Pictured Left to Right: Jack Riley, Joseph McHale and Parish Trevy (Young Leaders) and Mikk Murray, The Graffiti Artist. Kendray Play Fields, Barnsley

Authoring Our Own Stories: Graffiti Exhibition at The National Coal Mining Museum Blog

(By Dr Kat Simpson, The University of Huddersfield and Chelsea Jackson, Youth Work Unit)

Background and Context: Authoring Our Own Stories

Young Leaders, Chelsea Jackson (Youth Work Unit: Yorkshire and The Humber) and Dr Kat Simpson (The University of Huddersfield) organised and held a public dissemination event *Authoring Our Own Stories: Graffiti Exhibition* at the National Coal Mining Museum (25.01.2025). The event exhibited research from the Impact Acceleration Account research project: *Mined Out? Youth in the Former Coalfields* which worked alongside the Youth Work Unit's regional involvement in the five-year National Lottery funded Authoring Our Own Stories (AOOS). AOOS and the IAA explored 40 young working-class lads' (11-25-years-old) experiences of growing up in and around the former coalfields of Barnsley. The research focused on three spheres – **education, employment, and community** – and explored the lads' orientations towards, and lived experiences of, these spheres.

For generations growing up in the deindustrialised coalfields, their present is not disembodied from the past, it shapes the present-future in multiple and complex ways such as the nature and conditions of the labour market, orientations towards school and work, school-to-work transitions and so on. There is, though, little research and information co-created with young people on the ways in which the past shapes their experiences of education and employment and their aspirations. The research operated, therefore, through

a lens of co-creation with and for working-class young people, placing the lads' lived experiences of education, community and employment in the former coalfields of Barnsley at the centre. 'Young Leaders' were recruited from the former coalfields and trained in the notion of social haunting (theoretical knowledge to see the echoes and murmurs of the past in the present) and in arts-based methods and qualitative analysis (methodology) so they could co-produce research with other young lads from the locality.

*John Greaves, former Miner, at **Wath Amateur Boxing Club**.*

Young Leaders co-designed two workshops: one focused on the lads' industrial history of Barnsley which included a talk from John Greaves, a former miner at Goldthorpe Colliery, about growing up as a man in the 1950s and 1960s and what education, employment and community life was typically like then; and, the second, a graffiti workshop with a local artist, Mikk Murray, to explore the lads' lived experiences and perceptions of the three spheres.

*Young Leaders, Mikk Murray and Dr Kat Simpson at the Graffiti workshop at the **Coalfields Regeneration Trust: Game On,** Kendray Playing Fields.*

We worked with three key organisations and access was facilitated to groups of young lads within these local, voluntary sector organisations:

- **BRV Project**: 'Belonging, Resilience, and Vocabulary' aims to improve emotional literacy with boys and young men to give them a better understanding of themselves.

- **Wath Amateur Boxing Club**: A local community boxing club for all ages and backgrounds in Wath.

- **The Coalfields Regeneration Trust (CRT): Game On**: A community charity operating in Britain's former coalfield areas offering free football sessions to young people.

The Graffiti Exhibition at The National Coal Mining Museum

Each Young Leader co-designed and led a workshop activity based on data from one of the three organisations. **You can watch a short video of the day here.** Jack led the first workshop on **CRT: Game On** focusing on 'Opportunities' the lads have in and around their local community – Kendray, South Yorkshire. Jack selected quotes to highlight the limited opportunities the lads felt they had to engage in activities, events, youth clubs, and sports and social clubs locally. For many of the lads, the CRT Game On sessions were the only 'free' sports activities that they knew of and could access but felt a level of economic and political frustration that they were unable to access these football pitches outside of CRT Game On:

"I wanna see these pitches be cheaper cos they are robbing us – five quid per person! It used to be free!".

"Can you write inflation on the board – we need more free things!"

In the workshop, participants were asked to write down, on targets, the barriers (economic, social and cultural) that the lads faced in terms of opportunities in their community. These were then placed in the football net and participants took shots at the barriers which then opened dialogue between participants on how these could be addressed.

The second workshop was led by Jack and Joseph on **Wath Amateur Boxing Club (WABC)** and focused on how WABC gave the lads a sense of security, safety, and familiarity that they felt they didn't get anywhere else in their local community. Many lads described WABC as a **'get away gym'** from the social and economic landscape in and around Barnsley – drugs, crime, deprivation, anti-social behavior and so on – and a place that gave them 'opportunities' to have a career in boxing – a **'golden ticket'** out of doing **'shit jobs like warehousing'** that now dominate the labour market in the former coalfields. For all the lads at WABC, the trainers were integral to creating a particular sense of belonging. The lads saw them as positive role models and felt a reciprocal level of trust and respect. In this workshop, participants were asked to think about their role models and how they have shaped their lived experiences. Participants could either make a role model out of playdough, draw them, or decorate a mask.

Joseph led the final workshop focusing on the **BRV project** and the lads' experiences of education and employment through the story of Kallum. At the age of 14, Kallum had been excluded from mainstream education and had set up his own gardening and landscaping 'business'. Kallum's orientations and aspirations towards work were reflective of historical modes of being and doing, focusing on trades, 'grafting', and owning his own business to do so. However, he had not learnt any entrepreneurial skills at school as he **'didn't get chance to do his options'** as he'd already been excluded by then. At secondary school, Kallum experienced bullying and felt the school failed to address this.

"Education is shite! None o' ' teachers give a shit and the just brush it off onto other teachers and they dont know what to do"

He also spoke of further exclusion and marginalisation because of his neurodivergence:

"People who are Autistic or have ADHD struggle to concentrate n learn like me…then when you're like 'miss I dint catch that, can you repeat it'…n you still don't get it and they are getting mad at you but you are actually trying to understand it but…they are just like 'you haven't been listening' and you're like 'I have been, I just don't understand'…So, on my last few weeks, if the' wun't tell me, I'd just walk off and gu home – fuck em"

These experiences often led to fragmented teacher-pupil relations, and/or exclusion from mainstream education and a narrowed curriculum. Though the workshop focused on Kallum's story, this was reflective of many of the lads' experiences. Most lads realised the impact this had on actualising their aspirations of education and work and felt frustrated they didn't have the knowledge and support systems to challenge and change this. They also highlighted concerns with careers guidance and support:

"We need more stuff on setting your own business up…there needs to be more apprenticeships n all"

"I want to be a Marine biologist… [school] don't tell me how to do it they just say 'yes that's a good job' and that's it"

In the workshop, participants were asked to write, on the inside of a life-sized outline of a person, how Kallum might be feeling about his experiences of education and work and then, on the outside, what needs to change and how this might be actioned.

What's Next?

Research findings showed two key areas of significance to the lads: education and employment. Findings began to suggest a relationality between the intersections of social class, cultural heritage, and neurodivergence and the ways in which these interact and shape the experiences and biographies of these young lads, but we need to deep dive further into these experiences. Over 2025-2026 we aim to:

- Train 5 Young Leaders (aged 16-21) – from BRV.
- Carry out Deep Dive Case Studies x3 young lads in the Key organisations.
- Develop relationships with schools (SEND/PRUS) to develop the educational focus.
- Explore employment aspirations more via workshops.
- Create a Youth Hub: a social media platform with and for youth, content will be driven by the lads' lived experiences and identified knowledge and skill gaps within education and employment.