



# Disabled youth participation within activism and social movement bases: An empirical investigation of the UK Disabled People's Movement

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## Abstract

Understanding disabled youth activism is key for improving young disabled people's participation in politics and social change. Young disabled people require opportunities to situate historical and biographical experiences within broader socio-economic contexts. This will lead to a politicised consciousness surrounding disability, emancipation and social justice. This article presents empirical data from the first study on young disabled people's contemporary position within the UK Disabled People's Movement. It critically assesses three areas pertinent to youth activism: activist membership, social movement organisation and future considerations for activism. This allows for an exploration of how young disabled activists navigate collective action, influence activist claims and demands and understand the issues for sustaining a disabled people's social movement. The article illustrates young disabled activists' desire to disrupt their current position within the UK Disabled People's Movement and bring into focus a future where young disabled people's contributions to activism and social movements are accessible, valued and influential. The article argues that a failure to support young disabled people's participation within social movements will have an adverse impact on their political identities.

## Keywords

Activism, collective action, disability, Disabled People's Movement, social movements, youth

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## Introduction

Youth participation within activist and social movement mobilisation is a key pursuit within sociological enquiry. It remains integral to progressing social change and exploring the actions of – and reactions to – injustice (Terriquez, 2015). Investigations are required into the accounts and daily experiences of those at the intersection of power and oppression (Millward and Takhar, 2019) to understand the relation between activist participation, social movement bases and the events that position communities in precarious and marginalised positions. The study of disability provides new and original insights for sociology. Its significance lies in repositioning disability as a production of the material and discursive forces that shape and influence the social world. This, in turn, has influenced understanding of marginalisation, oppression and the pursuit for inclusive and accessible societies. Documenting, and critiquing, individual and collective experiences of disabled people's injustice reinforce an imperative within sociological research – to highlight the experiences of marginalised communities; to capture possible and preferable alternatives to how the social world is produced and organised; and to critique the evidence, analysis and theories employed to understand struggles.

Understanding disabled youth activism is key for improving young disabled people's participation in politics and social change. It requires capturing young disabled people's ideas about the material and discursive factors that perpetuate disabled people's marginalisation. Followed by their participation in activities to create possible, and preferable, alternative futures for our social world. Young disabled people require opportunities to situate historical and biographical experiences within broader socio-economic contexts. This will lead to a politicised consciousness surrounding disability, emancipation and social justice.

This article contributes at the intersection of Disability Studies and Social Movement Studies, by presenting an original account of young disabled people's experiences of disability activism and social movement participation in the United Kingdom. It identifies three areas pertinent for youth activism: activist membership, social movement organisation and future considerations for activism. The article unpacks young disabled people engagement in disability activism and participation in the Disabled People's Movement (DPM). This allows for an exploration of how young disabled activists navigate collective action, influence activist claims and demands, and understand the issues for sustaining a disabled people's social movement. The article argues that a failure to facilitate young disabled people's participation within social movements will have an adverse impact on emancipatory politics (within and beyond disability activism). Young disabled activists are in danger of having their participation devalued and considered unnecessary within existing social movement activity. Established social movement members, and leadership figures, are alleged to dismiss the significance of youth participation and undermine young people's contributions. This will fragment the collective activities of future disabled activists and will hinder opportunities to reimagine the future and realise inclusive, accessible and just societies.

Following this introduction, the first section provides an account of the literature on understanding disability activism. The second section provides an overview of the methods employed within the empirical study. The third section outlines young

disabled activist's experiences of the three identified areas pertinent to youth activism. The concluding discussion explores how young disabled activists navigate activism and social movements, and contest the restrictions imposed upon them by existing DPM members.

## **Understanding disability (youth) activism**

Activism, in this article, draws on Tilly and Tarrow's (2015) definition of social movements and the contentious politics that emerge through activist relations. Contentious politics refers to the relations that exist between and beyond activists, who are engaged in asserting and maintaining claims for social change. Three specific aspects are required to achieve this. First, claims are made to assert a position and determine the relation between subjects, objects, and stated claims (contention). Second, coordinated strategies and activities occur that demonstrates a shared interest in specified claims (collective action). Finally, those deemed to have influence, authority and assumed power are identified and interaction occurs (politics). The entanglement between these three aspects results in contentious politics. On a broader scale, social movements constitute: (a) repeated attempts of claim-making; (b) strategies to disseminate claims publicly; (c) maintaining collective solidarity; and (d) resource mobilisation to sustain claim-making and their related activities. There are similarities between Tilly's and Tarrow's articulation of contentious politics and social movements and defining the UK DPM.

The collective organisation of disabled people is well documented within Disability Studies (Beckett, 2006; Bloustien and Wood, 2016; Sépulchre, 2018) and grey literature (Angelova-Mladenova, 2019). Claims are made to assert that disability resides as the unnecessary restrictions imposed upon people with impairments, health conditions and diagnostic labels. Activists and disabled people's social movements have sought to politicise disability and frame it as a form of social oppression perpetuated by the entanglement of political, economic, social and cultural arrangements. Disability activism has also critically engaged with notions of normality and 'ableism' (Wolbring, 2008), to ascertain the values and practices that prioritise certain social groups and arrangements over others. Forms of collective action occur, orchestrated by disabled people in the United Kingdom, which has led to self-directed support policy (Mladenov, 2015), equality legislation (Lawson, 2020), the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Disabled People (Lawson and Beckett, 2020), and cause for overhauling disability policy agendas (Waddington and Priestley, 2021). Disabled activists, and their organisations, mobilise to bring attention to the injustices experienced by the disabled people's community, and – in doing so – contribute to the politicisation of disabled people's identity (Waltz and Schippers, 2021). In addition to awareness raising, activists network with one other to propose alternative agendas that will improve participation, accessibility and inclusion within society. Examples range from restricting disabled people's participation in the labour market (Foster and Wass, 2013), bullying experiences among disabled children and young people (Chatzitheochari et al., 2016), to the excessive violence encountered by learning disabled communities (Hollomotz, 2013), and United Nations investigations that conclude with the UK state violating disabled people's human rights (Loft, 2020).

It is difficult to establish the parameters for defining the UK DPM. It is best understood as a plurality of politicised individuals, and organisations controlled by disabled people, who are engaged in the emancipatory struggle for realising inclusive and accessible societies. The shared collective identity, which builds solidarity among activists, is premised on embracing the social model of disability (Clifford, 2020). The route towards emancipation is dependent upon the reformist or radical claims made by organisations and activists. Tensions exist over the inclusion of activists who deviate or resist a social model approach (Hughes, 2009). Furthermore, the prevalence of online activism has led to activists developing counter narratives, which are rooted in their personal experiences of injustice and marginalisation (Trevisan, 2017). Personal narratives provide an opportunity to reframe the public discourse about political and policy issues most pertinent to the lives of disabled people; however, they risk disrupting the existing claims of social movement bases if they appear to divert from existing DPM demands. Chon and Park (2020) provide a comprehensive review of contemporary online activism.

Social movements offer insight into the collective action of groups and networks, as they navigate and respond to social problems. Movements are embedded within conflicts associated with issues of identity and personal politics (Buechler, 2011; Eyerman, 1984), as well as broader patterns of class exploitation (Della Porta, 2017). The application of sociological frameworks to understand social movements is documented by Crossley (2002), who explores the significance of rational action, political processes and resource mobilisation and opportunity. Furthermore, Millward and Takhar (2019) provide a comprehensive overview of the trends and trajectories within activism and social movements, including the exploration of utopian visions, social movement membership recruitment and how emotions affect social movement activities and goals.

These issues are pertinent when investigating the existence, functioning and aims of disabled people's social movements. Soldatic and Johnson (2021) have charted global perspectives on disability activism and advocacy, highlighting the global reach of disability politics and the emphasis placed on advancing rights-based agendas. For some, it is problematic for disability activism to pursue a legalistic, rights-based approach (Oliver and Barnes, 2006), as it orientates social movement activity from an oppositional stance to a collaborative state aide. Others (Symeonidou, 2009) claim disability activism engages with extensive cultural and political activities to instigate emancipatory change – including legislative action.

Beyond this, the entanglement between personal, social and collective identities is well documented within social movement literature (Flesher Fominaya, 2010); however, the complexities associated with establishing safe and accessible spaces for individuals to participate in disabled people's social movements remains underdeveloped – particularly in the context of youth engagement. Scholars have called for disabled people's increased participation in activism and politics. Kelly (2010) argues for disabled people's social movements to focus on a 'collective of individuals' approach. This is designed to bring together loose groupings of individuals, with different goals and aims associated with the topic or issue. The expansion of different tactics, strategies and goals is expected to generate the creativity needed to sustain social movement activity.

The social model is key to the development of disability activism in the United Kingdom. The principles, which underpin the model, articulate disability as a product of

social conditions, imposed upon people with impairments. This creates unnecessary isolation and exclusion for disabled people, who remain an oppressed group due to how society is organised (UPIAS, 1975). The model remains influential in academia, notably within Disability Studies (Owens, 2015), but it remains contested. The emergence of Critical Disability Studies is understood as an attempt to move beyond the prioritisation of Global North materialist critiques and open new enquiries for disability theory, which are rooted in the perspectives and practices from across the globe (Goodley et al., 2019). The call for genuine collaboration between scholars and activists, across the globe, should not be understated. Chataika (2012) calls for entangling Disability Studies with postcolonial theory, to resist the transportation of Western Academy theories and methodologies. This, in part, is to understand disability through communities and places that have endured historical legacies of colonial violence, knowledge and power. There are parallels with the developments within Queer and Disability Studies, which troubles the dominant social positioning and – often binary – classifications used to monitor, regulate and control bodies (Mog and Lock Swarr, 2008; Liddiard and Slater, 2018).

The effectiveness and sustainability of disabled people's collective action is determined by the inclusion and participation of successive generations of activists. Scholars (Coe, 2020; Gordon, 2007; Gordon and Taft, 2011) have highlighted the struggle of social movements to engage with young people. This has led to concerns surrounding the recruitment of newcomers to influence social movement aims and strategies. Young people's experiences of activism are documented across Muslim communities (Pilkington and Acik, 2020), student campuses (Reger, 2018), climate action groups (Nairn, 2019) and through online spaces (Elliott and Earl, 2018).

Contemporary literature on youth activism illustrates the potential for young activists to inspire social movement bases, influence leadership and help sustain movement strategies and demands (Trott, 2021). This serves as an important counter narrative against depictions of apathetic and disengaged youth communities, who are assumed to have little regard for the issues and crises that affect social organisation and survival. Stone (2021) explores how young activists have mobilised, throughout history, to promote democratic forms of participation within social movements and foster collective action for the claims made by activists. The literature also points to the struggle by young activists to resist dominant conceptualisations of child and youthhood, which restricts their participation and undermines their contributions. Slater (2015) brings attention to the dominant conceptualisation of youth as a 'nearly adult' status, which renders young people's contributions in need of validation by adults. Vaghri (2018) argues this denies young people opportunities to shape their lives and subsequent generations. Young activists encounter situations where they are prevented from asserting claims and coordinating collective action. This article shows how such youth conceptualisations permeate disability activism across three aspects: membership, organisation and future considerations.

## Methods

The aim of this study, and focus for this article, was to explore youth participation within the UK DPM and investigate young disabled people's experiences of contributing to social movement organisation.

An Emancipatory Disability Research (EDR) design (Stone and Priestley, 1996) was employed. The interview schedule was established based on a review of existing contemporary empirical research on disabled people's experiences of social movements (Beckett, 2006; Carling-Jenkins, 2014). The topics and questions discussed during the interviews centred upon the following four themes:

- Conceptualising youth within the UK DPM;
- Current youth participation strategies within the UK DPM;
- Overall organisation of the UK DPM, including commitment to specific values or ideas;
- Increasing youth participation and influence within the UK DPM.

Respondents were selected through a purposive and snowballing sampling method. Contact was sought through gatekeepers and administrators of disabled people's organisations (organisations controlled by and for disabled people) and disability organisations (organisations not controlled by disabled people) with a youth focus. Seventeen individuals were interviewed between 2016 and 2019.

Two respondent groups were determined: young people and 'established figures' within the UK DPM. The study defined a young person as an individual aged 18–35 years. For the group consisting of established members, they were required to consider themselves – or be considered by others (e.g., the Disability News Service Influential List) – as an influential/established member of the UK DPM. The list, which is peer-reviewed, highlights activists who are considered to have a substantial impact on improving disabled people's lives through campaigning, activism and advocacy (Pring, 2014). They are expected to influence how disability is understood, how disabled people are governed and how to realise inclusive societies. All respondents from the 'established figures' group indicated over 20 years' experience in disability activism.

It is acknowledged that young activists can maintain influential and established positions within social movements. Young respondents had various levels of knowledge, experience and influence within UK disability activism. Over half had been involved in disability activism for less than 5 years, while others were active for over 10 years and were prominent within contemporary campaigns and activities. The decision to separate youth from established activists was made after reviewing the literature on the restrictions and difficulties encountered by young activists who participate in social movements. It was important to capture the experiences and perspectives of those who self-identify as young and disabled. The distinction is based on prioritising activist accounts from those who consider their youth status as pertinent to their activism. Furthermore, the research is reporting in detail about the view from within a 'particular frame' yet does not claim to map its findings across all of those who match the inclusion criteria. Although it is anticipated that the sample has relevance to the understanding and operations of the DPM, no claim is made that the group seeks to be definitively representative of the social movements associated with disablement and disabled people – nor of part or the whole of the disabled community.

A thematic analysis procedure was employed. The data were analysed to understand 'broader assumptions, structures, and meanings [that are] theorised as underpinning

what is actually articulated in the data' (Braun and Clarke, 2006: 85). The analysis process led to an initial engagement with the data, followed by locating early codes, which then led to identifying potential themes. Potential themes were reviewed to determine any that could be collapsed and incorporated into other identified themes. Finally, by reflecting on the data and literature, three themes were arrived at for subsequent discussion: membership, organisation, and future considerations.

## Unpacking UK DPM participation

Young disabled activist experiences are grouped into three key areas: UK DPM *membership*, *organisation* and *future considerations* for a sustainable and effective social movement. The areas are pertinent to activists participating, influencing and maintaining access to social movement bases.

### Membership

It was identified that current, dominant conceptualisations of youth positioned young disabled activists as passive and dependent upon the ideas of older, established figures. All young disabled respondents encountered friction when engaging with older UK DPM members. They acknowledged aspects of isolation and disengagement when attempting to collaborate on strategies and agendas pertinent to advancing social movement objectives. Regina alludes to this when referencing her participation, alongside peers, at an activist event:

I went to an event back in the summer with three disabled friends. All four of us were under 24 at the time. And I felt like we stuck out. Everyone was much older than us, we were the youngest there by far. A few individuals did make the effort to speak to us, but I did feel like we were very much outsiders. (Regina, female, White British, Northern England area, mid 20s)

Other young disabled activists gave examples of feeling isolated because they determined their level of knowledge and understanding of disability politics to be incomplete, particularly when surrounded by established UK DPM members. This often led to feelings of doubt and they were not encouraged to present their ideas within organised spaces. Furthermore, when activists engaged with one another much of the discourse centred upon matters that were judged to be pertinent by established figures. As Jeremy outlines, the debates and trajectories orientated towards the demands and issues affected by older generations within the UK DPM:

I am not familiar as such with the culture or the politics of the people and I am kind of alienated from the movement because of that. I do feel a lot of it is kind of older people, with particular influence, that aren't looking to be inclusive to [*sic*] our particular generation, they are more focused on seeking change for themselves in the immediate way. (Jeremy, male, White British, London area, early 20s)

Respondents discussed the importance of young disabled activists having support and encouragement to explore the political aspects of their interactions and relations with



others. This provides a method and platform on which to assess the fluctuating levels of power and self-determination. The importance of the lived experience remains paramount, yet is utilised in such a way as to challenge the existing relations that produce aspects of marginalisation and oppression throughout the social world. To achieve this, it depends upon whether the UK DPM actively encourages young people to be part of the agendas scheduled and action taken to plan for the future. For Hillary – a young disabled activist – this is not happening currently:

I think one of the things that the disability movement is struggling with at the moment is how to create space for new ideas and new people and new generations in a context where the people that founded a lot of these organisations, and lead the movement, are still alive and invested in what's happening. (Hillary, female, White British, Scotland area, early 30s)

Young disabled activists highlighted the overwhelming expectation that their role within the UK DPM was to continue the work and legacy of existing, typically older members. Current levels of engagement centred upon them offering a youth perspective and, thus, they were only afforded space when it was deemed necessary to capture young disabled people's direct experiences:

Every member of the movement isn't always going in the same direction with one particular goal. But they expect us [young activists] to get involved because of the agendas and campaigns they have made. They just ask for our opinion, like 'what does a young person think of this'. (Margaret, female, White British, lives across UK, early 20s).

Here, Margaret illustrates that young people's participation is confined to offering a youth perspective. Their contributions are to promote existing campaigns and align it with young people's interests and priorities.

### *Organisation*

The significance of the social model to UK DPM organisation was outlined by respondents. They indicated how the model is considered essential to claim-making and the strategies employed to disseminate claims publicly. As outlined by Regina, the social model is influential to the individual and collective pursuits of activists:

I think the social model is the cornerstone of the movement. Everything revolves around it and it's a massive part of the culture of the movement. It is important to me as an individual, it's central to everything I do, my work, my volunteering, my activism, and my friendships with disabled people. (Regina, female, White British, Northern England area, mid-20s)

Here, the social model is recognised as a foundational idea, one that has generated action and demands that centre upon the identification and shift of social arrangements that perpetuate the experience of disablement. Respondents, like Regina, highlighted the model's influence upon the creation and development of social networks, as it provides a common point upon which to build solidarity and support among disabled people committed to emancipation. All young respondents were frustrated with the lack of



opportunity to scrutinise the model, deconstruct the principles, and explore new ways for the model to describe the experience of disability. According to Kate, the current activist organisation provides little opportunity to debate and discuss the social model:

[T]hey're then sort of saying we can't talk about how we got here or why we're here, why we think these things should be changed. Yeah, that just confuses me [. . .] It was built on this model, the original model. They actually say – we can't debate it, we can't look at it, we can't alter it. That doesn't make sense. Doesn't that negate the whole movement in itself? (Kate, female, White British, Northern England area, early 30s)

Some respondents, who represented established members of the UK DPM, offered perspectives that aligned with Kate's critique. Marley argued for the need to question the terms employed through disability activism and determine their relevance within contemporary society:

People talk about the buzzwords of like, civil rights, human rights, social model, anti-discrimination legislation, but often they talk about all of these things as being the same. [. . .] And what I think young people would be very good at is what is our everyday conversations about the difference between civil rights, human rights et cetera? Do they or not matter? But, do we have these discussions in the movement to get our understanding of what it means? No. (Marley, male, Black British, Midlands area England, established UK DPM member)

In discussion about the social model, Rachael – an established member – reflected on the significance of the model and whether it requires updating. She was cautious about the claims made to update or find an alternative to the social model:

I think we do read too much into the social model. The social model is very weighted towards constructs that says that in order for disabled people to be included in society we need to do and understand things differently. It includes everybody, because if everyone really understood it for what it was and used its basic construct, they would see it applies to every socially excluded individual. (Rachael, female, White British, London area, established UK DPM member)

This illustrates the tensions within disabled activist collectives surrounding the positioning, application and allegiance to the social model. The model is prominent when contextualised within activism and campaigning, but young activists want to explore the social model's relevance to their activities, claims and coordinated strategies.

### *Future considerations*

During the interviews, respondents were asked to identify and explore what is required for a sustainable and effective UK DPM, and improve their participation within the movement. As identified through the respondents' own words, if action to involve them is not taken then the premise of whether young disabled people care that a disabled people's social movement exists will be of little value. There is a danger that if the UK DPM appears to operate specifically on a national basis, this will restrict young disabled people's access and overall engagement with the movement. As Richard highlights,

Imagine if you had a disabled people's civil rights movement that actually encouraged involvement from everyone that define[s] themselves as disabled. That would be so huge and yet so many people think that they are powerless within their own communities, in wanting to create the change that they want to see because they don't have skills, they don't have the experience. If we found a way to encourage more people to campaign on grassroots basis for their local issues then you would see people recognising that the movement exists. (Richard, non-binary, White British, South-East England, mid-20s)

Richard argues that through extensive campaigning, disabled people can mobilise within their localities to demonstrate the importance of civil rights, as well as illustrate the existence of specific social movements. It was evident that young disabled respondents wanted to disseminate key messages pertaining to the prevalence of disabling barriers to the local level. This would, they hoped, lead to a sustainable and effective UK DPM in the long term. Respondents were keen to outline the importance of using online social media accounts to raise awareness of local issues affecting disabled people. Kate, however, was concerned about how online activity fails to generate anticipated discussions with fellow activists and interested parties:

A lot of my friends don't read when I post all the links but it's like 'well I'll post it because then you've got no excuse' [. . .] But I think a lot of people are just sort of, in my head, just roll their eyes and scroll down, because I don't get any conversation from it and also I don't attend protests and things. Part of that is because my mum is my main carer and she is not into protesting about anything! (Kate, female, White British, Northern England area, early 30s)

Kate perceives online technology as a route to participating in activism, bypassing the extensive barriers that restrict access to off-line displays of campaigning, including protest. Kate also references how her mother is primarily responsible for the provision of her support; as she is unwilling to engage in activism, Kate's opportunities to participate are restricted and she thus focusses her efforts on using online technology.

Returning to the point surrounding youth conceptualisation within disability activism, Margaret felt that it was difficult for young disabled people to access information or participate in the UK DPM because it does not appear to welcome newcomers, nor does it include those who have initial interest in the movement's activities. This led to young disabled activists experiencing online hostility or isolation from established contingents within the movement:

If you know the leaders of the movement in depth and you follow them on social media and you're aware of their movements I think it's quite easy to be aware of what's going on. If you're not involved, and this is part of the problem I think, if you are not part of the movement and you have a great interest in that movement and you want to find out more, I think it's really flipping hard because I think it's quite closed off as a movement and quite excluding. And I think that's part of the problem. It can be hard to find other people to fight your battles for you if you don't let them in. (Margaret, female, White British, lives across UK, early 20s).

## Concluding discussion

The findings illustrate how young disabled activists participate in social movement bases and attempt to influence the formulation and dissemination of stated claims. Young

disabled activists navigate aspects to Tilly and Tarrow's (2015) contentious politics. They attempt to engage in processes to assert claims relevant to social change and the emancipation of disabled people. Their experiences reflect continued attempts to participate in collective action, building solidarity with disabled activists throughout the UK DPM. There are also aspirations to influence the authoritative and influential positions identified within and beyond disability activism. However, young disabled activists experience frustrations over their restricted participation and lack of opportunities to affect claim-making processes. These frustrations are reflective of the existing tensions within disability activism, particularly over concepts – such as the social model – that are integral to maintaining solidarity and disseminating claims. They also reflect the social position of youthhood, and the restrictions imposed to limit their contributions within social movements. If young activists are excluded or isolated from social movement bases, then the UK DPM will become further 'fragmented' because of dismissing or restricting the diverse ideas, demand and strategies of its members.

Conceptualisations of youth in contemporary Western society tend to position young people as incomplete adults (Slater, 2015). This idea of incompleteness can produce assumptions, particularly from those in influential positions (parents, educators, leadership figures), that young people are passive future-beings who require learning and guidance as they negotiate the trajectory towards adulthood (Alldred and David, 2007). Young respondents did resist these notions during the interviews, highlighting their desire to participate in discussions surrounding collective futures. There was clear appetite to engage in the political and social struggles experienced by the disabled people's community. They wanted to collaborate with UK DPM members and discuss strategies for emancipation that extended beyond the personal, often anecdotal, narrative. As Hicks (2002) proposes, there should be spaces for young people to suggest alternative visions of future social arrangements. This can be realised by supporting young people to, simultaneously, critique the present while engaging in the creation of alternative futures that are possible, preferable and probable.

The tension surrounding youth conceptualisation within the UK DPM points to the relations between activists, particularly between young people and those who influence activists' mobilisation. Reinforcing points made by DeCesare (2013), respondents discussed how specific members and organisations appeared reluctant to be associated with the terminology of 'leader', yet were instrumental in contextualising disability issues, framing the collective action required and encouraging participation from across the UK DPM. It was suggested that a form of stealth leadership (Western, 2014) was apparent, as respondents explained that other members denied any presence of leaders, though continuously acted on and promoted the demands and ideas offered by specific groups and individuals. For young disabled activists, this was often the catalyst for restricting their participation to youth matters only.

In the discussion about the role of the UK DPM, it became clear that disabled activists, in their pursuit of disabled people's emancipation, took differing positions. This illustrated the heterogeneity of the UK DPM members, who approached the experience of disability from different histories and identities (Trevisan, 2017). Some activists and campaigners proposed and implemented practices that were broadly aligned with reformist agendas, and others called for radical change – arguably rooted in their desire for the overhaul of broader economic and political arrangements. As a result, the UK DPM

comprises of four areas of claim-making: rights, political and economic arrangements, identity and disability pride, and the importance of campaigning and building alliances.

The UK DPM remains multifaceted. It reflects disabled people's shared experiences and awareness of the intersectional aspects associated with their existence and participation in the social world. The UK DPM illustrates the intersection between traditional class and social issues, alongside an acknowledgement of identity politics. It is unable to embrace a singular cause for the experience and reproduction of disablement. It is a social movement operating on a platform of various causes and rights-based issues, aspects that transcend the assumed divide between traditional class and identity issues. The four directions for claim-making, together, produce what is referred to as the UK DPM, with each direction producing ideas and activities for the movement to engage with to realise disabled people's emancipation. Each direction provides insight into how individuals come together to form groups, networks and potentially engage with other social movements on causes. Activists and campaigners will join more than one direction.

The social model occupies an important position within the UK DPM. It allows for the development of stated claims, in the directions outlined above, and for maintaining collective solidarity across social movement bases. It is argued here that, while the social model is contested, abandonment would risk further fragmenting the collective activities of disabled activists. Reviewing the empirical data suggests that young disabled people are committed to the social model yet want opportunities to explore its significance in their lives and its strategic relevance to disability activism. Some of the respondents called for opportunities to debate the application of the model. They wanted to understand how it was relevant in their lives and whether it could still describe the process and experience of isolation and exclusion from society. The desire to debate the social model is not a reinforcement for the argument to reclaim or revise it (Owens, 2015). Instead, it demonstrates the restricted participation of young disabled people to engage proactively with the prominent ideas and concepts of the UK DPM. It is a reaction, by each young disabled person, to build their own connection with the model, rather than have it imposed upon them by established groups and members.

Respondents were aware of how the model can be employed as a heuristic device for describing experiences of disability (Lawson and Beckett, 2020); as a tool for advancing disabled people's participation and inclusion; or as an object hijacked and used in a disciplinary manner by established activists (Beckett and Campbell, 2015). Young members can seek to understand how the model operates and be encouraged to expand their own ideas on how to respond to contemporary arrangements of oppression. This will provide young disabled people the opportunity to state emancipatory claims. Furthermore, it will open up possibilities for activists to debate their agendas and demands for realising an alternative accessible and participatory society. The emphasis is on the UK DPM providing young disabled activists with the resources and space to investigate the model's significance to disabled people's social movement participation. This is necessary if young activists are to hold valued positions in the development of inclusive societies.

Young members already experience restricted participation when attempting to explore the social model, or when engaging with the foundational concepts underpinning disability politics and activism. This is because such attempts are perceived as opportunities to weaken the position and importance of the model. This is further complicated by

conceptualisations of youth (Vaghri, 2018) that are imposed upon young disabled activists engaged in UK DPM activity. Disrupting such perceptions will allow for the opportunity to provide counter rationalities, not necessarily with the sole aim of proposing solutions within the existing political and economic arrangements, but to highlight the conditions of a socially unjust society.

To improve disabled youth participation within activism and social movements, there is a need to reorientate focus and resources to supporting young disabled people to offer ideas for the future. By emphasising the forces and social relations underpinning disabled people's collective action, activist contributions are reframed to focus on: what needs to be contested; how can collective action emerge and what should be the alternative claims? Sépulchre (2018) highlights similar approaches taken by Swedish disabled activists in their attempt to determine the causes of disabled people's marginalisation and provide recommendations and demands to address disablement. However, as highlighted in this empirical research, young disabled people are rarely invited or allowed to be part of such processes. Instead, they feel pressure to agree with those who have identified the cause, advised by established figures on ways in which they should demonstrate resistance, and are requested to provide recommendations that will improve the situation for young people: a limited involvement.

It is essential to capture young disabled people's experiences to support future generations in their understanding of the significance of disability activism and potential routes for participation. The mobilisation of activists, particularly within local and online spaces, was an important issue for respondents. Reinforcing the arguments outlined by Castells (2012), online technologies provided a means for activists to become aware of and inspired by the presence of existing disability activism. Accessible platforms, often online, provided activists with infrastructure through which they could articulate messages of opportunity against their daily experiences of barriers and marginalisation. Furthermore, respondents highlighted the necessity for disability activism to consider activity at the local level. Della Porta and Caiani (2009) suggest how social movements operate at a national level to gain access to mechanisms that can raise the profile and messages of the movement. While this is important for purposes of solidarity, including activism on a transnational platform, it should not be at the expense of how social movements fail to resonate with individuals in the local area.

The calls for activist mobilisation within this study reflect Hajer's (1997) suggestion that social movements formulate discourse correlations, which operate on multiple layers and produce framed agendas pertinent to the geographical space and time of the activities. Key to this is the local mobilisation of activists. Here respondents focussed on increasing activity, stimulating a growing membership and creating an environment where activists come together to create networks and alliances by addressing local issues. As Appadurai (2001) notes, this allows for social movement members to remain connected to diverse local sites across vast spaces. Within the context of disability activism, Trevisan (2017) considers the development of activists who disseminate personal life stories online through blog posts. This can be useful to the strategies employed to disseminate claims publicly and build solidarity among existing, and potential, disabled activists. There is also the need to review how the premise of disability activism online has provided new and visible methods of challenging government policy (Pearson and

Trevisan, 2015). It appears that online mobilisation serves to build advocacy networks across (non)politicised communities of disabled people. This is important when interacting with actors assumed to have influence within the arrangements that govern disabled people's lives. The online space has the potential to build relations between activists, provided that those ideas and activities emanating from young social movement members are embraced.

Some young disabled activists acknowledged difficulties when engaging with online platforms for disability activism purposes. This will have an impact on the recruitment and inclusion of young disabled people within the UK DPM, particularly if they have trouble in establishing local networks, engaging with established members or influencing people who do not associate themselves with disability politics. To address this, it requires an active pursuit by existing social movement bases to build capacity at a local level, so that young people have the skills, resources and confidence to mobilise effectively.

The article argues that, in the context of social movements, there needs to be acknowledgement of the sensitivities and caution that surrounds moving away from the social model. However, this should not be at the expense of opening new avenues for progressing disabled people's emancipation. Beckett and Campbell (2015) offer an approach to distinguish between the activist's interpretation of the social model (as a tool to progress UK DPM agendas and goals) and its prominence within academic discourse. The model can still assist activists, particularly newcomers, in establishing strategic solidarity with other social movement members. There is little doubt that the model should be kept at the core of the UK DPM; however, young members should be encouraged and supported in utilising the investigation of the social model as a form of opposition to current social arrangements. Without a clear and coherent strategy to support young disabled people's participation, the movement will lose traction in resisting current, normative and ableist perceptions of disability.

The empirical research outlined in this article positions disability activism as an important site for understanding youth participation in social movement bases. The three areas identified in this research require attention to improve youth participation within social movement bases. Prioritising youth participation and accessibility will lead to young disabled people gaining importance within the UK DPM and access opportunities to introduce alternative ways of producing an inclusive and accessible social world. This means positioning young disabled people as valued and credible contributors to claim-making processes within social movement bases, who can influence the strategies and activities that develop shared interests among activists. Reconfiguring young disabled people's position within disability activism will reinforce Goodley et al.'s (2019) call for new enquiries that explore disabled people's experiences through the intersection of their identities.

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## Author biography

Miro Griffiths is a scholar in the field of Disability Studies, based in the School of Sociology and Social Policy, at the University of Leeds. His research primarily explores young disabled people’s experiences of resistance practices, social movement participation and disability politics. Miro lectures in disability theory, research methods and social policy analysis. Alongside scholarly activity, Miro is an adviser on disability policy to the UK Government, European Commission and several disabled people’s organisations across the globe. Miro is a disabled activist and is committed to the emancipation of disabled people.

## Résumé

Il est essentiel de comprendre le militantisme des jeunes handicapés pour améliorer la participation de ces derniers à la politique et au changement social. Les jeunes handicapés ont besoin d’opportunités pour situer leurs expériences historiques et biographiques

dans des contextes socio-économiques plus larges. Cela conduira à une conscience politisée autour du handicap, de l'émancipation et de la justice sociale. Cet article présente les données empiriques de la première étude sur la position actuelle des jeunes handicapés au sein du *Disabled People's Movement* [DPM] britannique. L'auteur évalue de manière critique trois domaines importants pour le militantisme des jeunes: l'adhésion au militantisme, l'organisation du mouvement social et les considérations futures pour le militantisme. Cette étude permet d'explorer la manière dont les jeunes activistes handicapés trouvent leur place dans l'action collective, influencent les revendications des activistes, et comprennent les enjeux de la poursuite d'un mouvement social des personnes handicapées. L'article illustre le souhait des jeunes activistes handicapés de bousculer leur position actuelle au sein du DPM britannique et de porter l'attention sur un avenir où les contributions des jeunes handicapés à l'activisme et aux mouvements sociaux seraient accessibles, valorisées et influentes. L'auteur explique qu'un manque de soutien à la participation des jeunes handicapés aux mouvements sociaux aura un impact négatif sur leurs identités politiques.

### Mots-clés

action collective, activisme, handicap, jeunesse, mouvement des personnes handicapées, mouvements sociaux

### Resumen

Comprender el activismo de los jóvenes discapacitados es clave para impulsar el cambio social y la participación de los jóvenes discapacitados en la política. Los jóvenes discapacitados necesitan oportunidades para situar sus experiencias históricas y biográficas dentro de contextos socioeconómicos más amplios. Esto conducirá a una conciencia politizada en torno a la discapacidad, la emancipación y la justicia social. Este artículo presenta datos empíricos del primer estudio sobre la posición contemporánea de los jóvenes con discapacidad dentro del *Disabled People's Movement* (DPM) británico. Se evalúan críticamente tres áreas relevantes del activismo juvenil: la militancia activista, la organización del movimiento social y las consideraciones futuras para el activismo. Esto permite una exploración de cómo los jóvenes activistas discapacitados se desenvuelven en la acción colectiva, influyen en las reivindicaciones y demandas de los activistas y comprenden las cuestiones implicadas en el sostenimiento de un movimiento social de personas discapacitadas. El artículo ilustra el deseo de los jóvenes activistas discapacitados de cambiar su posición actual dentro del DPM británico y llamar la atención sobre un futuro en el que las contribuciones de los jóvenes discapacitados al activismo y los movimientos sociales sean accesibles, valoradas e influyentes. El artículo argumenta que la falta de apoyo a la participación de los jóvenes discapacitados en los movimientos sociales tendrá un impacto adverso en sus identidades políticas.

### Palabras clave

acción colectiva, activismo, discapacidad, juventud, movimiento de personas con discapacidad, movimientos sociales