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**Name:** Dr John Daniels  
**Email:** [j.e.daniels@mmu.ac.uk](mailto:j.e.daniels@mmu.ac.uk)  
**Tel.** +441612475467  
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## Abstract

### **Youth Development through sport: A case study of a disability gymnastics programme**

The British government's newly published sports strategy (DCMS, 2015) has recognised the recent decline in participation in all physical activity and sport (Sport England, 2015) and has once again targeted those in underrepresented groups – namely, women, black and minority ethnic groups and disabled people. Moreover, the Government have focussed on outcomes relating to mental health, employability and education. In the face of more spending cuts, it is the underrepresented groups that get hit the hardest (Collins and Haudenhuyse, 2015). Ironically, it is in these groups where sport is 'believed' to make the greatest gains, particularly in tackling inequality and for improving mental and social health. However, government investment and support can no longer rely on beliefs and anecdote – particularly in times of austerity. National sports programmes are tasked with explaining outcomes and providing a rich and reliable evidence base upon which progress can be made. Community sports programmes, particularly those targeting participants that are 'hard to reach' are no different.

The aim of this study was to explore the experiences of a disability sports programme and identify the mechanisms and context influencing its sustainability using Pawson and Tilley's (1997) realistic evaluation framework. The findings suggest that observations of improved physical and motor capabilities and sustained engagement with the programme could be explained through a number of mechanisms. These included allowing parents to be involved with initial programme activities and the timely inclusion of mini competitions. These mechanisms required important contexts such as coaches that were able to cope with the rapid changes in the physical abilities of the participants and having a programme that was developed with the 'family' in mind (Daniels, 2016).

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