

Title: Disclosure, Disbelief, Enclosure: listening with precarious kids in London.

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We have no way of knowing how often in the course of human history the idea of Truth, as a revelation to or possession of some one group (which thereby gained the right to consider itself superior to all those who lacked this revelation), may have appeared. But certain it is that, wherever this notion of hierarchical arrangements of cultural views of experience appears, it has profound effects upon education... —

Margaret Mead, 1943

Derek Freeman's discrediting of Mead's 1920s study on adolescent behaviour was almost as widely noted as Mead's original work. However, despite the controversy which occluded much of the merit of not only this monograph but Mead's wider work, Mead's book remains one of the most read and discussed ethnographies of the 20th century. I do not raise this to delve into the controversy itself. Rather, I am interested in Freeman's quoted reason for disbelieving Mead (according to Shankman's 2013 recasting), that "while Mead was not a deliberate cheat, she was a foolish young woman who never realized the nature of her error" (2013:61).ⁱ I foreground Mead's treatment as a provocation to tease out considerations of very similar statements by authorities, educators, and policymakers about children and young people more generally, to commence a discussion on interpretative skew, context, gender, ageism, self-sovereignty and what Sahlins named 'afterology' (1999:404): the analytical

remaking of insights in the field, in context, as a result of (and to match) hegemonic expectations.

Taking cues from Stuart Hall's "analysis of conjunctures" approach, I mark how "the intricate interweaving of religious, regional, cultural, historical, political [also racial, generational, neurodivergent, linguistic]" (Hall 1997:25 [interruption mine]) leads to communication breakdowns between marginalised 'kids'¹ in England and the decision-making adults surrounding them. I attribute these incommensurabilities to divergent 'affordances' (Gibson 1979; Keane 2013) which prevent recognition of and believing what kids say about what they value and need.

I will first unpack testimonial disclosure in both ethnographic telling and in UK public support eligibility proofs, before examining how UK austerity policies changed childhood through economic, taxonomic, and educational policies. I will then shift focus onto ethnographic research I co-produced in a North London locality as part of ABC (Anthropology By Children/Communities), a self-advocacy and citizen social science methods programme I devised and delivered with local government, in schools, and in third-sector spaces between 2021-2024.ⁱⁱ I will highlight challenges kids faced in two specific educational settings: alternate educational provision (AP),ⁱⁱⁱ and an ESOL (English for Speakers of Other Languages) class for 'recently-arrived' students, the gloss appointed to families who might be migrants of any kind including displaced people or refugees. I argue

¹ *A note on terms:* When referring to all people under 18, I employ the emic term 'kids' because 1. it's what they call themselves, but also because 2. by law any person under 18 is legally a child—'young people' in this context is a divisive concept as I will go on to show in the following pages. It is noteworthy that the kids featured here all reside within about one square mile of each other, despite living with very different circumstances.

that kids in both spaces experience lack of mobility (social/geographical/educational) because of 'disarticulation' (Rosalie Jones-McVey 2025; Berger 2013), an unhinging from typical teenaged pursuits and pathways provoked by a confrontation of institutions and bureaucratised disclosure forms which assume normative expectations of mind, body, and aspiration. These are enshrined in policy, and push against the (often non-normative, precarious and marginalised) kids' ways of being, learning and aspiring. This creates a loop which leads to lack of progression, heretofore attributed to “failure to aspire” (Appadurai 2007), but which may instead be seen as communicatively and structurally instantiated means of 'educational enclosure' (Sojoyner 2016), a thwarting of choices attributable to systemic and epistemic barriers (Froerer et al 2022) rather than aspiration failure—what I name 'poverty of pathway'.

Unreliable narrators? Challenges, children, ethnographic praxis

Twenty years ago, Hirschfeld wrote: "Why Don't Anthropologists Like Children?" arguing that "there are good, indeed quite compelling, reasons that children deserve broad-based scholarly regard [...] By adolescence, children in every known society display elaborate and culturally specific ways of making-meaning and modes of behavior" (Hirschfeld 2002:611-612). Over two decades since, anthropological attention on children has increased significantly, addressing digital spaces (Kallus 2022; Advani 2022; Jovičić 2020; Bonilla & Rosa 2015; Miller 2015); conflict (Broch et al 2024; L. Fergusson et al 2021; Haer 2019; Cohen et al 2015; Rosen 2007); crisis (Boyden 1994); inequalities (Lancy 2014; Bluebond & Langer 2007); statelessness (Allerton 2020; Mitchell 1991); and the consistent issue of adults doubting and devaluing children's voices (Balakian 2025; Panci 2023; Routon 2021).

Despite the increase in anthropological attention, kids are still often disbelieved or discredited based on their assumed lack of experiential knowledge and power. I've personally worked with adult interlocutors, policymakers and educators who believe research with children and young people is a waste of time because (to quote a prominent youth advocate): “*children lie*.” Nünning (2015) frames “children” alongside “politicians” as the archetypal unreliable narrators who: “can be found everywhere [...and] as listeners, we need [reliability...] It is crucial in daily life as well as in social and economic interactions” (2015:1-2). The parallel between deeming Mead ‘young’ and ‘foolish’ and the systemic disbelief of kids highlights a striking tension. In both examples, credibility is questioned not on the basis of the message, but on the messenger. The irony in doubting children is that ethnographers are likewise frequently challenged on the authenticity of their representations. Ethnographic narratives, Cheryl Mattingly argues, “cannot mirror reality; they transform and distort it, raising doubts about authenticity. Ethnographies are valued precisely because they expose these limits, highlighting the gap between lived experience and ethnographic text” (1998:30-31); as one (adult) interlocutor once told me, interpretation is like a photocopy of a photocopy – each new insight gets further away from the clarity of the telling itself. This interpretive skew thus requires critical scepticism of praxis and output, particularly given the power dynamics also in-play in field research. However, what is indisputable is that the distortion of ethnographic gaze is often the means through which the ethnographer is able to make strange, to revisit context and gain additional value from the transformed event. Memorably, João Biehl’s interlocutor, Caterina, asks him to retrieve for her the medical records kept by the clinicians at Vita, the mental health institution where she is held. When he asks why, she answers: “I want to know what they wrote of me” (2013:573). With this statement she indicates not only her desire to see the notes, and her perception that he is more likely to gain access to those records but also, less directly, that she doesn’t necessarily want to rely on his truth-telling

when it comes to her own story. In this small nugget of Biehl's ethnographic data so much more than the story is told; this moment conveys positionality, power dynamics, desire, degrees of agency and structural delimitations.

In every disclosure, whether by kid or ethnographer, there must be both teller and listener-interpreter. As each participant mobilises their individual communicative impulses via their knowledge of the conventions of language, what Julia Kristeva referred to as *phenotext* (1986:121) the content and language part of the message, is exposed. However, upon the point of utterance, the *genotext* (*ibid*) or what Barthes refers to in the context of song as 'the grain of the voice' or *genosong*; what emerges is "the body in the voice as it sings, the hand as it writes, the limb as it performs" (Barthes 1977:188); the *geno* conveys a qualitative, contextual interpretative moment which holds within it more about the person (body/hand/limb) than it does the component parts of language. The data which the teller wishes to convey, moves "through zones that have relative and transitory borders" (Kristeva 1986:121), becoming other than the initial intention of the teller, but also other than the interpretation of the listener. Their conjoint meaning-making is composed via each participant's self-specific varied 'affordances' (Gibson 1979): the environment-borne, relational and contextual aspects of meaning-making. Utterances include the formal language as well as experiential knowledge of body, age, ability, ethnicity, education, languages, accents, family upbringing, beliefs, socioeconomic positionality etc. of the teller but each listened-to message is likewise oriented through the affordances of the listener. This process by which the individual seeks understanding in the other – or in many others – can be seen as inherently *transductional* (Keane 2013): transformed to be receivable and thus also manipulable by the receiver. It is precisely this distortion, the merging of teller's affordances

with those of the interpreter(s), which are both key value and shortcoming of ethnographic representation, and it is here that kids and ethnographers elide.

For example, Cristina Toren's study of and by Fijian children uncovers what they expect of their futures through drawings and texts highlighting patterns modelled on typical adult behaviours, traditions, and customs. But they also sketch chairs for sitting-on that were not often found in the region. Toren writes:

their drawings and commentaries (like all our representations — this article included) are fundamentally products of imagination, itself a process that is informed by intersubjectivity, and hence by the history of our relations with others in the environing world. What interests me, therefore, is what emerges from analysis as evincing children's ideas about the situations I present to them.” (Toren 2007:286)

I glean from these and many other examples that the imagination or unreliability of kids and of ethnographers is not really a problem to solve, but rather an acknowledged feature we hold in common, an outcome of the need to attend to the context and process as much as that which is told.

My own ethnographic work with less-listened-to kids draws heavily on lessons I learnt from conducting research with deaf British Sign Language users; my learning to listen with them in a DEAF-centred way -DEAF signifying ‘an authority entirely apart from hearing’ rather than ‘in-opposition-to’. This way of ‘attending-to’ changed my entire understanding of what listening performs, both in everyday life and in my research (Robinson 2024). I learnt to de-privilege spoken and written English in favour of drawings, proxemic maps, photography or collage, a move which led to attending to this way of listening: multimodally, beyond

assumed sensory norms, and which therefore also mitigated some of the hefty power-dynamics in play when working with younger, marginalised people (O'Brien 2017). However, introducing dynamic multimodal outputs raises questions about ethics of representation, and how/whether we build into methods ways that facilitate the legibility of our interlocutors, not as *we* wish them to be but as *they* wish to be told, and whether/how this facilitates gaining access to the most hard-to-reach population of all: adult decisionmakers.^{iv} There is increasing recognition for the need for telling stories of displaced children in ways which feel lighter, more creative and less pre-determined, but doing so also requires ethical, field and risk reconsiderations. The most successful of these interventions restore via their telling the multi-dimensional humanity that is often removed from “all-too-pervasive accounts of young migrants as disembodied” (Heidbrink 2021), facilitating needed sensitivity to a “kind of literature of extreme situations” (Broyard 1992:41 in Mattingly 1998:1).

With *Delia's Return* (2021), Lauren Heidbrink crafts a textual representation of translated testimony of an unaccompanied 16yr old indigenous MamMam girl, illustrated by the anthropologist's 14-year-old daughter. The result is a dynamic, multimodal graphic non-fiction which recounts the story of Delia's deportation from the US. It “reflect[s] upon the politics of representation, children as ethnographers, and the creative potential of multimodal anthropology as both method and reflective practice” (2021:685). In Elizabeth Ngutuku's work exploring “how children's aspirations are built upon an ‘assemblage’ of factors, including HIV/AIDS and death, poverty and orphanhood” through a process she names ‘listening softly’. This involves continuous conversations around essays and drawings (*in* Froerer et al 2022:183) prioritising context as much as content in trying to understand how poverty and vulnerability impact upon young students' aspirations (Ngutuku 2022:225). Vijitha Rajan's (2020) ethnographic study of three NGO schools in Bangalore questions what

constitutes 'field' in fieldwork: the transience of displaced children means the anthropologist cannot pin down a cohort of interlocutors by staying in one place and monitoring (Merry 2011). The confluence of movement and uncertainty for children and families means a constantly changing field which requires listening and documenting with agility and flexibility. Particularly for those who live on a literal or metaphorical knife's edge, anthropological interpretations and representations of kids must sustain a heightened awareness of additional duties of care, questions of risk, vulnerabilities and potential harm (Clark et al 2017; 2011). Entangled within this is the recognition that disclosure itself can be a violence.

How Austerity formalised disclosure and created the mandate for long-term adversity

As Insa Koch's (2018) ethnography on Austerity Britain shows, while deep state cuts to government services were meted out across regions and impacted many in the population, a disproportionate percentage of cuts were felt by the most state-reliant people; for my purposes here, I will focus on people with disabilities, children, and young people. Following the financial crisis from 2012 onward, austerity measures were used by the conservative government to justify a shift toward economic efficiency. The austerity-focused architects of the revised benefits system hinged eligibility on evidence of "long-term adverse effects" as a result of that disability or long-term health condition. This was a direct reference to the Equality Act 2010 which had defined 'age' and 'disability' as protected characteristics.

As part of my fieldwork from 2013 through 2018, throughout the rollout of welfare reform, I volunteered as a form-filler for people claiming Personal Independence Payment aka 'PIP' (the primary form of disability benefit for adults in the UK).^{vvi} PIP requires proof of "long-term adverse effects," a demand which necessitates a highly formalized disclosure process

that is inherently susceptible to communication breakdown (Robinson 2019; Robinson & Carroll 2023). Disclosure must be via testimonial evidence outlining the extent, degree and frequency of adversity. The forms on which these testimonies are documented are structured to look simple, straightforward, and purport to not need specialist language, but there are hidden pitfalls which will undermine the claim. For example, when anyone 16 years and over applies for PIP, the disclosure process requires the claimant to be exceptionally clear about what kind of long-term adversity. However, the temporality of the form, named “How your disability affects you,” asks only about the claimant’s body, mind and challenges in the present tense. What they need to tell is not today, but every day: – *how much pain, how often, how many days a week, how many weeks a year, over how many years?* This seemingly small nudge toward answering adversity questions in the present rather than stating how they evolve day-to-day and over the long-term, often prevents a claims success. What starts as a simple response to a question about pain must suit the form necessitating a reconstitution of communication.

For this reason, testimonial proofs must undergo a 'semiotic transduction' (Keane 2013:2) a transformation of the meaning of long-term adverse effects from an embodied and lived semiotic modality to an abstracted, entextualised, paper-based flattened mode (Robinson 2019). Testimonial disclosures are transformed upon point of reception by the form-filler, because the initial individual's intention converges with the recipient-other's affordances, a calibration of which must then fit with the bureaucratic instruments underpinning the forms. Specific words trigger point values loosely based on the World Health Organisation's International Classification of Functioning and Disability (ICF) related adversity scores;^{vii} without careful attention to the language used, the claimant (who in all likelihood knows nothing about ICF domains) will not score high enough to get their benefits, regardless of the

severity of the need. A "successful" disclosure is one that foregrounds incapacity at the expense of the well self to clarify the temporality, frequency and longevity of long-term adversity over the lifecourse. The seeming optionality of telling more than the tick-boxes of YES/NO/SOMETIMES which appear on the form, the minimal amount of writing space should one wish to expand on their pain/challenges, and the form's 'present-ing' of time in the face of proving longterm adversity undermine success.

This is one way that formal disclosures set "expectations of telling [which] challenge people to reflect on how they will be presented in public [...] space over which they have no control" (Manderson et al 2015:S185). In public domains, in a confession, in a courtroom, or on support documents, breaking silence may sometimes serve a restorative function, providing a way of redressing gross power imbalances (ibid), but within this highly formalized disclosure system, breaking silence can sometimes break the teller in the process (Constable 2013). A biopolitical struggle ensues: the individual has the instinct to maintain self-sovereignty and dignity, while the State requires the applicant to be a suffering subject only, which is felt by many individuals as a form of denigration (Robinson 2019). The formalized nature of this disclosure process, with its inherent propensity for communication breakdown due to competing genotextual frameworks, thus becomes a mechanism through which systemic power imbalances are reinforced rather than addressed. It creates additional danger and pain for the person telling, often without them realising, a risk that is compounded when the teller is a child.

Changing schools, changing childhood

There were key changes from the 1990s onward which shifted the visibility of people under 18 years in terms of international policy. The UN Convention on the Rights of the Child^{viii}

came into force on 2 September 1990 with 54 directives designed to protect and extend human rights more concretely to children. As such, the legal system began "to distinguish adolescents as a special [legal] category, separate from children or adults, with debates ongoing about developmental capacities and whether autonomy of an adult or the protection owed a child was more important in this context" (Schmidt and Reppucci 2002:88).

In 1997, the UK's 'New Labour' party^{ix} promoted recognition of 'youth' as a positive representation of the future of the citizenry, capitalising on the attitude of "Cool Britannia", which embraced youth culture and focused on development of youth service provision driven by 'youth-choice' and 'student voice'.

However, after the onset of the 2008 financial crisis, austerity-linked initiatives hastened the advent of the UK schools 'academy' system, in which private equity investment began to fund and direct children's education with lessened oversight by the government. This moment also signalled a reconstitution of the meaning of 'childhood'. In the name of efficiency, early years were determined to be the best time to intervene in child development (ending around age 7-8yrs); 'young person' became the term to describe children of secondary school age through early adulthood (roughly 11–25). Increasingly the 'young person' life-phase involved mediating and policing post/pubescent behaviour including school attendance, sexual activity, drug use, and 'antisocial behaviours' (Youdell and McGimpsey 2015:214; see also Narotzky and Besnier 2014). Hirschfeld explains that "age-dependent 'costs' of transgression," have been mapped across geographies and cultures: "Young children's errors, from a cultural perspective, are relatively low cost [...whereas] errors in cultural performance committed by post-adolescents are generally seen as more serious and are more likely to arouse direct criticism, punishment, or other sanctions" (2002:612). In the UK case,

simultaneous funding cuts significantly reduced both formal youth support worker roles and youth-specific spaces, applying direct pressure to provide alternative supports in schools.

Young people's transgressions thus increasingly experience more punitive measures in English schools, including physical isolation (in locked rooms) for behavioural control, with reduced oversight by the government (Condliffe 2023), as well as increased presence of police officers where once had been youth workers (Joseph-Salisbury 2021). Dividing stages of childhood in this way have therefore impacted the choices and outcomes of generation Z kids onward. Amidst this landscape, English alternative (education) provision (AP) emerged to educate children who were not easily includable in mainstream education. Those young people accessing AP...

are positioned as particularly vulnerable, as they are more likely to have characteristics which are related to poorer life-chances and outcomes such as: growing up in poverty; having a special educational need or disability; being from minority ethnic groups; and involvement from other statutory services." (Johnston, Malcolm & Pennacchia 2024:5)

"What does disclosure mean?"

When I began conducting fieldwork in educational spaces in 2021, the UK was still under restrictions from the Covid-19 pandemic. As these parameters eased, my fieldwork moved beyond socially distant work with kids in school playgrounds to classroom-based AP settings. Here I describe fieldwork with students in two different AP settings: the first a formal one, set up to support children who had exhibited bad behaviour, glossed by educators as

‘incidents’ and the second, kids in a unit within a mainstream school where students take English for Speakers of Other Languages aka ‘ESOL’.

The North London locality where I conducted field research was amongst the ten highest jurisdictions for child poverty in the UK. Time and financial resource pressures limit young people's access to assessment and diagnosis of neurodiversities, behavioural and cognitive needs. Diagnostic delay because of long assessment National Health Service [NHS] waitlists, alongside reductions in personnel and financial expenditure for youth support leads to "a lower social participation rate in extracurricular organisations [which] decreases opportunities for informal learning and consequently reduces life chances" (Damelang and Kloß 2013:321). It also reduces the size and shape of kids’ networks – knowing who to talk to, where and how to ask for support. This was the case for Thomas.

Thomas, aged 15, a white boy, lived with an elderly relative because the rest of his family had dispersed elsewhere. From our first meeting, Thomas explained how desperate he was to get back to what he referred to as "real school", rather than the AP he'd been attending for the previous 24 months. He had been in mainstream – meaning state-funded, also called 'maintained' school – until age 12 when he was excluded because of an 'incident'. Ana, his teacher, never discussed with me the particulars of any of the children's circumstances beyond what was common knowledge. She did say that such incidents usually involved physical violence (e.g. fights, hair pulling, biting, and stabbing) or hate language; she implied that this included Thomas. I knew about ‘incidents’ as general ideas in the background but determined to meet the kids as I found them and treated this as part of their right to opacity.^x

The kind of AP learning institution Thomas attended is colloquially called (by those within the school though not by the local government nor the school's leadership) a 'Pupil Referral Unit', or a 'PRU'. PRUs are AP institutions created to teach children who aren't able to attend school and may not otherwise receive any education. Approximately half of young people in APs have "social, emotional and mental health difficulties" (Kew-Simpson et al 2023:145). Kids may be sent to an AP due to disabilities, learning differences or neurodiversities requiring particular support, or they have short- or long-term illness, or if the child has been excluded from mainstream education or are a new starter waiting for a mainstream school place (Malcolm 2024a; 2024b). The variability amongst APs in terms of disciplinary approaches, curriculum, resources (whether private academies paid for by private equity firms or state-funded), and related differences in the kinds of students each AP caters for means that the gloss of 'AP' does not really impart much information. Students attending an AP are never quite sure what to expect, and perhaps more importantly they do not know how long they will be staying.

One afternoon, Thomas asked Ana about the difference between the medical unit PRU and the behavioural unit PRU, because the two AP institutions work as cooperative offerings in the local area and it wasn't clear what distinguished them. Ana explained that the medical unit serves young people who have been diagnosed with a disease, disability or neurodiversity; the other PRU is for students who have been "*kicked out of school*." Thomas listened to this explanation and considered it aloud in light of his own school experiences and agendas for the future. He noted that he already had a diagnosis of ADHD, something I also knew because it was openly acknowledged by the teachers who work with him. However, likely because of his earlier violent incident, Thomas had not, and as Ana went on to explain

could not, have been offered the opportunity to attend the medical unit because, as Ana said, he'd been "*kicked out*." Thomas' documented incident was in his file as formal evidence of "behavioural problems" and no mainstream school so far had been willing to take him.

Sometime later, spying a flyer from another school about safeguarding which I had kept in my field notebook, Thomas asked me:

"what does 'disclosure' mean?"

I responded that 'disclosure' here meant telling another person, usually a child telling an adult (though not always), about something that has physically or psychically hurt the teller or sometimes saying that they (the child) had witnessed harm to another person. I said that in this context, it implies the listener needs to listen to and then support the teller, including potentially telling someone else who can help, particularly in cases of abuse. Thomas considered this response silently for a few minutes, before shifting tack. He asked some questions about the school from which the flyer had come – did I think it was a good school? "*Is it a 'real school', like with classes and tests?*" he asked. I told him it seemed pretty nice to me and yes, it had lots of different classes, was pretty big with a few hundred students and I assumed tests as well though I'd not seen any. Thomas had independently searched for schools online, but he admitted to me he didn't really know where to look or even what to look for, so he asked lots of people about their impressions of different schools. He doesn't know anything about the application process either, and it seemed he didn't know what to do next. Thomas' family and home situation were complicated; after he was excluded from his previous school at age 12, his mother sent him to live with the elderly relative, saying she "*couldn't handle him*." Ana mused that it is possibly because of his guardian's advancing age

and mobility issues that they do not, as some of the other parents and guardians might, walk with Thomas to the AP in the morning, nor was the guardian attending meetings about Thomas' future options, potentially slowing his move to 'real school' further. Ana and he discussed it frequently; each time he asks her what happens next, he is told as much as she can tell him: the school is in touch with the local government, they will reach out to other schools to see where there might be space for him to join, but these things take time.

Thomas seemed to file away these titbits about '*real school*' and about disclosure before he added, "*I don't know who to talk to about it.*" To which, with a laugh, Ana replied:

"Hah. Neither do I!"

Throughout my time at the PRU, Thomas expressed how much he wanted to go back to "real school", multiple times per day, to other students, to his teachers and to me. On one such occasion, he told a fellow student, Morris, about his plans. Morris who is also 15 years, from an ethnic minority background and like Thomas has always lived in the local area, has been in APs since he was 9 years old, four years longer than Thomas. Morris responds that returning to "*real school*" is not likely to happen. He explains that because Thomas will next year be going into year 11 – his GCSE board exams^{xi} year – there is no way another school is going to take him on. He's been out of mainstream schooling for three years and is too far behind on the curriculum. "*It would look bad on their books,*" says Morris, when Thomas inevitably fails his exams. Thomas argues that he wouldn't fail. Morris gives him a long look before telling Thomas he hasn't had any real subject teaching for too long now and ends by saying:

"You will fail."

Ana, who overheard the whole of this conversation, remained uncharacteristically quiet.

Thomas noticed her lack of response as Morris strode out of the classroom, bored. Thomas then fell silent himself and repeatedly threw crumpled up papers against the classroom wall.

Ana and Thomas are both waiting to hear from the local government about his future schooling. Though Thomas speaks clearly when he discloses his goals to attend "*real school*," none of us- teachers, fellow students, me--can help him, and so Thomas is stuck. Here it becomes apparent that without the right listeners, disclosure itself is a regimented mechanism which 'encloses' (Sojoyner 2013) young people within restricted options. Even with rhetoric which espouses "a person-centred approach to assessment [...] children and young people from marginalised groups, such as those with Special Educational Needs and Disabilities [SENDs], remain on the periphery of decision-making" (Sharma 2021:457). Vulnerable children, particularly those who are non-verbal, not fluent in English, or those who have experienced or continue experiencing trauma, remain significantly over-represented in APs and underrepresented in consultation efforts (Belek 2017).

Those confronting challenges in school are caught in double-bind: more likely to be excluded from mainstream-schooling if they do not have a diagnosis (often due to NHS delays) because their behaviours will be marked as aberrant ("bad") rather than as SENDs. A formal diagnosis affords more support to students and families. Where families can mobilise additional resources (time, money, systems awareness, etc.), discursive seeking for *real school* may be recognised and acted upon, but for those kids living in precarious contexts, adolescent disclosures, even if not doubted, are likely to be administratively deferred, or lost in procedural backlog (Malcom 2024b). What seems clear, however, is that Thomas aspires

to a different kind of schooling – aspiration is not the lack. Instead, his inability to have his disclosures recognised by those who could enact the change to his schooling he aspires to means he is confronting a poverty of pathway.

Kim: disclosure, diagnosis, and the double bind

Thomas is a year above another student, Kim, a 15year old Black girl. On my first day conducting field research at the AP, I had met Kim when I was talking with the deputy head, Miss Acres. Kim was playing in the hallway, noticed us in the office, and proceeded to knock on the door repeatedly, loudly, until she was invited in. We were introduced, and Kim laughed heartily when I referred to the deputy head as "Miss Acres" rather than by the Deputy Head's first name which is the convention when addressing the staff in that particular AP. Kim then began to stamp the walls with a rubber date-stamper (the kind used for dating documents) which she had found and taken from another office. The deputy head reminded Kim that this was "*inappropriate behaviour*" but more in the tone of a big sister scolding a younger one, rather than the authoritarian tone I'd heard her use elsewhere.

Though Kim is undiagnosed, Miss Acres and the other teachers with whom I spoke work under the assumption that Kim is likely to have ASD [Autism Spectrum Disorder], ADHD, and developmental delays alongside documented personal disclosures of trauma and allusions to previous events of self-harm and suicide. In my meetings with Kim, she was warm and friendly and joyful. She was also prone to shouting expletives or violent things out of nowhere. At one point when she was showing me around the classrooms and taking pictures of the things on the walls, I asked her if she likes Art.

She shouted:

"I DON'T GIIIIVVVE A FUCKKKK" but just as quickly said: "I didn't mean that, Miss, don't pay attention to me. I didn't mean it."

When she said this, she looked genuinely upset, as if she let herself down. In this outburst followed by her immediate apology, Kim articulates the double bind created by school policies of disclosure: adolescents are encouraged or even required to disclose their feelings and needs, yet disclosures can be read as transgressive and, in this case, Kim herself withdraws her statement – though it is unclear whether to avoid getting into trouble or because she really *didn't mean it*. I saw her do this multiple times: shut down her emotional outbursts in order to conform to good behaviour, an action which in a sense also foreclosed the possibility of support (or even dialogue).

While Thomas has a diagnosis, Kim does not, though according to Ana it is Kim who is more demonstrably neuro-atypical, vulnerable, and in need of the support the AP can offer. It is noteworthy, however, that the local NHS trust which works closely with both the medical and behavioural APs makes an important distinction between the two institutions: both are for pupils in Key Stage 3 and 4 (11-17 years); however, the Medical AP is for pupils with "significant medical or mental health needs." This is outlined in the schools' following statement:

Pupils with either short- or long-term medical needs that prevent them from attending their mainstream education provider are referred to the Securing Education Board.

[...] Where it is agreed that a pupil's medical needs prevent them from attending school and the relevant medical evidence is in place, they will be referred to [...]

Medical [rather than general] PRU^{xii}

There are two important implications in the underlined content: first, evidence is required to be considered a person with 'medical needs'; Second, that this is intended to be a temporary measure based on an improving wellness trajectory.

Lenore Manderson argues that "diagnostic labels overdetermine subsequent embodied states of being, structuring interactions and social relations with family, friends, and health professionals. Living under diagnosis [...] impacts on self-care, care for and by others, everyday lives and anticipations of the future" (2020:1). The converse is also true; living without diagnosis can foreclose certain possibilities by virtue of remaining invisible to the medical system and therefore ending up in a behavioural unit by default. Lack of resources,^{xiii} both human and fiscal, have meant that the NHS' Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS) are struggling to keep up with mental health support demand for teens.

The behaviours of children like Thomas and Kim is perceived to be rude, antisocial, 'inappropriate' rather than part of neuro-divergence. Neurodiverse educator Stella Lange discusses this as a "those students" problem (2022:113), referring to the ways she had heard other teachers talking about Lange herself when she was a schoolchild, as well as how colleagues talk about the neurodiverse students she now teaches. Being glossed as 'a problem student' displaying inappropriate behaviours makes it more likely that 'an incident' could occur, and less likely they will have adequate support once they arrive in AP. Kids educated in APs across England "have complex mental health needs for which they are currently not receiving adequate support, due to shortcomings within AP schools and numerous external barriers to care" (Kew-Simpson et al 2023:145). However, structural inequalities and racism are also contributing factors. Children from ethnic minority backgrounds are over-represented

in exclusions from mainstream schools in England according to data from the Department for Education. In the academic year 2023-2024 “Gypsy/Roma pupils and Traveller of Irish Heritage pupils continue to have the highest rates of suspensions and permanent exclusions, followed by Black Caribbean pupils, White and Black Caribbean pupils, and White and Black African pupils” (Coram 2024).^{xivxxv}

Joseph-Salisbury (2021; 2024) uses Critical Race Theory (CRT) “to make sense of, deconstruct and challenge racial inequality in [British] society” (2021:580-581, interruption mine), specifically in the context of the Children’s Commissioner 2018 recommendation that “there be ‘a police officer attached to every primary and secondary school in the country” (*ibid*) without addressing the entanglement of a police and schooling “web of whiteness” (2021:580). Damien Sojoyner points to this entanglement in his ethnographic advancement of the ‘educational enclosure’ concept, based on fieldwork conducted in US schools. He found that the rates at which young Black boys were being excluded compared to their white peers mirrored documentation of the statistical likelihood that Black boys were far more likely to end up in prison. Sojoyner rejects the idea often quoted by educationalists and police officers of the school-to-prison pipeline, arguing that schools are traps, spaces of subjugation rather than places to achieve and fulfil potential. He argues that rather than the school-to-prison pipeline being a response by schools to violent and criminal activity perpetrated by Black students, instead it must:

account for the possibility that the structure of public education is responding to the actions taken by Black students that are perceived to threaten the status quo. In this regard, the criminalization of Black youth is not only intentional, but it is in response

to direct agitation on the part of Black people. (Sojoyner 2013:243; *see also* (Perera 2020 for the UK case)

Bei and Knowler (2022) further argue that race and gender distinctions mean that young Black male adolescents are at higher risk of enclosure:

the most vulnerable, excluded, and marginalised young Black people in English urban cities experience further marginalisation because off-rolling [...which] places learners in a space (both physically and educationally) located beyond care and inclusion.”
(2022:231)

The result of being ‘beyond care’ is evident in a Canadian study that found Black children’s “marginalization is evident throughout the diagnosis process, where Black children and youth who meet the diagnostic criteria for autism and related neurodevelopmental disabilities face, on average, diagnostic inequities. This includes incorrect diagnoses, later diagnoses, and receiving no diagnoses at all [...] in a study of over 400 children—all of whom met the diagnostic criteria for Autism” 58% of Black children received an autism diagnosis, compared to 78% of White children (Abdulla 2025:23). The recently-formed ADHD taskforce led by a child and adolescent psychiatrist and clinician scientist at Cardiff University, Professor Anita Thapa, at Cardiff University likewise reported in June 2025 that the UK has “a very high level of under-recognition and under-treatment of strictly diagnosed ADHD, with significant inequalities in access to care (e.g. minority groups).”

Victor Turner identified adolescence as one of the ages of *life crises* alongside “the attainment of elderhood, and death” (Turner 2011:116). He describes these as “liminal or extrastructural phase[s]” with the threat of “a permanent condition of sacred ‘outsiderhood’”

(Turner 2011:116). When included in a process of becoming (like teen years), *a condition of sacred outsiderhood* is a state of liminality which is only meant to be a temporary state, typified by age. Unlike Turner's concept of liminal outsidership which is attributable to an age of crisis, for people with disabilities, neurodiversities and other forms of difference, 'outsidership' is both a liminal and an ongoing state of self, the person is held "apart from the behavior of status-occupying, role-playing members of that system" (Turner 1974:233 in Willett and Deegan 2001:141), leading to further marginality and lower status in society. Neurodiverse and otherwise disabled people's experiences as conditions of "permanent liminality" (2001:137) by virtue of the life-long divergence of disabled lifeways from what are perceived to be minded and embodied norms of personhood. As a result, they argue that liminal persons are "often invisible both structurally and physically. Structural invisibility is the inevitable result of losing or being without a social status [...] The myriad taboos that apply to the liminal person limit their social interaction and maintain their structural invisibility" (2001:140).

For Thomas and Kim and other kids in alternate provision, this creates a paradox: adolescence as a life-stage typified by "socially transgressive actions [...] through which young people display agency[...] foreground[s instead] the tension between young people's agency and the structural power of social institutions," (Buchotlz 2002:531) which results in a punitive state typified by stasis rather than transformation. Ana told me that for children like Kim, who had a traumatic start in life and have multiple developmental and learning challenges, PRUs can be a godsend (Hart 2013). Ana believes they allow students a safe space in which young people can make errors – both educational and social – and learn from them, thus gaining an opportunity to be reminded of 'right' behaviour. This is how they begin to recognise particular decisions as errors by themselves, Ana explains, adding that Kim has

made tremendous progress; she alludes to Kim's reduction in self-harming, less frequently being caught smoking or hiding in the stairwell, and other untenable events which had been constant when she'd first joined the AP.

While some findings indicate that alternative provision may exacerbate mental health difficulties (Jalali and Morgan, 2018:55), AP spaces can be a safety net for young people like Kim who have a turbulent home-life, though this is a temporary reprieve. Kim's behaviour had gotten so much calmer by the time I was regularly visiting the unit that I was shocked when one afternoon, as Ana, Kim and I sat in the cafeteria and admired the photos Kim had just taken, Kim out of nowhere started shouting and ran from the table we were sharing in the canteen, followed swiftly by a suddenly stricken Ana who muttered as she ran after her: *"no, no, no... she cannot be alone out there, not after what she did to herself last time."*

According to government data, 25% of children in APs have an ADHD diagnosis. This matches the 25% of the UK prison population with ADHD. In both cases the actual percentage is thought to be much higher (Roberts and Lawrence 2025). Without a documented diagnosis of a condition explaining the reason for young people's disruptive or 'aberrant' behaviours, children run the risk of going through to adulthood without the support they require. In this way, diagnostic delay itself functions as a silencer: without the biomedical corroboration of a documented condition, adolescents' disclosures remain illegible to decision-makers no matter how persistently voiced. This delay ensures that those least able to sustain the assessment gauntlet are those most likely to have their testimony discounted, deepening enclosure. As Ana explained to Thomas, a violent incident in a child's past is understood to disallow the possibility of going to a Medical PRU, and so the student is sent by default to a Behavioural PRU, because the former will not take on any students with

instances of violence against their names. At no point in the material I reviewed was there mention of "an incident" being a barrier in terms of potential support for either Thomas or Kim and other students like them. However, what happens in practice is clear and often discussed informally:

MEDICAL	BEHAVIOURAL	BEHAVIOURAL
Thomas+diagnosis	Thomas+diagnosis	Kim + incident or no incident
(no incident)	(post-incident).	(no diagnosis)
Has school choice,	No school choice,	No school choice,
Has access to additional support	Has access to additional support	No guaranteed additional support

In these two students' cases, combinations of diagnosis + 'incident' = level of access to choice and support, with the incidents determining as a clear red line in terms of their potential support in the form of alternate provision. As Ana told Thomas, a violent incident bars the possibility of going to the Medical AP which won't accept students with instances of violence on their files.^{xvi} Thus, diagnosis is not just a label but a passport. Its absence can foreclose futures. This chimes with findings from Mills and Thomson's summarising paper on alternate provision in the UK (2018) "it is the most marginalised young people who experience exclusion [...which is] associated with child, family and school-related factors identifiable at, or prior to, primary school age" (2018:27-28).

Young people with ADHD or who are on the autism spectrum push boundaries without even intending to do so and have an even harder time than neurotypical teens when attempting to conform to particular social norms and behavioural expectations (Belek 2018; 2019. Bagatell 2007). This alongside difference due to minority status and sometimes also statelessness (addressed in the next section) leads to ongoing outsidership through educational and social

exclusions. Once young people have been excluded from mainstream education because of ‘inappropriate behaviour’, they subsequently become enclosed, a social kettle-ing^{xvii} which prevents all but the most basic social movement, and second chances can be hindered lack of “(honesty and information sharing), negative narratives and language around young people, and inaccurate diagnosis” (Mills and Thomson 2018:45).

In this way the stereotypy that categorises AP students like Thomas and Kim, as 'those students' means that they may (and do) confront subsequent inability to be legible and listened-to, to execute autonomy in their decision-making, to find future pathways; “the aspirations that underpin young people’s educational engagement give way to a sense of futility about the possibility of achieving the desired outcome [...] structural obstacles or embodied disadvantages that thwart even the most reasonable strategies for pursuing a different kind of future” (Froerer et al 2022:181). For these kids, their attendance in the AP occurs at a time when development and change are the expected societal norm for them, physically and socially, but paradoxically for them this is the exact moment when likelihood of being listened-to and understood lessens even when it is attempted.

Disruptive and disguised: unrecognised forms of disclosure by 'recently-arrived' kids

500 meters from the school where Thomas and I sat considering the meaning of disclosure, I met Sye, a member of an ESOL class at a mainstream secondary school. Sye was a 14-yr old boy who had arrived in the UK a few months prior – referred to by the school and council as a "recently-arrived" student.^{xviii} He had been living with his family in nearby temporary accommodation. But on that day, he was being moved on to a new home and a new school. As was the case with other recently-arrived students I met in the school after that day, it was unclear whether the move was instigated by the Home Office or the family or agreed by both,

and I never knew why Sye's family had left Latin America to seek refuge in the UK. Sye had, I was told, made good progress during his time at the school and was well liked. When I met him, he seemed to me so much younger than his age, a miniscule frame with a gentle face and shy smile as he entered the room. I had been told that the ESOL classroom and his ESOL teacher were his favourite place and his favourite person. He arrived that day with presents for the teacher. But they were very busy and though they smiled and said hello, they never quite noticed his gift.

Sye had forgotten that a workshop was happening that day and did not quite manage to hide his disappointment upon finding me in his favourite place rather than his favourite teacher. Despite this, he worked diligently on the exercises I led that morning. The children watched a four-minute point-of-view film, in which the viewer follows a person as they arrive in a building. The children used their detective skills to find the clues about who the person might be – where they live, how their surroundings are setup, their beliefs, their passions, their personal rules as we understand them from what we see in the film. We worked together to compare what the students had noticed and to formulate questions about the gaps in our understanding of the person in the film.

The other ESOL students struggled with the idea that they could document what they saw using images or diagrams instead of English words, though I repeatedly told them that whatever helped them to remember the details of the person they were trying to understand was fair game. The one exception was Sye who embraced this multimodal potential of telling through drawing: he drew the clues from the film as the coherent picture you see below, with the person and their door at the centre and objects from throughout the film integrated to portray a non-sequential, cohesive life.

{~?~ Insert Figure 1 here ~?~}

I thought it was beautiful and took a picture of his unique fieldnotes. But as we carried on with the workshop, Sye carried on with his picture using a bright red marker rather than the light blue from before. I asked if I could snap another photo with this new, striking colour. He allowed this but said he wasn't finished and continued to work. During the remainder of the session, he tried a few times to get his favourite teacher's attention, but the teacher remained busy with their work as I led the class. Sye focused and worked on his picture. When the class left the room, S.'s picture was left on the desk, overturned. He had drawn large marks, expletives, and images of guns on top of the blue drawing, all in red marker. Concerned, I passed the image to the ESOL and deputy head teachers.

"Maybe he was letting us know he was upset about the move," mused the deputy head.

Not only did no one on the teaching staff know what happened to him after his last day at the school, when the deputy head tried to enquire, the school social services liaison told her there was no way to trace him. The liaison reasoned they'd known he was moving to a new place, so he was likely to be ok, but the truth was there was no way of actually finding out or finding him. The school operates as a key educational institution for the borough's 'recently-arrived' children who come and go on a regular basis; such departures are barely noticed.

Another 13yr old recently-arrived girl, Mila, and her family, had been undergoing a process of rehousing for the preceding six months as part of their asylum process. The final week of my fieldwork in the school was also Mila and her sister's final week at school. This would be the family's third attempt at finding a more permanent home; the previous two times the

family was brought to Dispersal Accommodation^{xix} which they expected would be a flat or apartment. Instead, they described the space as a ‘detention centre’^{xx} where there was no local school. Mila’s father refused the accommodation on both occasions because her older sister was due to sit GCSEs, and there was no school where she could continue to prepare for her subjects nor sit her exams.

During asylum processes as the UNHCR has documented “[...children] may not be able to articulate their claims to refugee status in the same way as adults and, therefore, may require special assistance to do so [...] asylum-seeking children are at a high risk of undergoing varied traumatic experiences, both prior to and during migration; these include family separation, natural disasters, and witnessing or experiencing assault, torture, human trafficking, slavery, and war” (UNHCR, 2008 in Chilliak et al 2024). For this reason, a slower pace is required when working with recently-arrived children. It is important that they lead, sometimes inventing new tasks through which additional dimensions of their human-ness emerges over above their need for refuge. While this may not advance the government agenda of proofs of longterm adverse effect(s), kids, for example Sye, tell in different ways. Kids in my fieldsites who were ‘recently-arrived’, never within my hearing used the word ‘home’, Mila was the same and I learned quickly not to ask her about it. This is not to say that the children did not tell about their lives once comfortable, aided by visual prompts and activities, such as collage. Through self-prompting from their chosen images, they did speak about specific countries they’d lived in, the languages they know or the accommodation they inhabited now. They speak about the things that made them, them. Their favourite colour, siblings, books they had read, as Mila does with her collage here:

{~?~ Insert Figure 2 here ~?~}

Mila: uh, that, (…0.7s) like, (…1.7s) it's, I like drawing and that's my favourite colour. Mm. Um,

that's like my sisters. (…0.6s) Mm. Um, that's Saudi Arabia. When (…3.2s) It's,

Kelly: did you live in Saudi Arabia?

Mila: Yeah. Mm-Hmm. Um, I like the purple color. Color. Mm-Hmm. Um, that's like M.

Um, I like this book. I read it in a, a library. Mm-Hmm. And I like that. Like that

Kelly: Like nature...

Mila: Yeah. (…1.3s) And I like the (…0.9s) animals (…0.8s) and that's It...

Mila told me about these things that made her happy with such delight. She seemed to relish being a part of something so colourful and light. Mila was one of the wittiest, liveliest kids I met throughout my fieldwork. She was very well-liked by peers and teachers, always smiling, frequently laughing, and drawing comics, sunsets, painting pictures for me to take home. She was never short of chat about what she liked, about wanting to be a writer or an artist, about wondering what her new house would look like and whether they would stay this time.

Even in spaces like the ESOL classroom, a space created to facilitate access to education and some elements of public support, I found that the kids were very focused on learning English not only in order to get to a degree of fluency that would facilitate them getting on with the academic work and becoming successful, but also to help their families, to serve as communication support for those who lacked spoken English. Sometimes this was because they fulfilled roles as proxies for family members without the language skills or health resources to contend with difficult to access benefits or to understand processes associated with applying for resources in a confusing public support system. In this way, kids were often reduced to their spoken and written English abilities, by their families, by their school institution and through their own expectations of themselves.

This raises the issue of prevalent ‘adultification’ of precarious young people not only in experiences of education but in everyday spheres beyond education spaces, including public support assessments, asylum-seeking processes, in courts and in confrontation with the police. Adultification “comprises contextual, social, and developmental processes in which youth are prematurely, and often inappropriately, exposed to adult knowledge and assume extensive adult roles and responsibilities within their family network” (Burton 2007:329). The expectations of adult-semlant behaviours by authorities both inside and outside of schools have is a serious challenge within the education sector, feeding further exclusions particularly amongst minority ethnic children in urban centres (Stewart-Hall et al 2023).

One prominent example of the impact of adultification in schools occurred in 2022, when a secondary school-aged Black girl, referred to as Child Q “was subjected to a traumatic intimate strip search by the attending police officers, whilst menstruating, in the absence of an Appropriate Adult and without her mother being informed” (Ikomi 2023:2) on the basis of suspected possession of marijuana which was not found. Though the child involved did attempt to advocate for herself, no member of staff chaperoned her; the child was traumatised and has had lingering mental health impacts as a result of this treatment. Sylvia Ikomi argues that, though it has been proven that “Black people are arguably more vulnerable to unfair treatment from the police [...] the adultification bias of [Child Q’s] teacher [was] being projected onto [the child]” This meant that though Child Q ought to have been seen as ‘at risk’ but instead she was seen as ‘*the* risk’ (Ikomi 2023:7). As Stewart-Hall (2013) has noted, affordances of Blackness as presupposed by listening White adults are rife with prejudice and stereotyping, but this is often left unacknowledged along with the power relations that are embedded in encounters between minority ethnic children and the adult decision-makers around them.

Bei and Knowler advocate for CRT [critical race theory] method ‘counter-storytelling’ as a means to countermand racist assumptions and resulting narratives. Counter-storytelling represents the deliberate and agentive telling of one’s own story by underprivileged people in the face of powerful and often subjugating authorities and institutions. It “can be generative and challenging for individuals as well as providing a framework for the disruption of normative narratives about education and schooling for communities [...] to understand the intersections between racial injustices [and] exclusion [...]enabling] a reflective analysis of the experiences of Black and minoritised children and young people (2022:232). I have been inspired by this approach, which though it still remains a kind of disclosure, embraces the preferred telling of and by each child, something I aim to do with ABC. It also requires that the kids are comfortable with and attention to the other component crucial to the value of counter-storytelling – the audience.

Embracing informal disclosure as self-advocacy

After Sye and Mila departed from their school, their ESOL class continued to work with me over a few months and produced some beautiful and insightful work on the challenges of school, how and where they felt welcome or not, safe or not, what they hoped they could change. They used mapping, sketching, photography with voice overs in English, Portuguese, Persian and other languages to talk about their values and ambitions. The outputs were raw and critical and beautiful. But when it came to the moment of sharing this work beyond the cohort, most of the boys remained keen to show it to the rest of the school, both teachers and students. But the girls, who had been reticent initially and had gradually warmed to participating in the project, were unanimously adamant that their work was not to be shown to the other students. We talked it over for a long time, as I tried to understand why and

struggled with an instinct of wanting to make these kids more visible to the rest of the school, because people who simply hadn't seen how brilliant they all are.

What I hadn't appreciated until that day was that for the girls and some of the boys from the ESOL, especially those living in perpetual waiting because of their migrant status, disclosing the shape of their differences was not something they wanted to do even if it was a far cry from evidence-giving that formal testimonial evidence requires. Their lives are constantly under review, governed by the requirement to tell their stories of hardship on repeat, in order to garner attention within a public support space — whether in written applications for financial benefits, or for additional resources in schools — they are either the seekers of support or communication proxies pursuing attention and support for others. Their value is thus frequently dictated by mandates for formal disclosures of difference, statelessness, pain and need, rather than their resilience, talents, senses of humour and accomplishments.

What I now understand is that they valued our work together because it was not about disclosure but instead a kind of self-recognition which is beyond affordances of vulnerability and 'need'. As government borders and belts have tightened, these young people's stories are too-often for others, to fulfil the longterm adverse effects narrative, harrowing and exceptional enough to achieve that support and (in many cases) the ability to stay in the country. The girls did not want to present themselves to the other students as products of adversity. The stories they told during our project acknowledged some of these elements, but that was not the point of the telling. I believe they enjoyed the time spent on the project to tell themselves about themselves, rather than telling for others. Their project work moved their stories beyond their 'recently-arrived' status. But had we shown this to the other non-recently-arrived students, whether or not the form of telling matched bureaucratic

expectations of adversity or was more dynamic, Sye, Mila, Thomas, Kim and the ESOL kids would have once again become part of a category – *Migrant. Stateless. Disabled.*

Traumatised. Formal disclosure, reliant on both teller and audience, both the official route to visibility and the mechanism of their erasure. As Rosie Jones-McVey (2025) so cogently argues in the context of the loss of one of her young interlocutor to suicide: “critical concerns usually associated with ‘giving voice’—authenticity and empowerment—are limiting as means of ethically relating to needs, since they presume personhood rests on coherence, intentionality and articulate expression.” (2025:1). For kids who have such heavy burdens of telling on them, the mandate to give voice can in fact be seen as a kind of violence.

Determining not only what is told but *to whom* is part of acknowledging and upholding kids’ right to their own stories.

Conversely, telling one’s story in the way one wants it to be heard can prove to be liberating (see Bei and Knowler 2022), and is something that many kids *do* want to pursue. Students with whom I worked in the field fed back that they couldn’t believe that “*you can say so much with a picture.*” They liked the power of showing what they saw in ways that helped others to see things that way too. Kim, for example, took Ana and me on a tour of the AP. While I had seen that Kim was happy to chat away with most of the staff and students she met in the halls, she never talked about herself. And though she was unable to focus for enough time to finish things that required longer focus like the collage project, she loved to snap photos and have control of one of the school iPads for the purpose. So, we went on a tour with Kim leading to the various places she liked or disliked within the AP – she’d snap a photo of each, and I recorded what she told us about those spaces. The place she most talked about was the football pitch because she said:

“It’s the best thing ever... because I love it. Because I’m always... I’m just great at football.”

{~?~ Insert Figure 2 here ~?~}

{~?~ Insert Figure 3 here ~?~}

Taking photos released her from what she said she was “*supposed to do*” in favour of telling what she loved and chose to do. Ana told me later:

“That was so big for her.”

In a different example, Thomas, a teaching assistant and three other students grudgingly obliged me in my efforts to make gluing pre-cut magazine images seem less infantilising. I asked them to make a soundtrack of their favourite songs to listen to while we worked, each person contributing a song. After a few minutes they got into the activity and started to talk to me and to each other about what the images represented about their lives. I videoed the explanations made by the kids explaining what their visuals prompted them to think about, and what these images and words tell people about who they are. The young people themselves are not visible in the frame in order to maintain safeguarding standards throughout their participation, as well as to make them less uncomfortable about saying what they value and what they need. Thomas began drawing little stick men in the spaces between the glued images including one on top of a fried egg labelled ‘mount everest’ [sic], and next to a picture of the chef, Michel Roux, a handwritten and underlined caption stating:

“This represents Gordon Ramsay (i cook)” [sic].

{~?~ Insert Figure 4 here ~?~}

Thomas' stickmen add a visual dynamic which is utterly Thomas: staccato, haphazard, suddenly they seem to be him on the page. In the film recording, he makes noises for guys running or falling. When we get to the egg with a tiny stickman on the summit of the yolk, he says: "*It's Mount Everest*," and, reflecting on the photo of a chef, Thomas repeats again that he is a good cook adding:

"I'm Gordon Ramsay, innit."

As we finished the collage work, I overheard Thomas chatting with another student near where I sat with Ana. The first boy explained that he'd put in for a building apprenticeship for his school-sponsored work experience. Thomas didn't say what he'd put down at first, then said he couldn't remember, then said that actually he'd put down working at McDonalds as a joke to which the other student laughed, and Thomas joined in. The other student told Thomas he was "*daft, building work means you can be outside instead of being cooped-up*." The other boy walked out before the bell signalled the end of the class. Thomas hung back and Ana asked him about his placement request. He responded he just didn't know what to put down. She suggested that if he wanted to put in for a building placement, he could possibly change his form to which Thomas answered,

"Nah. I love to cook."

Thomas stated in the collage, in the video, on his work placement form, and aloud that he is interested in cooking. He created an image of himself climbing a Mount Everest egg. He *is*

Gordon Ramsay. He put it on his work placement form because he says he doesn't know, but I would argue Thomas, having tried to tell, so many times, his teacher, his peer, himself, to me that what he wants is to go back to "*real school*" but having no means of making it happen for himself, is keeping his cooking aspiration close to his chest. The placement is a choice he can make – *to cook*. I wonder whether he thinks that what he wants has ceased to matter or if he's being creative with his ways of disclosing in the hope that something will cut through. I wonder whether he will try for it, to cook, to be a chef.

But I don't wonder whether he aspires – that much is apparent.

Conclusion: Disclosure, disbelief, and poverty of pathway

Across these cases — Thomas and Kim in alternative provision, Sye and Mila as a recently-arrived students, the adults and children navigating formal disclosure in welfare offices — the same pattern repeats. Testimonial disclosure is demanded yet discounted; marginalised kids and families are required to narrate their pain, their brokenness, or their culpability in order to be recognised, but those narrations rarely translate into support. Children and adolescents are compelled into disclosure economies not of their own making. In schools, in APs, in welfare forms, disclosure has become the mandatory currency of access. But it is a currency unevenly valued: middle-class families can mobilise resources to make a child's testimony legible; precarious adolescents' disclosures are administratively deferred, discredited or structurally erased.

Admission to and assimilation in mainstream educational spaces, once one is 'enclosed', is increasingly rare in the UK (Macrae et al 2003), leading to a state of permanent liminality and outsiderhood. So it happens that such enclosure leads to a Sisyphean state from which,

despite best efforts and aspirations, it is difficult if not impossible to extract a young person, who is fenced into very limited choices, or sometimes none at all. However, as sociologist Morag Treanor (2020) has argued, the idea that children and families living with deprivation fail to aspire “[advances] an often biased, and a certainly superficial perspective on children and families living in poverty.” Treanor is of one of many at the vanguard of Scotland’s current policy direction: namely, by approaching educational attainment, social belonging/alienation, street violence, deprivation, trauma, physical and mental thriving under the unifying banner of public health, support can be more adequately address both the young person in context, as well as maximise limited resource availability.

Thinking with and about affordances of communication – values, beliefs, language, ethnicities, future hopes, pain, bodies, abilities – these kids are consistently reframed as the categories by which they are institutionally processed and through which they are delimited: *‘those students’*, *‘recently-arrived’*, *‘BAME’* [British Asian Minority Ethnic], *‘disabled’* may go some way to show where support is required but also precludes understanding these kids in their multi-dimensional, intersectional ways. Enclosure is in this way both material (children stuck held in AP buildings, some of which lock classroom doors, or require solitary time-outs, or containing themselves in the ESOL classroom rather than risking the wider school spaces), but it is also epistemic; they are denied choice and questioning access with the result that their disclosures are unheard, ignored or disbelieved leading to testimonial foreclosures and poverty of pathway.

Disclosure is both the mandated route to visibility and the very mechanism of these young people's invisibility. At the material level, many excluded children are fenced into APs and denied re-entry to mainstream education. At the epistemic level, their speech is fenced off by

testimonial injustice; even when disclosures are voiced, they are not recognised as credible (Fricker 2007).

From Mead's treatment as a "foolish young woman" to Thomas' wish to return to "real school," the symmetry remains: testimony is either credited or discounted on the basis of who speaks it, in what context, as well as (or rather than) what is said. In this sense, though the formal disclosure which has become so prevalent under UK austerity promises recognition, protection, and progression, it just as frequently delivers enclosure, disbelief, and stasis. The requirement to disclose is framed as empowering, but its structure ensures only those who can tell in the expected ways — persistently, pathologically, and with biomedical or bureaucratic corroboration — will be heard. The inability for these kids to be understood on these grounds places their disclosures within the realm of testimonial injustice which “occurs when, following an act of telling someone something, a Speaker is accorded insufficient credibility by a Hearer due to a prejudicial stereotype held by the Hearer” (Fricker 2007 *in* Wanderer 2017:28). When disclosure is the only route to recognition, disclosure-refusal (like the ESOL girls), defacing a drawing that perfectly answers the brief given by an adult, or framing the things you actually want (“*I love to cook*”) as an accident or a joke may become more honest forms of testimony. As pedagogical scholar, Gunther Kress reminds: “there are times – perhaps many times – when communication isn’t really the issue, and power is.” (2009:4).

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ⁱ There are critiques of Mead's work which are not attributable to her age, many of which rightfully question anthropology/ists objectification of Samoan people (*see* Shankman 2013; and The Sapiens podcast "We need to tell our own stories" (2023 S6 E3) <https://www.sapiens.org/culture/samoans-critique-margaret-mead/>) Viewed on 12.09.25

ⁱⁱ via Personal, Social, Health and Economics (PSHE) sessions and as co-curricular anthropology clubs; this has since expanded to Cambridgeshire; and internationally in Varese Italy, and the High Himalayas in Limi, Nepal

ⁱⁱⁱ The AP's administration never gave any indication that the 'behavioural PRU' moniker applied to the school.

^{iv} <https://researchbriefings.files.parliament.uk/documents/CBP-7501/CBP-7501.pdf> viewed on 15.09.25

^v <https://www.gov.uk/pip> Viewed on 20.09.25

^{vi} <https://www.gov.uk/universal-credit> Viewed on 20.09.25

^{vii} <https://www.who.int/standards/classifications/international-classification-of-functioning-disability-and-health>

^{viii} <https://www.unicef.org.uk/what-we-do/un-convention-child-rights/> Viewed on 17.05.24

^{ix} <https://brexitfutures.com/wp-content/uploads/2025/08/maybe-we-have-left-them-behind-je-fv.pdf> Viewed on 20.09.25; working paper by Jeanette Edwards which is "a version of the Distinguished Douglass Lecture,

delivered November 2019 in Vancouver. It draws on an interdisciplinary, collaborative and experimental research project, funded by the ESRC, which aimed to investigate how Brexit was playing out in four urban localities in England” (Edwards, undated).

^x Part of my reason for this deliberate omission from my questioning in the field, and from this and other texts is because of pervasive pejorative stereotypes about young people in APs as violent criminals in the making.

^{xi} GCSEs are formal national exams that are sat in school year 11, which is the final year of ‘school’ though many children then go on to either further study on A-Level courses to year 13, or apprenticeship programmes or other schemes.

^{xii} This is taken from the school website, source redacted to maintain anonymity

^{xiii} <https://publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm5804/cmselect/cm youth/cost-living-crisis-young-people/report.html#:~:text=The%20Joseph%20Rowntree%20Foundation's%20Destitution,2022%2C%20one%20million%20were%20children.&text=As%20a%20result%2C%20%20Young%20people,food%20that%20day%20or%20not>. Viewed 28.03.2024

^{xiv} <https://www.coram.org.uk/news/coram-concerned-about-shocking-rise-in-number-of-children-excluded-from-school/> Viewed on 20.09.25

^{xv} <https://explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/find-statistics/suspensions-and-permanent-exclusions-in-england/2023-24> Viewed on 20.09.25

^{xvi} I also spoke with a senior educational administrator who confirmed that such ‘incidents’ were red flags on student files which made it “highly unlikely if not impossible” for the student to ever be readmitted to mainstream schooling.

^{xvii} “‘Kettling’ is when the police contain protesters in one place for an extended period by surrounding them and not allowing them to leave.” https://www.libertyhumanrights.org.uk/advice_information/kettling-guide/ Seen on 17.05.2024

^{xviii} ‘Recently-arrived’ is the gloss for all displaced children in the school, regardless of status. Some will have refugee status or awaiting asylum adjudication ,while many others will have unsettled status.

^{xix} <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/living-in-asylum-accommodation/living-in-dispersal-accommodation-english#:~:text=1.,before%20moving%20onto%20dispersal%20accommodation>. Viewed on 22.09.25

^{xx} Based on further conversations it seems that it was most likely to be an old army barracks rather than a formal detention centre, but the impression is important as is the fact that there was no access to school there for either child.