A Grand Challenge ‘Adolescent Lives’ Ethnographic Documentary
Beyond the ‘Engagement’ Paradigm: Participating in Youth Lives in Rural Somerset

PROJECT TEAM:

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Project Aims:

- To understand adolescence in the context of permanent school exclusion in non-selective state schools and attended Pupil Referral Unit (PRU)

- To challenge misconceptions about the ‘excluded kid’

- To disrupt notions about ‘engagement/ dis-engagement’ – what does ‘being engaged’ actually mean for young people?

- To facilitate participatory research with young people by making a film with them that captures their views of education and everyday life
What do we mean by adolescence?

Mike and Andy

• According to the Lancet (2018) ”a definition of 10–24 years corresponds more closely to adolescent growth and popular understandings of this life phase and would facilitate extended investments across a broader range of settings”

• Everyday stigma
  ○ Defining self against how perceived as ‘excluded kids’
    ○ worthless, stupid, amount to ‘nothing’

• Everyday social exclusion
  ○ “I feel like I was forgotten about” – Mike
  ○ “I was just misunderstood” – Andy
What do we mean by adolescence?

Mike and Andy

• Exclusion informs future aspirations:
  o Very positive stories of PRU and PRU teachers
    ▶ “School is black and white whereas PRU is a rainbow” – Andy
  o Mike’s assisted living care work
    ▶ “It’s because I got kicked out of school that I am a carer. I want to be a manager of a care home one day”
  o Andy studying music production
    ▶ “I never knew there were careers out there like this. PRU introduced me to my creative side”
What are the policy implications of your research findings?
Why are exclusions increasing?

- Each school day 35 children are told to leave their school permanently:
  - In England, exclusions have risen by 40% over the past three years (Department for Education, 2017)

- Austerity measures and cuts to funding

- Increased accountability and audit measures
Reforms and implications?

- Prevent exclusion in the first place
  - Improve teaching practice
  - Introduce more inclusion measures
  - Improve communication with mainstream schools and the AP sector
Our findings show that communication between schools and APs is essential for the well-being of vulnerable students.

But we disagree that this should be only solved by preventing exclusion in the first place.

Instead, we argue that we need to re-think the role and meaning of exclusion in the first place.

- Separate the practices of punitive and welfare systems
- Understand that exclusion can sometimes be the start of a positive process of re-engagement
- Bigger implication
  - Move away from polar thinking of inclusion / exclusion towards a more a holistic understanding of adolescent learning
  - Start from the voices of the young people themselves – ethnographic work is essential!