



Young people's activism in times of austerity

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YOUNG PEOPLE'S ACTIVISM IN TIMES OF AUSTERITY

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This report outlines the key insights from a PhD research project carried out between October 2018 and April 2022.

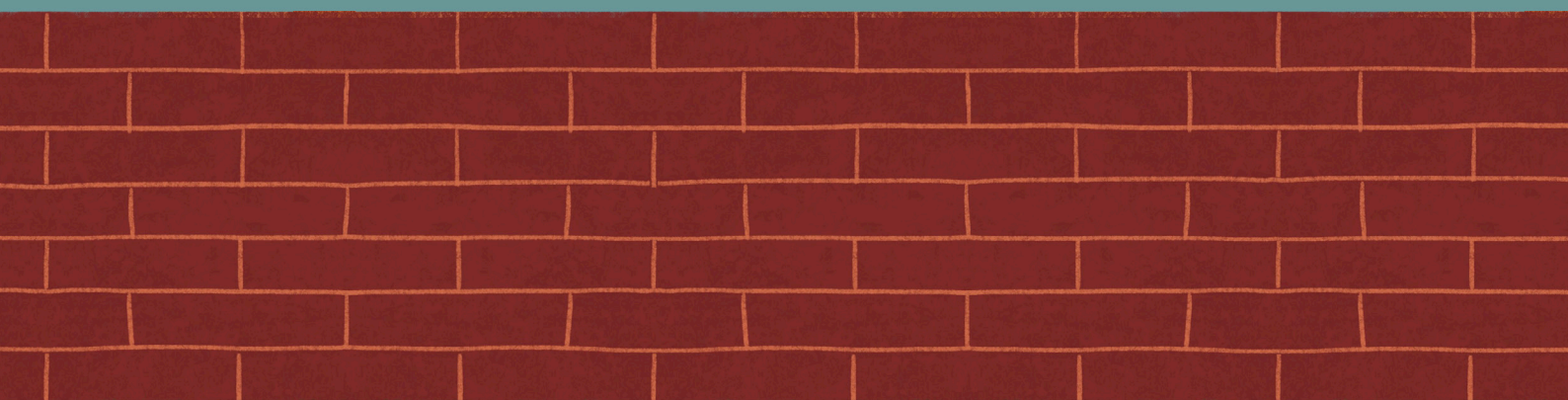
The project, entitled 'Young people's activism in times of austerity: an ethnographic and participatory study', was a collaborative project between myself and RECLAIM, a youth engagement charity based in Greater Manchester.

The research was designed to explore young people's understandings and practices of activism and how this work is supported by a youth engagement organisation. Accompanied by quotes from staff and young people at RECLAIM, this short

report outlines the dynamics, challenges and everyday politics of engaging in and supporting working-class youth activism in a context of austerity, as well as the COVID-19 pandemic.

The findings are arranged thematically, covering 1) young people's ideas about and experiences of activism across the life-course; 2) intergenerational care, support and solidarity; and 3) challenges facing youth engagement organisations in a difficult economic context.

The summary concludes with an overview of key findings and recommendations.



1. YOUNG PEOPLE'S PRACTICES AND EXPERIENCES OF ACTIVISM ACROSS THE LIFE-COURSE

1.1. ACTIVISM AT MULTIPLE SCALES

The young people who took part in this research described activism as **non-hierarchical**; their activism takes place at **multiple scales** and involves actions from tweeting, to standing up to bullies, to protests and government lobbying.

So I feel that activism can take place in your everyday life, in the simple things that you take part in, but it can also be something big, something that's organised, something that's set apart beforehand. Or even what something that someone could do by telling a friend when they say something offensive about someone else, saying oh that's wrong, you shouldn't say that, you should be respectful towards that person [...] there's also demonstrations, protests, things like that, or speaking in government lobbying different things that you can do on a larger scale for different things.

I think different levels but also just because it isn't like a national scale or a global scale that doesn't mean it's not like valued almost? [...] I think even though it's not such a big scale it should still be seen as something really [...] like you did something really well. (Younger alumni members, 11/8/20)

1.2. SPACES OF ACTIVISM

Young people described differences between 'activism' and 'politics', describing activism as a more hopeful and less exclusionary space than politics for young people to challenge inequalities.

[...] with the start of Team Future; it was difficult when we were speaking to a lot



of people, that idea of why young people should be involved in the conversation of it and stuff. I remember being really deflated, because a lot of people just didn't understand why we would care and they didn't value our opinion. (Older alumni member, 3/11/20)

[...] in my opinion, so activism is best effective at ground level. So in communities, in the...certain levels of society, I think it really works and it builds sort of togetherness, sort of hope, those types of things. (Older alumni member, 10/11/20)

1.3. 'ACTIVIST' AS IDENTITY

Young people **described differing relationships to the term activist**; this is linked to young people's identities in terms of **class, race, gender and youth**. Some young people used the title activist confidently, whereas other young people felt more ambivalent or hesitant to use the term due to ideas about who can be an activist.

Yeah, I don't use that word to describe what I do, but I recognise that I have done some activism work in the past. To me, I always feel an activist is someone who has dedicated their full time interests and pursuits to it, but I'm kind of moving away from that, because I was thinking about how unfair it is that because of the way the world is, some people have to give up all of their interests and passions and become an activist when if they didn't have to fight literally for equality, maybe they would be brilliant in the media, maybe they'd be brilliant in academia.

So now I'm realising that we should move

away from thinking that an activist is just someone who does that. Maybe people who are activists are doing multiple things all the time, but with the intention of bringing about social change [...]. (Older alumni member, 22/9/20)

1.4. CRITICAL THINKING AND YOUNG PEOPLE'S AGENCY IN CONTEXT

Young people described involvement in activism and critical thinking at a young age having a big impact on their **sense of self, power and agency**. For many young people, RECLAIM was the first space in which they were encouraged to think critically about inequalities and where they were supported to challenge issues they care about. This encouraged a longer-term interest in politics and activism for many young people. Young people's sense of agency is strongly related to intersecting axes of difference, as well as the socio-economic context.

I think I became a lot more sort of politically aware and politically engaged after joining RECLAIM [...] politics just seemed so boring before and like not really anything to do with me. And then after the start of RECLAIM I started thinking more about how it does affect me [...] I thought about how that media portrayal directly impacted me and then to see other political stuff like [...] about how disengaged young people are, and challenging that, that makes you just feel better as well [...] when all the Brexit talks started happening I remember actually sort of making an effort to know what was going on and to like have an opinion about it as well. (Older alumni member, 29/10/20)

2. INTERGENERATIONAL CARE, SUPPORT AND SOLIDARITY

2.1. ADULTS AND YOUNG PEOPLE WORKING TOGETHER

Most young people expressed feeling a **strong sense of equality** between themselves and the staff members and that the way in which RECLAIM works offered an alternative to more traditional age-related power dynamics.

[...] I'd got to the point where I was really disillusioned 'cause I'd done things like Youth Parliament and a load of initiatives that seemed really shiny all on the outside, but there was no actual teeth there, you were just basically wasting your time. And, I think, RECLAIM was the first time that I actually felt it was something to do with young people, but it was radical, it was actually about inspiring change. (Older alumni member, 19/11/20)

Transparency about the extent to which an organisation is youth-led, however, is important; there are **age related power dynamics** that must be acknowledged. There were differing views regarding what constitutes youth-led work, supporting the need for a shared understanding of what this looks like in practice. Collaboration between young people and adults is key.

2.2. CHALLENGES INVOLVED IN EARLY ENGAGEMENT IN ACTIVISM

Young people described **learning about intersecting oppressions and processes of marginalisation as challenging**, but that this learning supported young people to view oppressions as **structural**.



[...] hearing statistics about you're less likely to get a job, or you're more likely to be stopped by the police [...] I would often argue with [former staff member], isn't it best sometimes if we don't know? [...] Maybe I would have internalised them differently though? Maybe it would have been more of a personal attack rather than a wider community attack, so now when I feel discriminated against because of my accent or because of where I live or anything like that, I often look at it as part of a wider societal issue, rather than a personal issue. So there are benefits to learning about this in the formative years, yeah, there are. Just difficult. (Older alumni member, 22/9/20)

Young people also spoke about the pressure that can come with activism and the sometimes **unfair burden and expectation** that is put onto working-class young activists.

People come and talk to us as if we had like the cure for cancer and we knew how to fix society, like we knew everything but it was like we were just kids trying to make a difference in our communities and trying to like open it up for ourselves. (Older alumni member, 1/7/20)

I don't want to be the voice of every working-class young person [...] it's incredible to have a voice that is genuinely heard and it's incredible to have a voice that inspires other young people to use their voice. It's not incredible to have a voice that organisations use to say that they've worked with working-class communities. (Older alumni member, 1/7/20)

2.3.

CLASS SOLIDARITY AND RELATIONSHIPS BETWEEN STAFF AND YOUNG PEOPLE

Strong bonds of care between young people and staff supported young people to stay involved with RECLAIM. Young people talked about feeling a sense of **intergenerational class solidarity** which supported them to feel at ease within the organisation. Young people described their involvement with RECLAIM giving them a vocabulary to discuss their experiences of being a young working-class person, as well as a sense of worth as a young person.

I don't think anybody had ever sat in front of us and said like, you are working-class young people, and that's nothing to be ashamed of. But it is something that in life, that it's...you automatically, you're a couple of a steps behind those that aren't [...] And it made us start looking at the world and dynamics of the world, and actually seeing, oh, yeah, that is unfair, that is unjust. (Older alumni member, 10/11/20)

3. CHALLENGES FACING YOUTH ENGAGEMENT ORGANISATIONS IN AN AUSTERE CLIMATE

3.1. A COMPETITIVE AND LIMITED FUNDING LANDSCAPE

At an organisational level, the highly competitive funding landscape has impacted RECLAIM's ability to secure funding they used to rely on to run longer, resource intensive programmes. Instead, the organisation relies on a variety of smaller grants and other sources of funding such as charity partnerships and consultancy work. The **context of diminishing resources** has led to RECLAIM adopting **more business-like practices both in terms of the structure of the team and the financial strategy** to survive within a neoliberal economic landscape.

We have to be so business savvy [...] It doesn't sit right with charities. When I first started to talk to staff here about fundraising and donor engagement and getting people to give they'd [the rest of the staff team] all pull faces, it felt horrible to them, I completely appreciate that, but the truth is if we don't we don't survive, none of us have jobs, we don't continue making an impact and working with young people. (Staff member, 11/3/20)

3.2. HIGH STAFF TURNOVER RATES

The competitive funding landscape and tight turnaround time for funding bids causes stress and anxiety at an individual level for staff, as well as **impacting upon the longer-term work** of the organisation. One of the consequences of the funding situation is that the majority of staff are on **short-term contracts**, and the staff turnover rate is high. Throughout the research it was clear that strong relationships between staff members and



young people enable and sustain young people's engagement in activism. However, these **relationships can be undermined** by a high staff turnover as a result of short-term contracts.

*... I think funders don't realise the impact that has on young people and I think especially with a lot of working-class young people there's always knock-backs within their lives, so consistency is a massive massive thing and if the consistency isn't there I think it can do worse damage going in and parachuting out than not at all, doing it not at all.
(Staff member, 11/3/20)*

*... when they [staff] leave, it's hard for the young people, you know, because they've spent so much time getting to know that person, and building trust.
(Older alumni member, 24/10/2020)*

3.3. LIMITS TO YOUNG PEOPLE'S INVOLVEMENT IN THE ORGANISATION

The competitive and challenging funding context influenced young people's participation in the strategic side of the organisation. Tight turnaround times on funding bids left limited time for young people to be involved in these. Whilst strong relationships between some staff members and young people meant that ideas for campaigns and projects could be discussed quickly and easily, the absence of these in all cases meant that this influence is sometimes not shared equally amongst all the young people engaged with RECLAIM.

For example, one staff member spoke about finding it harder to engage with some cohorts of young people because she was not their youth worker from the start – “they don't have that level of trust with me”. She held this in contrast to her relationships with young people for whom she has been their youth worker, where there is “no weirdness about me just ringing them and asking them something [...] Is this something we could do a campaign on? [...] And they'll talk to me about stuff”. (Staff member, 14/4/20).

3.4. WORKING-CLASS YOUTH-LED CAMPAIGNING WORK IN A CONTEXT OF AUSTERITY

Establishing a definition of 'working-class' was a necessary task for the RECLAIM team in 2020 as ambiguity over the way this term was being utilised in funding bids impacted RECLAIM's chances of securing funding. This process of arriving at a definition was experienced by some in practice as involving a reduced focus on questions of race and anti-racist practice. This demonstrated the need for and led to an expansive, inclusive and intersectional definition of working-class which has since been adopted by the organisation.

I feel like RECLAIM used to work more on issues affecting other demographics, not just working-class communities [...] there should be more of a focus on race – as an organisation we should be tackling these issues. (Paraphrased comments made by older alumni member, fieldnotes, 5/8/20)

The external context has meant that youth organisations are required to provide a 'unique selling point'. This need to set the organisation apart speaks to the necessary 'individuality' created by a **neoliberal economic context**. All the campaigning work RECLAIM support young people to do has to be specific to the organisation's

definition of working-class, creating therefore some parameters to young people's campaigning activity. **This drive to be doing something 'different' can sometimes put limits on the space to create expansive, unboundaried, youth-led campaigns.**

CONCLUDING COMMENTS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

- **Young people think about activism as taking place at multiple scales, with all actions along this scale being valuable.** Activism, and activist spaces, are seen as more hopeful and less exclusionary to young people than politics and political spaces.
- **Activist identity is bound up with intersecting identities, including race, gender, class and age.** There is a need to continually challenge ideas about who can be an activist and ensure young people's views and opinions are centred in discussions about activism.
- **Austerity measures have created a challenging economic context for youth engagement organisations,** the impacts of which are felt particularly in terms of staff turnover, project length and the extent to which all aspects of an organisation's work can be youth-led.
- **Systemic changes within the funding system are needed to ease the pressure on small charities.** These should include increased availability of long-term funding, more flexible deadlines and shorter application processes.
- **RECLAIM offers an important space for young people to develop critical thinking skills, impacting their sense of worth as young people and feelings of capability and power to fight for social change.** Spaces like RECLAIM are therefore vital, especially in a context where the UK government are tightening rules on forms of protest and yet more austerity measures are coming into effect with the cost of living crisis.
- **Research conducted with care, commitment and collaboration can support youth activists by amplifying their work and tracing the processes and legacies of change making.** Small scale collaborative research projects can tell us a lot about the dynamics and challenges of small third sector organisations.



This research was a collaborative effort that would not have been possible without some brilliant young people and adults.

A huge thank you to all the young people and staff at RECLAIM for being so welcoming of me and of this research; it has been a pleasure and a privilege to work with you all.

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I'd love to hear from you so please get in touch with any thoughts or questions.

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