 2024, 2025b, 2026; van Laar et al. 2025).
- Destabilisation of normative competence through improvisation and open-ended processes (Zimmermann et al., 2024, 2026).
- Recognition of lived experience as knowledge through art-based and artistic narrative forms (Zimmermann, 2026).

Together, these principles suggest that art-based communities can foster social justice by collectively reshaping the forms and norms of practice themselves.

Bridging art therapy and art-based communities fostering social justice for persons with intellectual disabilities

The design principles clarify what this dissertation contributes to the field of art therapy. Traditionally, art therapy for persons with intellectual disabilities has often been positioned within clinical and individual treatment paradigms focused on symptom reduction, emotional regulation, or intrapsychic healing (Miller, 2020; Miller et al., 2020). While community art therapy approaches have expanded this orientation from their own historical roots, the findings of this dissertation suggest a further development: art-based community practice may carry not only social but political significance through the reorganisation of relational patterns in everyday encounter (Meininger, 2013).

This does not imply abandoning clinical knowledge. Rather, it extends art therapy's scope. If, as Herman (2023) argues, trauma is not only an individual's wound but also rooted in violations against discriminated and stigmatised groups, then healing cannot be confined to the individual alone. Art-based community practices within art therapy frameworks may address not only what needs healing within a person, but also or even foremost, the relational and structural conditions in which persons can heal by living in healthy environments. By reshaping how people meet, listen, and co-create, these practices operate at the level of the relational fabric itself. These practices can also address wider systemic conditions by questioning how injustice is continuously reproduced. When things are done differently, entrenched patterns tend to surface, creating opportunities to recognise and address them.

Social justice, in this sense, may not be an added objective layered onto clinical art therapeutic goals. Instead, it is embedded within art therapy practice. Importantly, the professional field of art therapy itself provides a particularly suitable foundation for the further development of art-based communities for persons with intellectual disabilities from political and ethical perspectives (Zimmermann et al., 2025b). As outlined in the introduction of this dissertation, art therapy is an experiential and relational practice in which meaning emerges through the interaction between participant, art materials, and therapist (Haeyen, 2018, 2026). Within this framework, creativity is not understood merely as individual expression, but as a relational and processual phenomenon shaped through shared artistic engagement.

Art therapists are specifically trained to work within these relational constellations: between participants, art materials, and the social environment. In such healing spaces, the creative process unfolds through ongoing interaction and attunement, where artistic exploration, sensory engagement with materials, and relational responsiveness influence one another (Robb et al., 2025). This integrated attention to relational dynamics and artistic processes enables art therapists to facilitate encounters in which communication may occur through gesture, rhythm, material engagement, and shared creative activity, rather

than relying on verbal communication alone. In this sense, the profession brings together competencies that extend beyond those typically associated with artistic facilitation or social support.

The development of art-based communities can therefore build on a long tradition within art therapy in which communal art-making has been used to foster connection, participation, and collective meaning-making (Finkel & Bat Or, 2020; McNiff, 2009; Moon, 2016). Community-oriented approaches such as open studios and community art therapy practices have been described as creating shared creative environments that support agency and community cohesion among marginalised groups (Frostig, 2011; Kaplan, 2016; Talwar, 2016; Vick, 2016). Within social art therapy and community-based approaches, artistic practice has also been described as a means of amplifying marginalised voices and enabling new forms of recognition and solidarity (Huss & Havsteen-Franklin, 2023; Talwar, 2016).

The growing interest in community-oriented art therapy therefore offers an important foundation for extending such approaches to people with intellectual disabilities, a population that has thus far received relatively limited attention within this body of literature (Finkel & Bat Or, 2020). Building on this emerging field, art-based communities may provide opportunities to explore how collaborative artistic practice fosters encounters across difference and enables new forms of recognition and collaboration.

In this sense, the current development of community art therapy approaches may also have wider ripple effects for the possibilities available to persons with intellectual disabilities. By drawing on the relational and artistic expertise of art therapists, art-based communities can become spaces in which participants collectively experiment with more ethical and political ways of communicating, creating, and belonging. The field therefore stands not only on the shoulders of earlier art therapists who explored community-based approaches with other marginalised groups but also contributes to extending these practices towards greater structural equality within contemporary disability contexts.

As both a researcher and an art therapist, I gave relatively little attention within the self-initiated art-based communities to presenting the artefacts created in the group to a wider audience. Occasionally, we shared artefacts beyond the community, for example, a collective totem pole that travelled between care organisations connected to us. Within art therapy practice, artefacts are regarded as therapeutic material, which involves a high degree of sensitivity regarding privacy and ownership.

However, the literature suggests that presentations and exhibitions constitute a fundamental design element of art-based communities, as they create connections between the community and the wider social environment (Zimmermann et al., 2025b). Opening the community in this way may help counteract one of the risks associated with

the pitfall of closed spaces, such as the niches described by Meininger (2013), where new internal hierarchies and power dynamics may inadvertently emerge. Public sharing can therefore contribute to maintaining permeability between the community and its broader context.

In addition, such presentations create opportunities for the artistic and embodied stories that emerge within the community to resonate beyond it. Artistic expressions developed within the group may function as counter-narratives to dominant discourses that stigmatise persons with intellectual disabilities (Zimmermann et al., 2025b). Importantly, decisions about what is shared and how it is shared can themselves become topics of collective exploration and negotiation within the community.

In summary, art therapy is uniquely positioned to bridge artistic practice, relational care, and social justice concerns within the design of art-based communities.

c) How are art-based communities experienced by participants, and how can these experiences be understood in relationship to fostering social justice?

Experiencing social justice as relational and embodied practice

If the design of art-based communities creates relational conditions for justice, the question remains how these conditions are experienced by participants themselves. Across the empirical studies (van Laar et al., 2025; Zimmermann et al., 2026), social justice was articulated and encountered as lived, embodied experience.

Voice and recognition within policy contexts

In the NDIS study (van Laar et al., 2025), participants did not respond to art-based community practices as conceptualised elsewhere in this dissertation, but to creative and experiential therapies situated within the Australian National Disability Insurance Scheme (NDIS). This distinction is important. These therapeutic encounters are embedded within formal service provision, shaped by clinical roles and policy frameworks, and therefore differ structurally from the art-based communities explored in Chapters 2, 4, and 6.

Yet, the experiential themes emerging from the testimonials offer important insight into how social justice is lived. Participants described the value of creative and experiential therapies in terms of having choice, being understood, developing self-efficacy, belonging, and accountability. These themes resonate strongly with CRPD-informed discourses of social justice (United Nations, 2006; van Laar et al., 2025). However, what stands out is that social justice was not experienced only as formal access to services. Rather, it was encountered in moments of relational recognition.

Being "understood" and "taken seriously" referred to concrete interactions in which one's expressions, emotions, and embodied ways of communicating were acknowledged as meaningful. Participants framed social justice not only as funding eligibility, but as being recognised as knowledgeable about their own lives and needs. In this way, CRPD principles were translated into relational practice through creative and experiential therapeutic encounters.

The findings of the NDIS study (van Laar et al., 2025) do not demonstrate the impact of art-based communities per se. Instead, they illuminate something fundamental about creative and experiential modalities more broadly: when artistic and embodied practices are taken seriously within care contexts, they can create conditions in which participants experience themselves as heard, validated, and respected. In this sense, the therapists involved were not merely delivering protocolled services, but they were enacting caring relationships within policy structures.

At the same time, the funding controversy surrounding creative and experiential therapies highlights the fragility of this enactment. As discussed in relation to research question a), rights-based commitments such as *nothing about us without us* can become vulnerable when economic or bureaucratic pressures dominate. The NDIS study therefore provides a bridging position: it demonstrates both, how CRPD principles can be relationally embodied in practice and how easily such relational enactments can be destabilised at structural levels.

For this third research question, the central insight of the NDIS study is, that social justice was experienced through recognition of needs and having choice, next to experiences of being seen, heard, and taken seriously.

Embodied and relational experiences of social justice

Chapter 6 (Zimmermann et al., 2026) approaches lived experience from a different methodological angle. Through evocative autoethnography, it explores how social justice is experienced within art-based communities through embodied, relational, and performative presence.

In the three stories, justice emerges as a *Listening Space Affirming Inherent Dignity*, *Participation Beyond Words*, and *Belonging Beyond Categories*.

Drawing on Walker's (2007) expressive-collaborative model that understands morality as a social practice in which people collectively express, negotiate, and sustain shared understandings of responsibility within relationships and social institutions, the findings presented in stories, illustrate how social justice is enacted within relational practices.

In Story 1, drawing side by side generated a space in which grief became legible through rhythm and shared artistic presence. Social justice emerges as recognition of subjectivity, a fusion of each person's horizon (Gadamer, 2004) grounded in attentiveness to the pace of the human encounter.

Story 2 challenged normative assumptions about participation. Gestures that initially appeared disruptive became intelligible when viewed through Kittay's (1999) ethic of dependency and Bredewold and van der Weele's (2025) relational ethics of not knowing. Participation was lived not through autonomous self-expression or self-determination, but through relational choreography, uncertainty, and interdependence. Social justice here lay in staying with ambiguity rather than enforcing normative interpretation and structure.

Story 3 foregrounded radical belonging. Resisting categorisation, participants co-created a space in which difference was valued. This resonates with Bacon's (2020) notion of radical belonging that refers to relationships and communities where difference, mutuality, and agency are valued and acknowledged, and no one needs to feel excluded (Bacon, 2020). It further resonates with care-ethical perspectives that frame social justice as sustained through relational recognition (Tronto, 1993; Visse & Abma, 2018).

In these stories, social justice emerged through gestures, shared rhythms, artistic co-creation, and the refusal to normalise difference. Participation extended beyond policy metrics of autonomy and inclusion.

Taken together, the NDIS study and the autoethnographic inquiry reveal complementary dimensions of lived social justice. Chapter 5 foregrounds voice and recognition within formal systems of care. Chapter 6 shows how justice can be performed and experienced beyond spoken language, through embodied co-presence and artistic process. Social justice, in this sense, is institutional and structural, and relationally sustained in everyday artistic encounters. Across both empirical contributions, social justice emerges as:

- Recognition of lived experience
- Validation of multiple forms of voice
- Participation grounded in interdependence rather than autonomy alone
- Radical belonging without preconditions
- Being taken seriously within relational and institutional contexts

In answering this third research question, the dissertation therefore demonstrates that art-based communities can foster social justice by creating relational conditions in which dignity, agency, responsiveness, and belonging are experienced. Social justice is lived through these encounters.

Art-based communities and disability understanding

These findings can be understood with the relational understanding of intellectual disability outlined in the introduction of this dissertation. There, intellectual disability was approached as something that emerges in the interaction between individuals and their social environments rather than as an individual impairment alone (Goodley, 2001; World Health Organization, n.d.). From this perspective, experiences of exclusion or equality

in societal position are shaped by the social norms and institutional arrangements that define competence and meaningful membership (Goodley, 2017).

The stories presented here illustrate how these definitions can shift within different relational contexts. Within art-based communities, gestures, rhythms, and embodied expressions were recognised as meaningful forms of communication and participation. In doing so, these spaces temporarily disrupted dominant hierarchies of competence that often structure professional and institutional interactions. What counts as participation, expression, or agency was not predetermined but negotiated within the unfolding artistic encounter.

From this perspective, the significance of art-based communities lies not only in the creative activities themselves but in their capacity to transform the relational conditions through which persons with intellectual disabilities are recognised as full members of community life. In line with relational understandings of disability (Goodley, 2017), these practices demonstrate how social environments can either constrain or enable participation. Art-based communities can therefore foster social justice by reshaping the relational environments in which people with and without intellectual disabilities meet and connect, enabling forms of recognition and being with, being for and doing together, that may otherwise remain constrained. Art-based communities create conditions in which individuals can be encountered as valued and legitimate members of shared community life.

d) What can be learned from these designs and experiences to inform new practices that aim to foster social justice for persons with intellectual disabilities?

In addressing this research question, several insights emerged from the analysis, which are presented below. The insights are:

- From designing interventions to cultivating relational practices
- Designing for openness
- Recognising interdependence as a starting point
- Attending to knowledge, voice, and epistemic justice
- Working within existing contexts
- Relational niches and the risk of separation
- From inclusion to reconfiguring belonging

From designing interventions to cultivating relational practices

Bringing together the findings from the previous sections shifts the focus from *what art-based communities are* to *what they make possible in practice*. A central insight is that fostering social justice for persons with intellectual disabilities cannot be reduced to implementing predefined interventions or aligning practice with normative frameworks alone. Instead, it requires attention to the relational conditions through which persons encounter one another in practices.

Across the studies, social justice did not emerge as the outcome of specific techniques or programme components. Rather, it became visible in how participants listened, responded, and created together. This suggests that practices aiming to foster social justice need to move beyond an intervention logic towards cultivating relational environments in which recognition, participation, and belonging can take shape.

This insight is supported primarily by the findings of Chapters 4, 5, and 6, which, from different methodological perspectives, foreground relationality, co-creation, responsiveness, and lived experience rather than predefined intervention outcomes.

Designing for openness

A second insight concerns the role of design. While art-based communities are intentionally structured, their effectiveness lies in creating openness. Improvisation, co-creation, and openness of expectations allowed participants to contribute in ways that were not predefined by assumptions about competence or communication.

This has important implications for practice. Efforts to foster social justice often rely on predefined indicators of participation, autonomy, independence, self-determination, or social inclusion (Duffy, 2023; United Nations, 2006). However, the findings show that such indicators may also constrain what becomes recognisable as meaningful participation. Practices informed by this study would therefore need to remain open to multiple forms of expression, including embodied, non-verbal, and relational modes of engagement.

Designing for social justice thus involves a shift from structuring *what participation should look like* to enabling conditions in which doing together can emerge in diverse and unpredictable ways.

This insight draws primarily on Chapters 4 and 6, where improvisation, co-creation, and responsiveness to participants' ways of engaging emerged as important conditions for participation, with Chapter 5 providing complementary evidence from participants' reported experiences.

Recognising interdependence as a starting point

A third learning concerns the underlying assumptions about personhood that inform practice. Across the empirical studies, participation was experienced as something that unfolded through attentiveness, interdependence, responsiveness, and shared activity. This resonates with relational understandings of disability (Goodley, 2017) and care-ethical perspectives that position dependency and relationality as fundamental aspects of human life (Tronto, 1993; Kittay, 1999).

Practices that aim to foster social justice may therefore need to move beyond models that prioritise independence or autonomy as the primary goal (Duffy, 2023). Instead, they can recognise interdependence as a starting point for organising social life. In practical terms, this means valuing relational processes such as attunement, mutual responsiveness, and collective meaning-making as central components of participation.

This insight is grounded particularly in the empirical findings of Chapters 5 and 6, which show participation and meaningful engagement as relational processes, and is further supported by the relational design principles identified in Chapter 4.

Attending to knowledge, voice, and epistemic justice

An additional insight concerns the epistemic dimension of social justice. Persons with intellectual disabilities have historically been positioned as recipients of care rather than as contributors to knowledge (Fricker, 2007; Goodley, 2017; Walmsley, 2001). The findings suggest that art-based communities can challenge this by foregrounding shared authorship, narrative authority of all, and the legitimacy of lived experience. Artistic processes, including embodied and non-verbal forms of expression, expand what can be recognised as voice and knowledge (Taylor, 2003).

This insight is also grounded in the historical case study of Wilhelm in Chapter 3. This study showed that social justice cannot be assumed to be neutral or beneficial simply because it is coherently articulated within a particular system of norms. Instead, concepts of social justice need to be continuously examined in relation to their consequences for the people concerned. Their lived realities and voices therefore provide an important point of reference for evaluating whether justice is being fostered.

This can be understood as a response to epistemic injustice, in which certain groups are systematically discredited as knowers (Fricker, 2007). Practices aiming to foster social justice must therefore remain attentive to how knowledge is produced, interpreted, and valued within the community. This includes recognising whose voices are heard, which forms of expression are legitimised, and how meaning is co-created.

At the same time, this requires ongoing reflexivity. No practice operates outside broader social and institutional power structures (Foucault, 1980). Facilitators, art therapists, and

participants alike bring assumptions shaped by dominant narratives about intellectual disability. Fostering social justice therefore involves a continuous examination of how these assumptions may shape interactions, interpretations, and expectations within the art-based community.

This insight is therefore supported across Chapters 3, 4, 5, and 6. Chapter 3 establishes the importance of evaluating social justice in relation to the realities and voices of those affected; Chapter 4 illuminates shared authorship and narrative authority, Chapter 5 foregrounds participants' reported experiences and perspectives, and Chapter 6 demonstrates embodied and non-verbal forms of knowing and expression.

Working within existing contexts

Further, the findings highlight that art-based communities do not exist outside political, institutional, and structural conditions. As discussed in section a), participation is shaped by factors such as funding structures, transport, and eligibility criteria. The NDIS study (van Laar et al., 2025) further illustrates how relational experiences of justice can be supported or constrained within policy frameworks.

This suggests that fostering social justice requires working on two interconnected levels. On the one hand, practices can create relational spaces within existing contexts where alternative forms of doing together, and recognition become possible. On the other hand, these practices may also contribute to questioning the structural conditions that limit such possibilities (Foucault, 1980).

Rather than positioning art-based communities as alternatives to existing care contexts, they can be understood as sites of exploring and doing different ways of relating and valuing.

This insight draws particularly on Chapters 2, 4 and 5, which show how the possibilities for relational and participatory practices are shaped by wider organisational, policy, funding, and institutional conditions.

Relational niches and the risk of separation

The findings caution against romanticising these relational spaces. The concept of relational niches (Meininger, 2013) is helpful in understanding this tension. Art-based communities can function as protected yet permeable spaces within broader institutional and societal structures, where alternative relational patterns can be explored. Within such niches, participants may experience forms of belonging, recognition, and collaboration that are not able enough in other contexts.

However, this protection also carries a risk. Spaces created to counter structural exclusion may inadvertently reproduce forms of separation if they remain disconnected from the wider social world. For this reason, practices of sharing artistic work beyond the own community, such as

exhibitions or performances, become important. These moments create opportunities for participants to appear in the broader social space as artists and collaborators (Zimmermann et al., 2025b). In this way, art-based communities can open new encounters with difference and challenge dominant representations of intellectual disability.

At the same time, visibility alone does not transform structural inequalities. Artistic work can be recognised and valued, while the broader systems that shape exclusion remain largely unchanged. Moreover, no practice operates outside the power relations in which it is embedded (Foucault, 1980). Art-based communities themselves participate in shaping what is recognised as meaningful expression, whose voices are heard, and how intellectual disability is understood.

This points to a more challenging insight: the dynamics of exclusion are not located only in institutions or policies but are also present within everyday interactions. All participants bring assumptions shaped by dominant cultural narratives about intellectual disability (Zimmermann et al., 2025). Even well-intentioned practices can unintentionally reproduce these norms (Foucault, 1980).

Fostering social justice, therefore, requires ongoing reflexivity. This involves attentiveness to relational dynamics, openness to being challenged, and a willingness to remain with not-knowing. In this sense, moments of tension, misunderstanding, or discomfort are not signs of failure, but part of the practice of engaging with persons with different needs, hopes, and dreams, and navigating more just ways of relating together.

To support such reflection, tools are available that enable shared reflection among all those involved. For example, the reflection tool developed by Hermsen et al. (2024, 2025) is designed to facilitate experiential forms of reflection in which everyone can be part and therefore align well with the lessons learned from art-based community practices.

This insight is grounded primarily in Chapters 4 and 6, which identify art-based communities as spaces in which alternative relational patterns may emerge, while also highlighting the importance of their connection with wider social contexts. Chapter 3 added attention to the risk of niches and the need of ongoing reflexivity.

From inclusion to reconfiguring belonging

Finally, the findings invite a reconsideration of how equality can be understood. Across the studies, radical belonging did not emerge through fitting individuals into existing social norms, but through collectively reshaping norms and values. Experiences of *belonging beyond categories* (Zimmermann et al., 2026) suggest that social justice is achieved by allowing existing frameworks to shift.

This moves the focus from inclusion and participation as integration into existing structures towards radical belonging as a relational and ongoing process. Art-based communities

aiming to foster social justice may therefore benefit from asking not only how individuals can be included, but how the community life can be navigated in response to difference.

This insight emerges most directly from Chapter 6's account of belonging beyond categories and is supported by the conceptual and design-oriented findings of Chapters 2 and 4 concerning inclusion, participation, agency, and the reconfiguration of relational norms.

Taken together, the insights suggest that fostering social justice for persons with intellectual disabilities is rethinking how practices are organised, how relationships are shaped, and how participation, knowledge, and radical belonging are recognised in practice.

Strengths and limitations

This dissertation has several notable strengths. First, it integrates multiple methodologies, including a scoping review, qualitative analysis of participant testimonies, and evocative autoethnography to provide a rich, multi-perspective understanding of how art-based communities can foster social justice for persons with intellectual disabilities. By combining these approaches, the study captures both the broader conceptual landscape of art-based communities and the embodied experiences of participants, in line with mixed-methods approaches that value the integration of multiple forms of knowledge (Creswell, 2014).

Second, the inclusion of two self-initiated art-based communities as sites of inquiry allows for direct engagement with practices in which relational, embodied, and co-creative processes unfold. This approach supports a practice-informed understanding of social justice, emphasising how it emerges in lived experiences rather than abstract principles alone, which is consistent with arts-based and experiential research traditions (Leavy, 2015, 2018; McNiff, 1998).

Third, the research foregrounds reflexivity and critical reflection on positionality, both in the design of self-initiated communities and in the interpretation of findings. Engaging in art-based dialogues, reflective writing practices, and consultation with experts by experience enabled the researcher to recognise aspects of the own positionality and to approach participants' experiences with heightened awareness of bias and assumption. This aligns with qualitative research traditions that position reflexivity as central to rigorous and ethical inquiry (Finlay, 2002).

However, the study also has limitations. While efforts were made to represent the voices of persons with intellectual disabilities as fully as possible, certain challenges limited the extent to which this could be achieved within this study. The online petition analysed in Chapter 5 included primarily individuals capable of reading, writing, and articulating

experiences in written form, limiting the representativeness of these findings. This reflects a broader challenge within disability research concerning whose voices are included and how they are accessed (Walmsley, 2001). Due to the urgency with which the NDIS study had to respond to the policy change affecting access to creative experiential therapies, this was at the time a feasible but limited option. We only had six weeks from the start of the study until a peer reviewed publication, to be on time to respond to the call to submit literature for a government-commissioned review intended to demonstrate the efficacy of creative experiential therapies. Similarly, the evocative autoethnography in Chapter 6 is grounded in the researcher's lived experience and interpretive perspective and therefore does not directly capture participants' verbal accounts. While more-than-verbal and embodied methods were employed to engage participants, this remains an indirect representation of their perspectives, which is a recognised characteristic of autoethnographic approaches (Ellis et al., 2011).

Another limitation concerns generalisability. The self-initiated art-based communities studied are context-specific and shaped by the researcher's skills, materials, and relationships. While the findings provide rich insights into relational and embodied mechanisms of social justice, caution is warranted in transferring these insights to other settings, populations, or cultural contexts without critical reflection or adaptation. In line with qualitative research traditions, the aim is therefore not statistical generalisation but contextual transferability (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Finally, while the dissertation emphasises attention to structural inequities, the study primarily centres on intellectual disability and does not comprehensively explore how other intersecting identities, such as race, gender, or socioeconomic status, shape experiences of social justice within art-based communities. This limitation reflects the importance of intersectional perspectives in understanding complex forms of marginalisation (Crenshaw, 1991).

Implications for the field of art therapy and policy

The findings of this dissertation suggest that art therapy, at its heart, is particularly well positioned to support art-based communities. The profession's emphasis on embodied expression, relational attunement, and co-creative processes aligns closely with the conditions through which social justice, as described in this study, can be lived. In this sense, art-based communities are an extension of the foundational practices of art therapy into broader social contexts.

This is important because broader policy developments are reshaping the field in which art therapists operate. At the European level, the implementation of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD) is guided by the *Strategy*

for the Rights of Persons with Disabilities 2021–2030 (European Commission, 2021), which promotes independent living and participation in community life as it focuses on a de-institutionalisation process. In the Netherlands, where most of this research has been conducted, the CRPD was ratified in 2016 (United Nations, 2016), leading to policies in line with the European strategy such as *Onbeperkt meedoen!* (Ministerie van Volksgezondheid, Welzijn en Sport, 2018). This development reflects a broader shift away from institutional care toward community-based support structures.

Experiences from Australia, where the CRPD was ratified much earlier (Australian Government, 2026), offer insight into what such a transition may entail. Under the National Disability Insurance Scheme (NDIS), most persons with disabilities live in community-based settings, and therapeutic support are often delivered by independent practitioners in homes or community environments, rather than through large, segregated institutional services. For example, in 2022 only 3.3% of the persons with disabilities lived in care accommodation such as hospitals, nursing homes, aged care hostels, and other 'homes' such as group homes for people with disability. The likelihood of a person with disability living in such an accommodation has decreased since 2018 (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2024).

This development suggests that art therapists may need to adapt to more decentralised, community-oriented modes of working.

In this context, the field of art therapy is also invited to reconsider its scope. Alongside individual, medicalised model and goal-oriented therapy, there is an opportunity to further develop practices that focus on goals such as citizenship, radical belonging, and recognition within community life. Art-based communities, as shown in this dissertation, can contribute to reshaping the relational conditions through which persons with intellectual disabilities are seen, heard, and recognised as full members of society. This includes engaging with wider public through exhibitions and performances and remaining critically attentive to how social power and structural inequality continue to shape practice.

Responding to these developments requires a shift in perspective but also offers a meaningful opportunity for the field to grow. Rather than positioning art therapy solely within clinical or institutional frameworks, this transition opens space for art therapists to take a more active role in community-based and socially engaged practices. In doing so, art therapy can not only sustain its relevance within changing care systems but also strengthen its contribution to broader societal transformations.

Building on this perspective, it is important to shine a light on the relationship of Arts in Health initiatives (Arts in Health Netherlands, n.d.; Lewis, 2024) and creative arts therapies in the Netherlands. Recently, creative arts therapists Willemsen and colleagues (2024) position these fields along a continuum, placing creative arts therapies at the more clinically accountable and evidence-informed end. This differentiation raises questions

about whether opportunities for an additional perspective are being overlooked. From a social justice perspective, particularly in the context of persons with intellectual disabilities as outlined in the introduction of this dissertation, many of the challenges addressed in therapeutic settings, including trauma responses, are deeply rooted in structural inequality rather than solely individual pathology and should be addressed at least partly in this way (Herman, 2023). As such, framing arts-based practices aimed at social connection and wellbeing as separate from those addressing health may risk obscuring the interconnectedness of these domains.

Moreover, the distinction between health and wellbeing becomes difficult to sustain in light of approaches that emphasise collective, relational, and community-based responses to distress. Emerging international literature points to a growing movement towards community-based and socially engaged practices in the field of art therapy, suggesting a shift to broaden the strictly individualised and clinical models (Finkel & Bat Or, 2020; Huss & Havsteen-Franklin, 2023; Ottemiller & Awais, 2016).

In this context, the argument put forward by Willemsen and colleagues (2024), that creative arts therapies hold a unique position due to their evidence-informed basis, the growing number of PhD's in the field, as well as professorships may also warrant reconsideration, particularly given the significant development of research, including PhD research, and professorships within Arts in Health over the past years. For example, the *Creating Cultures of Care* research project at the Utrecht School of the Arts demonstrates the expanding evidence base within this field (HKU, n.d.). Earlier claims regarding a lack of evidence in this broader field (Moss, 2016) may no longer adequately reflect its current state.

In relation to the findings of this dissertation, it appears more just to move beyond strict distinctions and instead explore the potential of collaborative practices that bring together creative arts therapists, other arts in health professionals, and experts by experience. Such an approach allows for nuanced consideration of when and how different forms of expertise can contribute and learn together, while remaining attentive to issues of positioning professionals within collaboration and quality regulation. Engaging with these questions may open up more equitable and context-sensitive ways of working, aligned with the broader movement towards community-based care.

Contribution to knowledge

This dissertation makes several contributions to existing knowledge on art-based communities and social justice for persons with intellectual disabilities. First, it addresses a gap identified in the introduction: while art-based communities have been framed as emancipatory spaces, empirical insight into how they are related to aspects of social justice, how they are designed, and how they are experienced by persons with

intellectual disabilities has remained limited. By synthesising insights from two reviews, a historical case study, empirical testimonies, and evocative autoethnography, this research demonstrates that social justice is not only a matter of formal rights or access, but is lived within relational, embodied, and co-creative practices. In this sense, art-based communities are not merely contexts in which social justice is experienced, but sites in which it is actively lived through interaction.

Second, the study advances theoretical understanding by bringing together rights-based perspectives, relational social justice, and critical perspectives on power. It shows that social justice emerges through processes of attentiveness, responsiveness, and mutual recognition, rather than being fully determined by external frameworks such as the CRPD alone. By foregrounding lived experience as a central site of knowledge, the dissertation contributes a practice-oriented perspective that complements and extends rights-based and policy-driven approaches to social justice.

Third, methodologically, this dissertation demonstrates the value of combining conceptual, historical, and experiential research designs. It highlights the importance of approaches that foreground more-than-verbal, embodied, and art-based forms of knowing, enabling a richer understanding of how social justice is lived and navigated in community practices.

Fourth, this dissertation contributes to the field of art therapy by extending its scope beyond individual, clinically oriented interventions towards community-oriented and socially engaged practices. It shows that the heart of art therapy can support forms of being together, being for, and doing together, feelings of radical belonging, and recognition in community contexts. In doing so, the study positions art therapy as a practice that can contribute to shaping the relational conditions of social life. This opens new directions for the field in which art therapists engage with broader societal questions of community membership.

Contribution to education and knowledge exchange

In addition to its contribution to knowledge, this research has also contributed to educational practice and processes of knowledge exchange. Throughout the project, eight bachelor's students engaged with the research project, including two who contributed to the literature review and six who conducted their thesis projects within the broader scope of the study. While their data are not included in this dissertation, these collaborations created a shared learning environment in which knowledge was developed through engagement with different practice contexts.

This pedagogical collaboration reflects the relational and co-creative principles of this research. Rather than positioning knowledge production as an individual endeavour, the

project functioned as a space in which learning and meaning-making were shared with participants, professionals across different contexts, and encounters. In this sense, the involvement of students can be understood as part of a broader practice of shared inquiry, in which different perspectives and forms of engagement contributed to a deepening of understanding of art-based communities.

In addition, knowledge generated within this project was actively exchanged with creative arts therapists in the Netherlands through a focus group, and internationally through publications, ongoing dialogue with different professionals and professional exchange. The research also engaged with an emerging initiative of an art-based community. Insights from this study have been shared and were further developed through processes of joint reflection on the steps needed to establish and sustain such a community.

Furthermore, the project has been disseminated through presentations and workshops at national and international conferences, including events in Nijmegen, London, Singapore, Australia, and the United States, as well as through an Erasmus+ guest lecture in Lithuania. These activities extended the relational reach of the research, enabling dialogue across academic, professional, and educational settings, and contributing to the ongoing exchange and development of knowledge in the field.

An overview of dissemination activities is provided in the Appendix, reflecting the iterative and relational nature of knowledge exchange within this project.

Recommendations for future research

Building on the findings of this dissertation, the next step for research lies in further exploring how the relational principles and practices identified in this study can be translated into everyday community contexts. While this research has provided conceptual, empirical, and practice-oriented insights into how art-based communities can foster social justice, questions remain regarding how such practices can be sustainably embedded within local infrastructures of community life.

Future research should focus on the development of practice-based networks of future art-based communities within local communities. Such work would enable a deeper understanding of how art-based communities can be organised in practice: how access can be facilitated for persons living in diverse settings, how logistical and organisational pathways can be established, and how financial and organisational structures can support these initiatives over time. This includes identifying and collaborating with relevant local partners, including art therapists, and exploring how existing pathways of care and community support can be engaged or reconfigured.

Importantly, further research should foreground the role of persons with intellectual disabilities as co-creators in the development of these practices. This involves creating conditions in which experiential knowledge is a leading and co-creative role from the outset. Understanding how such forms of shared ownership can be realised in practice remains a key area for further inquiry.

In this way, future research can contribute to strong bridges between conceptual insights and lived practice, exploring how the potential of art-based communities can be realised within the everyday environments in which people live, meet, and create vital networks together.

The insights gained in this research into the potential of art-based communities resonate with recent developments in the field of education of future creative arts and psychomotor therapists (*vaktherapeuten*) in the Netherlands. These developments reflect an ambition to broaden the field through more dynamic perspectives on health and prevention, shared decision-making among those involved in care and wellbeing, and increased collaboration with other professionals (LOO VTB, 2025). What emerges from the present study, particularly the emphasis on relational practices, co-creation, and collective meaning-making, and engagement with broader social contexts, can be understood as a complementary perspective to the focus on individual health and care.

Within the Dutch *National Domain Profile for Bachelor Programmes in Arts Therapies* (*Landelijk Opleidingsprofiel*) (LOO VTB, 2025), health is conceptualised not only in terms of physical or mental wellbeing, but also in relation to being part of society, quality of life, and finding meaning in one's own life. It further outlines competencies for graduate arts therapists, including a commitment to the reduction of inequalities, alongside key professional orientations such as recovery-oriented practice, empowerment, and connectedness.

Considering areas of overlap between these educational developments and the findings of this research -widening the scope of art therapy towards social equality, connectedness, and dynamic perspectives on health that include social justice- further research is recommended to support a movement from an exclusively individualised focus on health-related challenges towards the inclusion of collective and community-oriented approaches within art therapy that are accessible to people with intellectual disabilities. There is a need for research into how students can be effectively prepared and supported in developing relevant competencies for this wider scope within educational programmes. Previous experiences with collaborative forms of education at HAN University of Applied Sciences, in which art therapy students and students who are experts by experience learn together using the art medium (*STERK in onderwijs*), may serve as a meaningful starting point for further exploration of which competencies can be developed in practice and how this can be achieved (Landelijke Federatie Belangenorganisaties, n.d.). This can be meaningfully connected to research on the development of future local art-based communities.

Overall conclusion of the study

The main aim of this research project is to examine how art-based communities can foster social justice for persons with intellectual disabilities. Across conceptual, historical, and empirical studies, a coherent picture emerges in which social justice is not only a formal framework of policy goals or rights, but also a relational, lived, and embodied practice. Art-based communities create spaces in which recognition, radical belonging, and membership of community are actively created, offering conditions in which social justice can emerge through co-creative, attentive, and responsive relationships.

The study demonstrates that art-based communities function as relational niches within broader institutional and societal structures. They are not isolated interventions but operate within existing structures while creating spaces in which alternative social norms, values, and practices can be explored and lived. Within these communities, artistic processes, improvisation, shared authorship, and embodied encounters become mechanisms through which social justice is both, experienced and lived. Being together, being for, and doing together is grounded not solely in autonomy or competence, but in interdependence, reciprocity, and radical belonging, emphasising the value of everyone's lived experience.

From a practical perspective, the findings highlight the potential of art therapy to extend beyond clinical, individual-focused frameworks. The profession's expertise in relational attunement, co-creation, and embodied engagement positions art therapists to support community-based practices fostering recognition, agency, and radical belonging. In that sense, art-based communities are a natural extension of its foundational practices into broader social contexts and future care policy, providing opportunities to address structural inequalities and negative effects of social power in everyday life.

The study also underlines important considerations for designing and supporting these communities. Intentional design principles, such as valuing agency through co-creation, destabilising normative expectations of competence, and recognising lived experience as legitimate knowledge, are central to fostering social justice. Yet, these communities exist within political, institutional, and financial constraints, highlighting the need to work with existing infrastructures while remaining critically reflective of power dynamics and structural limitations.

Taken together, the findings point to a central insight: fostering social justice for persons with intellectual disabilities requires more than delivering interventions or aligning with normative frameworks. It requires cultivating relational environments in which individuals are listened to, recognised, and able to be who they want to be and join in meaningful ways, with space for creativity, improvisation, and collective ownership.

Looking forward, this research suggests a natural progression from conceptual and empirical understanding to practical application. The next step involves translating these insights into everyday community environments that make it possible to explore how art-based communities can be embedded sustainably within local neighbourhoods and networks. Key questions include how access can be facilitated, how logistical and financial structures can be organised, which local partnerships are most effective, and, importantly, how persons with intellectual disabilities can step up to leading and co-creative roles from the outset. In this way, practice and research can converge, ensuring that the principles identified in this dissertation inform tangible opportunities for social justice in the communities where people live, meet, and create together.

Ultimately, this dissertation contributes a framework for understanding, designing, and experiencing art-based communities as sites of social justice. It positions art therapy as a facilitator of ethical social practices, offering new directions for research, practice, and societal engagement in the lives of persons with intellectual disabilities.

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Chapter 8

SUMMARY

This dissertation examines how art-based communities can foster social justice for persons with intellectual disabilities. Situated at the intersection of social justice theory, disability studies, and art therapy-informed practice, it responds to a persistent gap between formal recognition of rights and the lived realities of inequality, marginalisation, and limited membership of communities experienced by many persons with intellectual disabilities. While art-based communities have been described as spaces of empowerment and emancipation, limited research has explored how they are intentionally designed, how they are experienced by participants with intellectual disabilities, and how they relate to social justice in practice.

To address this gap, the dissertation is guided by the overarching question: *how can art-based communities foster social justice for persons with intellectual disabilities?* This question is explored through four sub-questions focusing on *a) conceptualisations of social justice, b) the design of art-based communities, c) participants' lived experiences*, and *d) implications for future practice*. The dissertation employs a multi-method approach, combining a scoping review, a historical case study, a qualitative interpretive synthesis, a mixed-methods study of participant testimonies, and an evocative autoethnography. Together, these studies provide a multi-perspectival and in-depth exploration of social justice as both a conceptual and lived experience.

The findings of this dissertation demonstrate that social justice for persons with intellectual disabilities cannot be understood solely in terms of formal rights, inclusion policies, or access to services. Instead, social justice emerges as a relational, embodied, and co-creative practice that is lived in communal interactions. Art-based communities contribute to this process by creating space in which participants engage in shared artistic practices that foreground presence, attentiveness, and mutual responsiveness. In these spaces, dominant norms of competence, communication, and doing together can be explored, suspended or reconfigured, allowing alternative ways of being with, being for and doing together, expressing, and relating to emerge.

Across the studies, several dimensions of social justice within art-based communities are identified. First, these communities foster forms of recognition and belonging by enabling participants to be encountered as valued contributors rather than as addressed as care recipients. Second, they support empowerment and self-advocacy by creating opportunities for self-expression and participation on one's own terms. Third, they can challenge stigma and dominant societal narratives by making participants' experiences visible in public and relational contexts. Importantly, these processes are achieved through the relational dynamics that unfold within artistic co-creation.

The dissertation also highlights how the design of art-based communities plays a crucial role in fostering these conditions. Practices such as co-creation, improvisation, storytelling, and public sharing are artistic and relational strategies that redistribute

agency and challenge hierarchical distinctions between participants and professionals. In this sense, art-based communities can be understood as relational niches within broader institutional and societal structures, where new forms of interaction, recognition, and belonging can be explored and lived.

The recommendations for future art-based communities, based on the findings of this dissertation, are to view such communities not as a designed intervention but as a relational practice characterised by openness of expectations that allow participants to contribute in ways that were not pre-defined by assumptions about competence or communication. This includes recognising interdependence as a starting point, attending to epistemic justice, and starting within existing contexts while remaining mindful of the risks of separation. Furthermore, belonging should be understood as a radical form of belonging that moves beyond fixed categories and is seen as a relational, ongoing process.

At the same time, the findings caution against idealising these spaces. Art-based communities remain embedded within wider social, cultural, and institutional contexts, and therefore cannot fully escape existing power dynamics. Questions of visibility, representation, and creating the community together remain complex, and the risk of reproducing subtle forms of stigmatisation and exclusion persists. This underscores the importance of ongoing reflexivity among all participants, as well as critical engagement with broader structural conditions.

Methodologically, this dissertation demonstrates the value of combining conceptual, historical, and experiential approaches, including methods that engage more-than-verbal, sensory, and embodied forms of knowledge. Such approaches are particularly important when researching the lived experiences of persons with intellectual disabilities, whose perspectives may not always be accessible through conventional verbal or text-based methods. At the same time, the study acknowledges limitations, including partial representation of participants' voices, context-specific findings, and the need for greater attention to intersectionality.

The dissertation further contributes to the field of art therapy by extending its scope beyond individual, clinically oriented practice towards community-based and socially engaged forms of working. It shows that the heart of art therapy including working with embodied expression, relational attunement, and co-creation, are particularly well suited to facilitating art-based communities that foster social justice. In doing so, the study positions art therapy as a practice that can foster not only individual wellbeing but can also shape the relational conditions of community life and broader societal possibilities.

Finally, the dissertation identifies directions for future research, particularly the need to translate conceptual and empirical insights into sustainable practices within local communities. This includes exploring how art-based communities can be embedded in

existing local community structures, how access can be facilitated, and how persons with intellectual disabilities can take on leading and co-creating roles in the development of such initiatives. Furthermore, research is required into the competencies required for arts therapists to work within such relational and socially engaged practices, and into how students can be effectively prepared and supported in developing relevant knowledge, skills and attitudes within educational programmes.

In conclusion, this dissertation argues that art-based communities offer a meaningful and necessary complement to rights-based approaches to social justice. By creating relational spaces in which people can engage in shared artistic processes, these communities enable new ways of encountering difference, fostering belonging, and reimagining society in which we all belong. Social justice, in this sense, is not only a goal to be achieved, but a practice that is continuously created through being with, being for, and doing together.

Epilogue

At the end of this research project, again, I am sitting at my kitchen table with a photograph of Chiharu Shiota's art installation "Between the Lines". Her work has accompanied me throughout the past six years. While writing the final words of my dissertation, I had the privilege of visiting her retrospective exhibition in Turin and taking the photograph that now appears on the cover of this book.

"Miss Be," I said.

She looked at me, somehow smiling softly and said: "So, what is the conclusion of your research?"

I paused, letting the question settle. Then I replied, I already had the story in my head that, as human beings, we each sit in our own little boat, yet we sail the same river. Sometimes alongside one another, sometimes behind one another, sometimes crossing paths. In doing so, we are vitally connected in an everlasting network, simply because we exist. We are connected to those we see and hear, and who see and hear us. But we are also connected to those we do not see or hear. Their existence lives within us as well.

This includes persons who, through structural inequality, have been pushed outside the dominant group often referred to as society. Because they are pushed outside, you, as a privileged persons no longer see them. Yet they are there. The fact that social power places them outside so-called society and then expects them to demonstrate that they can 'participate' and 'be included', preferably through their own strength, their own self-determination, and without making too great a claim on care budgets, only reveals this painfully even more clearly.

"And there you are," she continued, "with your art-based communities, hoping that making art together might contribute something to living in a good space, together, for and by everyone. Do you think your hope is justified?"

I stood up getting a cup of tea but paused and turned around facing Miss Be again.

"During this research," I replied, I became increasingly aware of the *Zeitgeist* in which we live. I saw how a dominant neoliberal discourse continues to sustain an oppressive narrative about persons with intellectual disabilities. Stories about financial burdens and scarcity, about vulnerability, and about so-called disabled heroes who manage to participate successfully in the structures designed to organise and manage our shared lives, structures that categorise and classify people.

Many times, I have seen persons with intellectual disabilities repeat these stories about themselves. Yet over the past years, I have also encountered other stories. Stories of doing things together. Stories of navigating new routes in our river. I have met persons who

choose to do things differently, who experience and live 'nothing about us without us' together very strongly.

The question remains how we, as humans, want to live? How do we prefer to shape our society? How will I offer a hand to others or grasp the hand that is offered to me?

Hannah Arendt has also walked alongside me during these past six years. Her picture is in my bedroom. I like to wake up to her open arms, her smile, and the pearl necklace that carries the marks of her time. As a young Jewish woman, she fled to the United States to escape the Nazis. She had been a lover of Martin Heidegger, the German philosopher who sympathised with the NSDAP. After the war, Arendt returned to Germany. I once thought this was admirable, now I find it above all courageous and defiant. Perhaps she thought: *This country is as much mine as anyone else's.* Above her photograph are the words: *Vertrauen in das Menschliche aller Menschen* that translates into 'trust in the humanity of all humans'.

Arendt too, used the image of threads. She wrote that as human beings we must continually take the risk of throwing our threads into the public space. Then we appear in that space, and our threads become woven together within the network. It is there, I imagine, that society nourishes itself, where it co-creates itself, where new developments are born and navigated. The stronger this network becomes, the more power it may generate to do things differently.

I hope that my research, like a thread thrown into the public space, contributes to this trust: to meaningful encounters, to strong knots and directions, to learning and doing the good life together. Sometimes we may sail with the current and sometimes we may row against it. Each of us in our own small boat, yet always on the same river, bound to the other boats.

Appendices

Samenvatting (Dutch Summary)

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List of publications

Presentations, workshops and knowledge exchange activities

About the author

Samenvatting (Dutch Summary)

Dit onderzoek 'Bruggen tussen klinische beeldende therapie en *art-based communities* voor sociale rechtvaardigheid' kijkt ernaar hoe *art-based communities* kunnen bijdragen aan meer sociale rechtvaardigheid voor mensen met een verstandelijke beperking.

Groepen waarin mensen met en zonder een verstandelijke beperking samen kunst maken, worden in dit onderzoek *art-based communities* genoemd.

Het onderzoek kijkt eerst naar ideeën over sociale rechtvaardigheid, over wat een verstandelijke beperking is en naar hoe beeldende therapie kan bijdragen aan sociale rechtvaardigheid. In beeldende therapie tekenen, schilderen of bijvoorbeeld kleien mensen om gedachten en gevoelens te verkennen, te uiten en te delen. Door afstemming tussen mensen, op kunstmaterialen en het creatieve maakproces ontstaat betekenis van de ervaringen die mensen daarbij hebben.

De reden van het onderzoek is een bekend probleem: er zijn rechten van mensen met een beperking vastgelegd in het VN-verdrag Handicap. Maar in het dagelijks leven ervaren veel mensen met een verstandelijke beperking nog steeds ongelijkheid. Zij hebben vaak moeite om in de samenleving mee te kunnen doen.

Art-based communities zijn volgens al bestaande literatuur ontmoetingsplekken waar mensen meer zelfvertrouwen kunnen ontwikkelen en leren om voor hun rechten op te komen. Er is echter nog weinig onderzoek gedaan naar hoe *art-based communities* vormgegeven worden. Naar hoe mensen die meedoen het zelf ervaren en hoe daarin hun sociale rechtvaardigheid bevorderd wordt. Daarnaast is geen wetenschappelijke kennis gevonden over *art-based communities* voor mensen met een verstandelijke beperking die hun sociale rechtvaardigheid bevorderen.

De belangrijkste vraag in dit onderzoek is daarom: hoe kunnen *art-based communities* bijdragen aan de sociale rechtvaardigheid voor mensen met een verstandelijke beperking? Deze vraag is onderzocht aan de hand van vier deelvragen:

a) wat verstaan mensen die over *art-based communities* hebben geschreven onder sociale rechtvaardigheid?
b) Hoe worden *art-based communities* vormgegeven?
c) Hoe ervaren deelnemers deze *art-based communities*? En
d) Wat kan hiervan geleerd worden voor *art-based communities* in de toekomst?

Voor het onderzoek zijn verschillende methoden gebruikt, zoals literatuuronderzoek, een historische casestudy, een enquête over persoonlijke ervaringen van mensen met een verstandelijke beperking en verhalen over de ervaringen van de onderzoeker. In het literatuuronderzoek is gekeken naar wat wetenschappers wereldwijd hebben geschreven over *art-based communities* die sociale rechtvaardigheid van mensen met een

verstandelijke beperking kunnen bevorderen. De historische casestudy kijkt terug in de geschiedenis naar waarom aandacht voor sociale rechtvaardigheid zo belangrijk is en wat we uit die geschiedenis kunnen leren. Met de enquête zijn mensen met een beperking die in Australië wonen gevraagd naar hun ervaringen met beeldende therapie. Samen geven de resultaten van deze onderzoeksmethoden een breed en diep inzicht in sociale rechtvaardigheid en *art-based communities*, zowel als idee als in de praktijk.

De resultaten van het onderzoek laten zien dat sociale rechtvaardigheid verder gaat dan vastgelegde rechten of beleid. Sociale rechtvaardigheid voor allen ontstaat vooral in de manier waarop mensen met elkaar omgaan, elkaar erkenning geven en waardering en dat zij elkaar horen en zien. *Art-based communities* helpen hierbij door ruimte te creëren waar mensen elkaar echt ontmoeten. In deze ruimte staat aandacht voor elkaar centraal. Door de aandacht en ruimte voor elkaar ontstaat er ruimte om ieders normen en waarden te ontdekken en aan ieders behoeften recht te doen. Zo kunnen nieuwe manieren ontstaan van jezelf zijn met anderen. Of er voor elkaar zijn. En een nieuwe balans bij samenleven en samenwerken.

Uit het onderzoek komen meerdere aspecten van sociale rechtvaardigheid binnen *art-based communities* naar voren. Als eerste zorgen de *art-based communities* voor erkenning en een gevoel van erbij horen. Dit doordat alle mensen worden gezien als waardevolle bijdragers en niet alleen als mensen die zorg ontvangen. Als tweede geven de *art-based communities* ruimte voor het uiten van eigen gevoelens, gedachten, persoonlijkheid en stijl en eigen keuzes daarin. Daardoor kunnen mensen meer ruimte ervaren om zichzelf te laten zien en voor zichzelf op te komen. Als derde kunnen *art-based communities* helpen om vooroordelen te verminderen door levenservaringen van alle mensen zichtbaar te maken voor anderen.

Uit het onderzoek blijkt dat de manier waarop *art-based communities* zijn ingericht belangrijk is. Werkwijzen zoals samen kunst maken, improviseren, verhalen delen en de kunstwerken laten zien aan anderen helpen om de verschillen tussen deelnemers met en zonder een verstandelijke beperking kleiner te maken. Hierdoor kunnen deelnemers en professionals meer gelijkwaardig samenwerken. Zo ontstaan ruimtes waar nieuwe vormen van samenleven en erbij horen kunnen worden uitgeprobeerd en onderzocht.

De adviezen voor toekomstige *art-based communities*, gebaseerd op dit onderzoek, zijn om deze niet te zien als een vooraf ontworpen, vaststaande manier om sociale rechtvaardigheid te bevorderen. Maar als een manier van samenwerken en samenzijn, waarin ruimte is voor openheid en samen ontdekken. Door deze manier kunnen mensen meedoen op hun eigen manier. Zonder dat er van tevoren wordt bepaald wat men moet kunnen of hoe men zich moet uitdrukken. Dit kan ervoor zorgen dat de machtsverhouding tussen mensen zo gelijkwaardig mogelijk is. Het is daarbij belangrijk om te erkennen dat mensen elkaar nodig hebben. En om verschillende vormen van kennis serieus te nemen,

bijvoorbeeld kennis uit ervaring van mensen zelf.

De *art-based communities* kunnen ontstaan binnen bestaande contexten zoals binnen dagbestedingslocaties of op scholen maar het blijft belangrijk om samen alert te zijn op het risico van afgrenzing van anderen. Tot slot gaat het bij *art-based communities* om een vorm van 'er echt bij horen', waarbij mensen niet in hokjes worden geplaatst. De focus ligt op verbinding die steeds opnieuw in het samenzijn ontstaat.

Tegelijkertijd waarschuwt het onderzoek dat *art-based communities* niet volmaakt zijn. Ze bestaan namelijk niet los van de samenleving en de context waarbinnen zij zijn. De mensen in de *art-based communities* kunnen daarom ook te maken krijgen met bestaande machtsverschillen en uitsluiting. Het blijft daarom belangrijk dat alle deelnemers samen blijven nadenken over hun eigen rol en kritisch kijken naar de bredere omstandigheden en structuren waarbinnen de *art-based community* is.

Het onderzoek laat ook zien dat het waardevol is om verschillende onderzoeksmethoden te combineren. Vooral methoden die niet alleen op gesproken taal zijn gebaseerd maar ook op ervaring, gevoel en lichaam. Sommige ervaringen worden niet alleen met woorden gedeeld, maar ook via het lichaam, gevoelens, beelden en samen doen. Dit is belangrijk omdat sommige mensen met een verstandelijke beperking zich niet altijd goed kunnen verwoorden wat er met hen gebeurt en wat zij voelen.

Daarnaast draagt het onderzoek bij aan het vakgebied beeldende therapie. Het laat zien dat beeldende therapie niet alleen gericht hoeft te zijn op individuen en persoonlijke problemen. Maar ook op onderdeel zijn van de samenleving en sociale verandering. Bezig zijn met creativiteit en je beeldend uiten, afstemming op elkaar en samen creëren blijkt goed te passen bij het bevorderen van sociale rechtvaardigheid.

Tot slot geeft het onderzoek adviezen voor toekomstig onderzoek en voor de praktijk. Het is belangrijk om de ideeën over art-based communities en sociale rechtvaardigheid voor mensen met een verstandelijke beperking verder in te voeren in lokale gemeenschappen zoals wijken en buurten. Daarbij hoort ook de vraag hoe mensen met een verstandelijke beperking zelf een grote rol kunnen hebben bij het opzetten en leiden van dit soort groepen. Ook is verder onderzoek nodig naar wat beeldend therapeuten moeten kunnen om op deze manier te werken. Daarnaast is het belangrijk om te onderzoeken hoe studenten binnen opleidingen beeldende therapie hierin goed begeleid en voorbereid kunnen worden.

De conclusie is dat *art-based communities* een waardevolle aanvulling zijn op het denken in rechten, regels en beleid binnen de samenleving. Door samen kunst te maken, ontstaan nieuwe manieren om elkaar te ontmoeten, verschillen te begrijpen en een samenleving vorm te geven waar iedereen erbij hoort. Sociale rechtvaardigheid is dan niet alleen een doel, maar iets wat steeds opnieuw ontstaat in hoe mensen samen zijn en samenwerken.

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This dissertation is dedicated to my brother, Ralf Zimmermann (1959-2013), who taught me what it feels like to live excluded by others and how deeply that can shape the human experience.

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Presentations, workshops and knowledge exchange activities

Zimmermann, A. (2021, July 6–8). *How can art-based communities foster social justice for people with intellectual disabilities?* Poster presented at the IASSIDD Conference, Amsterdam, Netherlands.

Zimmermann, A., Andishmand, J., & van Dijk, L. (2022, April 21). *Inclusief onderzoek met kunst in de praktijk* [Inclusive research using art]. Presentation presented at the *Van Kwetsbaar naar Weerbaar* conference, Nederlandse Vereniging Beeldende Therapie, Hogeschool Heerlen, Heerlen, Netherlands.

Zimmermann, A., & Andishmand, J. (2022, June 26). *Beeldend vormen in onderzoek en onderwijs van en voor mensen met en zonder een verstandelijke beperking* [Art-based approaches in research and education with and for people with and without intellectual disabilities]. Film screening and discussion presented at *Waalzinnig Festival*, Nijmegen, Netherlands.

Zimmermann, A., van Dijk, L., LFB student experts by experience, & art therapy students. (2022, November 22). *Hoe leer je samen als student beeldende therapie en als student ervaringsdeskundigheid?* [How do students of art therapy and students with lived experience expertise learn together?] Workshop presented at the *EAPRIL Conference*, Nijmegen, Netherlands.

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About the author



Anja Elisabeth Zimmermann was born on 24 March 1966 in Waldshut, Germany. She obtained a bachelor's degree in art therapy (*Creatieve Therapie, Beeldend Vormen*, now *Vaktherapie, Beeldende Therapie*) from De Kopse Hof in Nijmegen, the Netherlands (now HAN University of Applied Sciences) in 1991. She later completed a master's degree in arts therapies at Zuyd University of Applied Sciences in 2014.

Following the completion of her master's degree, she pursued further academic studies in Humanism at the University of Humanistic Studies in Utrecht (2016–2019), deepening her ethical and philosophical orientation that inform her academic and professional work.

After obtaining her bachelor's degree, Anja worked for more than twenty years as an art therapy practitioner (1993–2018). Her clinical experience includes long-term employment at Siza in Arnhem (1993–2011), where she provided art therapy addressing social-emotional, psychological, and psychiatric challenges experienced by individuals with intellectual disabilities. In parallel, she maintained a self-employed art therapy practice (1995–2018), offering therapeutic support to children and adults of diverse abilities, as well as to their families and caregivers, in response to challenging life experiences. Earlier in her career, she worked as an art and play therapist at Schreuder Huizen (1994–1995), supporting children's emotional, behavioural, and developmental needs, and as a temporary art therapy practitioner in several mental health hospitals in the Netherlands, including APZ Wolfheze, the Vincent van Gogh Institute, and Vrederust Halsteren (1993–1994). In 2008, Anja began working as a lecturer in art therapy at HAN University of Applied Sciences in Nijmegen. Since 2020, she has also been active as a researcher at the Department of *Ethics of Connection with Persons with Intellectual Disabilities* at HAN University of Applied Sciences, where she collaborates with Dr Maaike Hermsen on various research projects. She currently holds a full-time position as lecturer and researcher at HAN University of Applied Sciences and is a full member of the European Federation of Art Therapy (EFAT).

In 2020, Anja started her doctoral research at the University of Humanistic Studies in Utrecht. This research forms the foundation of the present dissertation, which explores the intersection of intellectual disability, social justice, and art therapy.