

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



People

Like Us

**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:
  - Very positive stories of PRU and PRU teachers
    - ✦ *“School is black and white whereas PRU is a rainbow” – Andy*
  - 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”*
  - 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



# Policy Implications From Our Research



- 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!