# URBAN YOUTH LANGUAGE, ETHNOGRAPHY AND



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# The Project

A variationist/interactional study into the language of urban youth and its role in the enactment of identities. The study included a year-long ethnography in two Manchester secondary Pupil Referral Unit (PRU) learning centres. The centres we attended cater for 14-16 year olds who have been permanently excluded from mainstream education for disciplinary/behavioural reasons.

## The Data

Much of the recorded data came from spontaneous interactions that would have been unavailable to us with a more traditional approach. The ethnography gave us access to fleeting, sometimes volatile situations in which language and (mis)communication played a crucial role, often in terms of things 'going wrong'.



# The Resource

As observers, we could see the potential value of these interactions as a teaching/training resource, both for staff development and for helping young people deal with issues inside the centres. They could be used as a prompt to discuss the impact of different courses of action and strategies in a given situation. However, written scenarios can be dull and inaccessible. What we needed was something vibrant, edgy and engaging. Enter artist Andrew Chiu. Each scenario was illustrated as a graphic novel/comic sequence, and we developed some suggested activities to be used with the young people or in staff training.



- Discussion/activity questions and suggestions Describe in your own words the story that is presented here.
- 2. How do you think the boy in the red tracksuit is feeling in frames 1-5? Why is he feeling like this?
- 3. How do you think the staff member in the green shirt is feeling in frames 2-6? Why is he feeling like this?
- 4. Do you think the boy in the red tracksuit did lock someone in the cage? What makes you think this?
- 5. Do you agree that the member of staff in the green shirt when he says that walking past someone in trouble and not helping them (standing up for them) is just as bad? (Frame 5)
- 6. If you were one of the other young people and knew what had really happened, would you say something?
- Have you ever been blamed for something you didn't
- do? What happened? How did it make you feel?
- Have you ever let someone else take the blame for 8. something you did? What was it? How did it make you feel?

#### Other ideas

- Blank out all the speech from the boy in the tracksuit and invite suggestions as to what is being said.
- 2. Do the same for the speech of the staff member, or for all the speech.



# 'The Purple Pen'

## (Selected questions)

Discussion/activity questions and suggestions

- 1. Have you ever been called a name you didn't like? How did it make you feel?
- 2. At what point does name-calling change from being 'just banter' to something more serious?
- 3. Do you agree with the staff member in frame 6?

#### Other ideas

Discuss which names for groups of (young) people are appropriate, and which aren't (e.g. Emos, Hoodrats, Roadmen, Chavs, Goths, Geeks, Nobodies).

#### For staff training

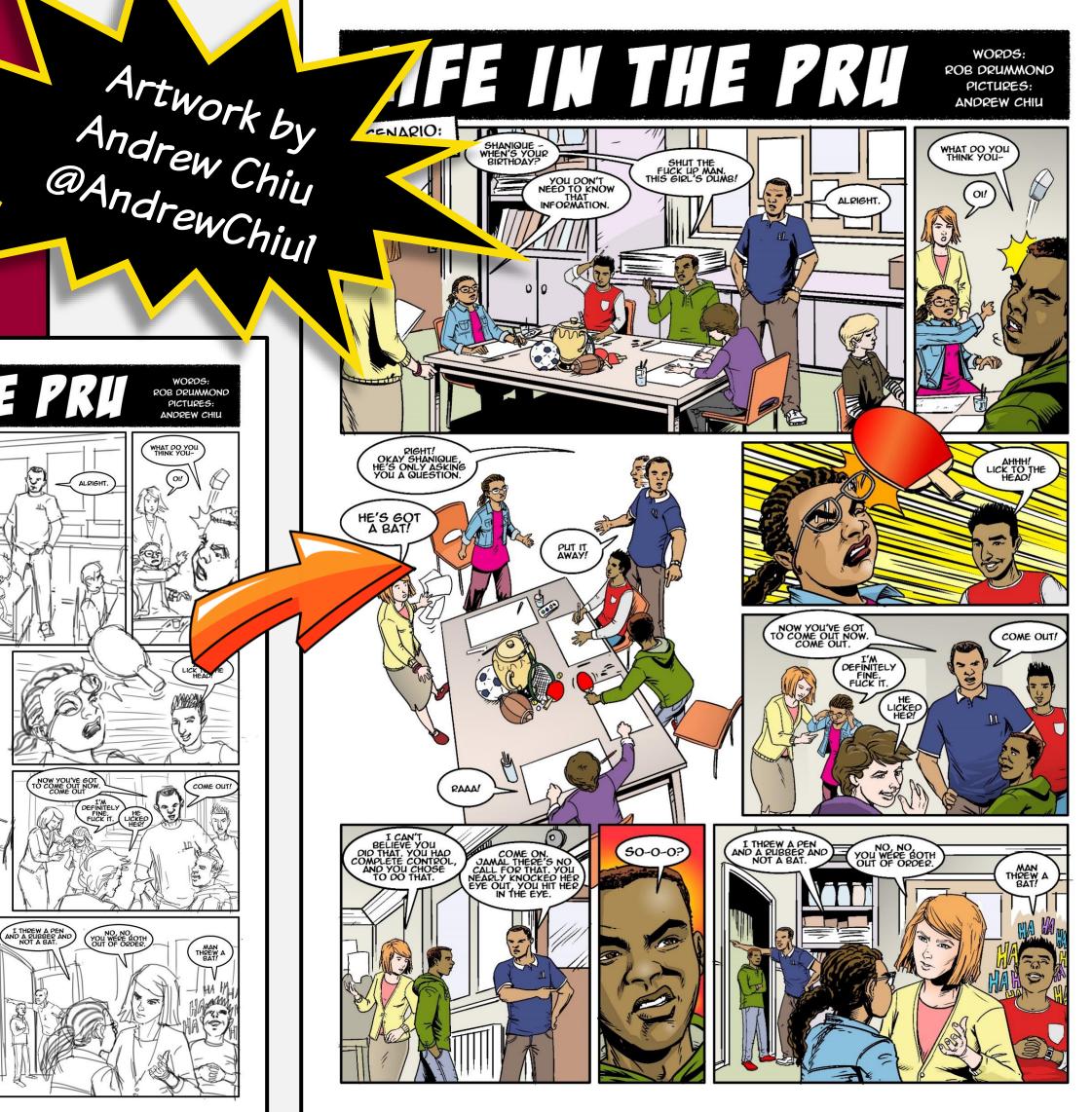
- Was it appropriate for the teacher to use the term 'Emo'?
- 2. What stereotypes are presented in this scenario?
- 3. What's the difference between a stereotype prejudice, and discrimination?
- 4. How might stereotypical, prejudicial, or

- 3. Ask for ideas as to how the situation could have played out differently if their responses had been different.
- 4. Ask pairs of students to act out the scenario either based on the one that is scripted here or their own version of this or their own similar scenario.

### For staff training

- What's your overall impression of the scenario depicted here?
- 2. Is the staff member in the green shirt right to use the opportunity to talk about this earlier incident?
- 3. Imagine the conversation in frame 1 has taken place. If you were the staff member, what would you say next?

Alternatively, blank out all the staff speech after frame I and invite suggestions as to how they would approach the situation.



# The Impact

The result is a set of resources that are of genuine use to the PRU. The activities have been designed in consultation with experienced PRU staff, and they are due to be trialled properly in September. With their 100% authentic speech, accessed through ethnography, they serve as an example of the real-world application of language variation studies, albeit in a slightly indirect way!

This is not the first project to use illustrated scenarios for intervention/training purposes. But it is unique in its

#### discriminatory views impact on the way people work within the PRU?

LIFE IN THE PRU Scenario: the bat Context: In the middle of an Art lessor

Character info Jamal: brown skin Shanique: dark brown skin, glasses (female, pupil) Staff 1: light brown skin, youth worker appearance, male Teacher: white, female, art teache Other boys: white, Asian, anything

Visual context: Art class. Tables, pictures on wall etc

Panel 1: Wide shot of pupils working, drawing/painting at tables. Both staff helping/watching. Staff 1 looking up at conversation. Shanique and Jamal are not next to each othe

- Shanique when's your birthday
- You don't need to know that informatio
- Shut the fuck up man. This girl's dumb

Panel 2: Shanique throws a rubber at Jamal [not sure if should be close up of Jamal or Shanique?]

- What do you think you
- Teacher

Panel 3: Staff 1 trying to calm situation, other boys laughing. Teacher notices Jamal has picked up table tennis bat

- Right! Okay Shanique, he's only asking you a question
- Teache He's got a ba
- Put it awa

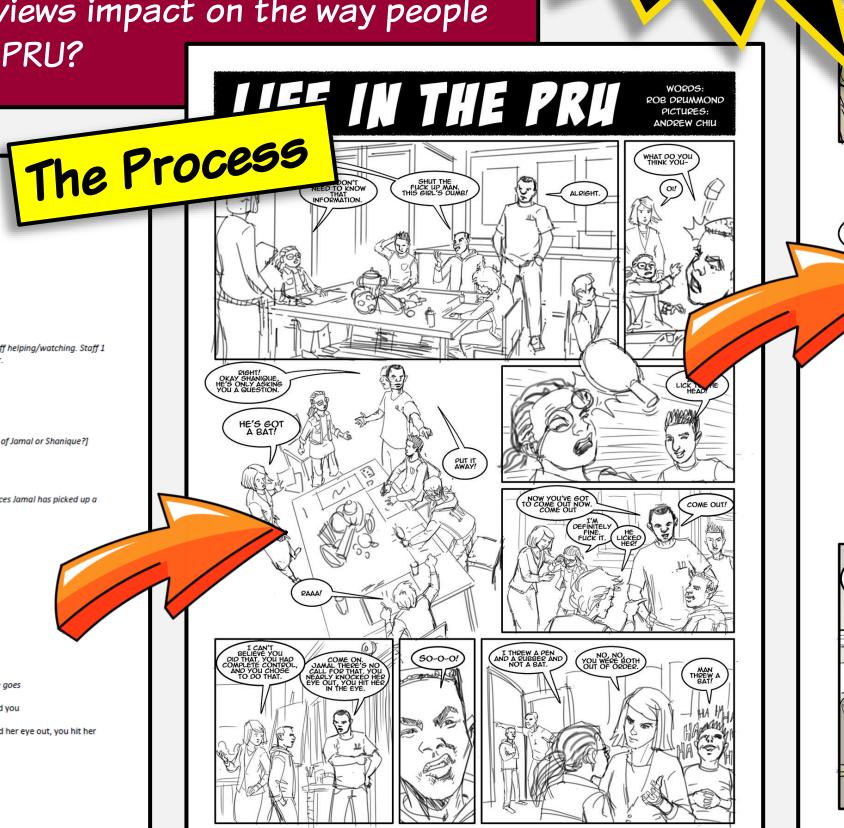
Panel 4: Jamal throws a table tennis bat at Shanique, it hits her in the even

- Ahhh! Lick to the head
- Now you've got to come out now. Come out
- He licked he 'm definitely fine. Fuck
- Panel 5: Staff 1 leading Jamal out of the class, teacher talking to him as he goes

- can't believe you did that. You had complete control, and yo chose to do that Come on Jamal there's no call for that you nearly knocked her eve out, you hit he
- n the eve

Panel 6: Jamal refusing to step outside, looking angr

- threw a pen and a rubber and not a bat
- No. no. you were both out of order
- [laughing] Man threw a bat



combination of linguistic authenticity, artwork, and targeted activities.

There are countless additional contexts where this approach would be useful. I am currently working with colleagues exploring possibilities for their use in mainstream schools (for 'Citizenship') and youth justice.

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