From Alternative Provision to 'Adulthood': Is There a Role for the Educational Psychologist?

Teniola Oloko

A thesis submitted for the degree of Professional Doctorate in Child, Community and Educational Psychology

Tavistock and Portman NHS Foundation Trust

University of Essex

Date of Submission for Examination (May 2025)

Acknowledgements

Completing this thesis marks the beginning of the end of a journey that has shaped me in ways I did not expect. So, it is only right that I start these acknowledgements with gratitude to past me, who did the work to get me here.

I am so proud of us!

I dedicate these acknowledgements to Jide, because you've been there through the gritty, evolving reality of the journey, seen every version of me that has come from it and still been constant. From one favourite to the other, thank you.

I am also incredibly grateful to my research supervisor Dale Bartle for his support during this process, and to everyone in my life who makes up my amazing support system. To my mum, each of my siblings, including the three I have gained along the way, thank you for being there. But also, thank you for your patience with me! And the same goes to my friends, who have endured this research being my entire personality for a very long time. I can't even begin to name you all, but Ama, Hannah & Liz, I really appreciate you.

I also feel so fortunate to have made some real friends on this quest to becoming. Charae, Ruth, Zahwa, we did it!

Most importantly, thank you God for meeting me where I am at.

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Abstract

Alternative Provision (AP) serves as an educational setting for students who are unable to access mainstream settings, often due to social, emotional, and mental health needs. Unlike special schools, AP does not primarily cater to students with diagnosed special educational needs but instead supports those who have disengaged or been excluded from mainstream settings. Existing research has examined students' experiences within AP, and highlights the value of factors such as relational support and increased agency. However, there is limited research on the long-term outcomes of these young people, particularly their transition to adulthood. Even less is known about the role of educational psychologists (EPs) in supporting individuals aged 16 to 25 who have previously attended AP.

The present research contributes to knowledge in this area through an exploration of the lived experiences of three young adults who completed secondary education in an AP, and have since transitioned to adulthood. This research utilised interpretative phenomenological analysis to examine participants' meaning making around their transition, considering how this shaped their self-conceptions, and overall perceptions of adulthood. The findings highlight the complex and ongoing process of transitioning to adulthood, identifying five protective factors in the process. Implications for EP practice with AP leavers aged 16 to 25 are considered, focusing on transparent, accessible, developmental and community-based approaches.

1. Introduction

Transitioning to adulthood is a significant period in any individual's life. It is typically initiated by the post-16 transition, as young people complete secondary education and begin to navigate the complexities of adult life (Schulenberg & Schoon, 2012). This transition process is shaped by various systemic, social, and personal factors, with it gaining an increasing focus in educational, psychological and sociological research. In particular, there has been growing attention on the learning necessary to prepare children and young people for further education, employment and training (Moulton et al., 2018; Vidal Rodeiro & Vitello, 2023). However, research has also explored challenges within this process (Allan, 2017; Cort, 2017), and looked at the experience for young people with learning difficulties (Carroll, 2015). Correspondingly, research has also explored the evolving educational psychologist (EP) role within this process (Morris & Atkinson, 2018; Morris, 2017). This research seeks to further these explorations through a focus on the lived experiences of young people who have completed their secondary education in an Alternative Provision (AP), and since transitioned to adulthood. This study will explore the meanings young people make of their transitional journeys, then consider how the EP role in early adulthood can be informed by these.

1.1 Secondary Education

Completing secondary education marks a key milestone for young people as they progress to adulthood. Children and young people spend a significant period of time in secondary school, and it is recognised as an environment where they can gain an education, have social experiences, and are equipped with the essential skills which prepare them for adult life (Lahelma, 2002). The literature in this area highlights the relevance of later secondary school, known as Key Stage 4 (KS4), in

preparation for adulthood, particularly considering preparation for further education, employment or training (Hodgson & Spours, 2020; Lupton et al., 2021). Though there are a range of settings available for students to access secondary education, mainstream settings are most commonly accessed. Mainstream refers to schools that teach a diverse range of pupils with varying capabilities (Leicestershire County Council, 2023). These schools have been moving towards more inclusive educational practices in line with the Education Acts (1996, 2011) and also in keeping with the increase in reported Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND; Department for Education, 2024a). However, some children and young people are still unable to access these settings due to various factors, which has led to conversations around how regulatory practices govern inclusion and exclusion in these schools (McLean, 2024). This has resulted in increased demand for AP in order to provide education to those students who, for various reasons, are unable to access mainstream provision (DfE, 2018).

1.2 Alternative Provision Definition

The Department for Education (DfE) has provided documentation which outlines the purpose and expectations of AP, while also providing guidance for all professionals working in or with these settings. Within these records, AP is described as a setting which aims to provide education to pupils who are unable to receive suitable education in a mainstream or special school (DfE, 2013; 2018). Broadly, the reasons for this include physical or mental health needs; a pupil not having a placement in a mainstream school; as well as fixed term suspensions, permanent exclusion, or direction to receive education off-site by the school, resulting from behaviour in school. AP placements are offered by Pupil Referral Units (PRUs), AP

Academies, AP Free Schools, independent schools, colleges, and other private and voluntary settings (Mills & Thomson, 2018).

AP placements are typically organised by schools or local authority (LA) professionals, for varying durations. Students can have full or part-time AP placements which may be long or short-term in duration. In the literature, the purpose of this type of setting is recognised to be an alternative setting for pupils who are at risk of exclusion, have been excluded and need support to be reintegrated into a mainstream school setting, or are unable to return to mainstream education settings (Bridgeman, 2024; Mills & Thomson, 2018).

1.3 Legislative Context

1.3.1 Inclusive Education

In recent years government policy and legislation have focused on improving outcomes for children and young people. The introduction of the Children and Families Act (2014) and the subsequent SEND Code of Practice (2015) extended the age range of children and young people in this category to include those aged zero to 25, with the EP role expanding to include this age range. A key aspect of the reform initiated by this legislation was the introduction of Education, Health, and Care Plans (EHCP) as a means for various practitioner services to contribute to a single assessment of needs for children and young people. This statutory plan is designed to facilitate a collaborative approach to tailored support, while amplifying the voices of children and young people, and their families within the process of assessment and provision.

The development of the EHCP process replaced the previous statement of special educational needs, and builds upon previous legislation including the Education Act (1996, 2011), which outlines the objective for all students to be

educated in mainstream education setting wherever possible. This has resulted in an increase in "inclusive education/mainstreaming" (Lindsay, 2007). Mainstreaming refers to an expectation for schools to provide education to all pupils, irrespective of differences relating to ability, health, or culture. It aims to function in a way that responds to pupils' individual differences within the pre-existing structures and processes which are present in education (Florian, 2008). It is rooted in concerns for the educational rights of children and young people, with the knowledge that separation of pupils with special learning needs from their typically developing peers places an injustice on this group (Florian, 2008; Lindsay, 2007).

There appear to be tensions between the right to accessing education, and the equity of the experience. Internationally, inclusive education has increasingly come to be recognised as acceptance of the diversity between learners (Ainscow & Miles, 2008). This has led towards educational provision that is more responsive to individual differences (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation, 1994; 2001). Yet specific groups continue to be disproportionately represented in exclusion data (DfE, 2024), therefore the SEND Code of Practice (2015) has pushed for utilisation of special school and Alternative Provision (AP) placements. This follows on from the Children and Families Act (2014), which emphasises the requirement for appropriate education to be that which meets the individual needs of pupils, enabling the best possible outcomes by meeting their full potential.

1.3.2 The EP Role with Young People Over 16

Expansion of the EP role to cover a broader age range has meant developments in EP practice to meet the needs of these children and young people. Particularly for young people aged 16 and over, this has increased the necessity for

EPs to work in collaboration with adult services, and a variety of further education and training providers (Atkinson et al., 2015). The EP role in supporting post-16 transition is becoming increasingly recognised, especially through guidance such as Preparing for Adulthood (2013), which emphasises a collaborative and person-centred approach to future planning. This guidance aims to improve outcomes for young people around employment, independent living, health and community inclusion, and research in this area encourages EPs to broaden their understanding of theories around transitioning to early adulthood (Atkinson et al., 2015). It is notable that these reforms prioritise SEND specific needs. This suggests a focused lens around improving outcomes for certain vulnerable groups, which means there is potential for other groups to be overlooked.

1.4 National Context

1.4.1 The EP Role with Young People Over 16

Despite the commitment to tailored and inclusive educational support presented at the legislative level, national data highlights discrepancies in educational practice. This is particularly reflected through the increased demand for AP placements which appears to be linked to the escalating rates of exclusions and fixed terms suspensions in recent years (DfE, 2024b). While it is notable that these rates declined during the Covid-19 Pandemic lockdowns, statistics in the 2022/23 academic year marked a drastic increase in fixed-term suspensions (FTS) and permanent exclusion (PEx; DfE, 2024b). Though these recorded increases encompassed students in primary, secondary, and special schools, secondary schools continue to account for the majority of PEx, at 86%. This indicates that approximately 11 in every 10,000 secondary aged students is being permanently

excluded. Similarly, a market analysis of AP (DfE, 2018) highlighted that 84% of AP placements were commissioned for secondary aged pupils.

The factors influencing these high rates are not clarified in the data. However, government guidance around behaviour suggests that schools are being urged to adopt more punitive approaches around behaviour management (DfE, 2024c). Research in this area highlights that government guidance and policy around this is creating an increasingly challenging situation for schools, suggesting that this likely cultivates teacher stress and a reduced sense of self-efficacy regarding classroom management (Nash et al., 2016; Wray et al., 2022). This is particularly concerning as longstanding research suggests that a corrective approach to behaviour management is found to intensify behaviour difficulties in children with pre-existing needs (Taylor, 2010). This suggests that children and young people with SEND are particularly vulnerable in this context, as research indicates that they are more likely to have social, emotional, and mental health (SEMH) needs which often present as behavioural difficulties in the mainstream classroom setting (Nicholls et al., 2020; Oldfield et al., 2017). The suggestion here is that the increase in PEx and FTS rates potentially indicates where schools are struggling to meet the standards for inclusive education, as promoted in the SEND Code of Practice (2015). Literature here questions the effectiveness of FTS and PEx as an approach to behaviour management, highlighting negative impacts on education and mental health which are closely linked to feelings of rejection (Howard, 2016; McInerney & McKlindon, 2014; Sealy et al., 2023). This intersects with increasing recognition of mental health difficulties in children and adolescents documented across the UK (DfE 2017, 2018b).

AP is therefore seemingly being utilised as a reactive measure and perpetuates a cycle that overly impacts students of certain groups, as literature highlights the prevalence of exclusion for students of minoritised populations (Perera, 2020; Rizvi, 2023; Wallace & Joseph-Salisbury, 2022). The demographic breakdown of pupils in AP further illustrates this by highlighting intersecting differences between individual factors such socio-economic status, race, culture, and gender (DfE, 2024d). The DfE data reports that students of black British African and Caribbean ethnicities, and Gypsy Roma and Traveller of Irish heritage have the highest exclusion rates. The data also reports that boys are significantly more likely to be excluded than girls. Additionally, students eligible for free school meals (FSM) are five times more likely to be PEx, a disparity that is highly relevant as research highlights that FSM eligibility is an indicator of socio-economic disadvantage (Taylor, 2018). Moreover, the Timpson (2019) review revealed that 78% of students permanently excluded are classified as in need, or have identified SEN labels.

This disproportional representation of students from specific minoritised groups in exclusion data and subsequently AP demographics, reflects the broader social inequalities that students in this context face. This therefore highlights a broader systemic inequity which negates the meaningful realisation of inclusive practices as they are directed by legislation. Particularly, this indicates an imbalance in how the educational rights of these students, who are already vulnerable, are being met within the context of these systemic barriers.

1.4.2 Pressures on Alternative Provision

The government commissioned market analysis of AP highlights that the increase in PEx has led to overcrowded settings, as well as strain on AP resources and staff (DfE, 2018). Additionally, inconsistent funding means APs are having to

utilise support from temporary staff and at times, staff who are underqualified. With research highlighting that students who are PEx have an increased chance of accessing settings that are considered inadequate (Gill et al., 2017), the impact of these systemic challenges on teacher capacity and self-efficacy is undeniable (DfE, 2018; Wray et al., 2022). It has also been highlighted that APs have limited access to specialist services (DfE, 2018), which is problematic as data highlights that a large proportion of students in AP have SEND or SEMH needs (DfE, 2024d).

Government initiatives have been put in place in recent years which focus on reform and support (DfE, 2017, 2023). This has focused on improving quality and capacity of these settings, leading to the implementation of quality assurance frameworks (DfE, 2023). However, there appears to be a disconnect between the aspirations and expectations of AP, compared to the outcomes of students who complete education there. Though AP is widely regarded as a temporary situation, the difficulties around reintegration of students to mainstream settings are extensively documented (Moran, 2010; Owen et al., 2021). Furthermore, the data indicates that PEx rates peak in later secondary school, and for students accessing AP in KS4 this becomes a final destination (DfE, 2022). Nonetheless, government guidance in this area has focused on augmenting the educational experiences of these students, as well as their long-term outcomes, while supposedly addressing the existing systemic inequities which maintain disadvantage for minoritised children and young people (DfE, 2017, 2023, 2025).

1.4.3 Long-Term Outcomes for AP Students

Research suggests that exclusion from the mainstream education system increases the likelihood of negative long-term implications for young people as they progress to adulthood (Isherwood, 2023). This aligns with DfE research which

highlights challenges for students in AP around successful post-16 transition to further education, employment, or training, and subsequently adulthood (DfE, 2017). Compared to their peers in mainstream settings, students accessing AP are reportedly significantly less likely to transition to, or sustain a post-16 destination (DfE, 2017). This demonstrates the difference and fragility in their outcomes. It is likely that this disparity is due to limited access to qualifications for AP pupils, as the research shows that as few as 4.5% of AP students achieve a standard pass in English and Mathematics at GCSE (DfE, 2017). This data reflects an academic gap which is likely exacerbated by the systemic pressures placed upon AP. The inconsistencies in staffing, as well as limited access to targeted or specialist support, presents a challenging context for APs to equip pupils with the necessary skills for post-16 transition (DfE, 2017; Gill et al., 2017).

A 2016 Ofsted report indicated that in 15% of APs visited, the route from APs to continuing education, employment or apprenticeships was not clearly defined (DfE, 2017; Ofsted, 2016). This data also indicates that as of 2014, pupils who ended KS4 in APs made up 1% of all KS4 pupils in the UK, but 4% of those not in education, employment, or training. This raises questions around how equipped pupils are when transitioning out of these settings. The wider literature in this area highlights that the skills required for the staff who work in APs are concentrated around flexible person-centred practice as opposed to standardised practice, in order to improve outcomes for the children and young people who attend (Johnston & Nolty, 2023). This tends to focus on the significance of relational practice in order to develop qualities such as trust, a sense of belonging and motivation for engagement for students in these settings, with the view of improving short-term outcomes (DfE, 2023). The aim here

is therefore to foster a positive school experience, and possibly enable successful reintegration into mainstream settings.

However, with AP seemingly being positioned as a reactive measure within the education system, issues relating to positive long-term outcomes remain. In the article by Johnston and Nolty (2023), social capital refers to the connections and relational factors which underpin AP settings, with the impact of this being perceived as dual in nature. It is felt that the positives of this relational approach in AP are not effectively bridged across wider contexts out of the AP setting. Therefore, while supportive connections are formed, this may perpetuate segregation between AP leavers and other young adults in the community and also in further education, employment and training posts which are not structured similarly to AP (Clarke & Thompson, 2024).

In a recent study, the significance of a comprehensive approach to preparations for post-16 transition was emphasised, utilising the perspectives of AP students and the staff supporting them (Macro, 2020). The findings from this study revealed that while young people perceived AP to be more fitting to their individual learning needs, they felt that attaining qualifications to support successful transition was sacrificed, in favour of the affective and relational support they received around mental health. Furthermore, the study highlights that staff and students also felt that the AP structure prioritised short-term outcomes over sustainable long-term success. Nonetheless, while the findings indicate that there are gaps in the preparatory supports that AP students receive, it is evident that staff in these settings pride themselves on their capacity to meet the immediate needs of these students.

1.5 Transitioning from AP to Adulthood

1.5.1 Post-16 Transition

Research surrounding AP indicates how the PEx process increases risk and vulnerability, further marginalising certain groups within the education system (Johnston & Bradford, 2024; Malcolm, 2018). The complex needs of the AP student population are also brought to the forefront through research in this area, which highlights the intersecting difficulties students in AP face (Caslin, 2021; Clarke & Thompson, 2024; Facey et al., 2020; Trotman et al., 2019). This suggests unique challenges for AP leavers in the post-16 transition, a key point where young people explore options for further education, employment, or training in preparation for adult life.

Comprehensive post-16 planning is an evolving area of focus, with the literature recognising the necessity for support around mental health and wellbeing support as well as access to vocational pathways (Gregory & Atkinson, 2024; Hamilton & Morgan, 2018; Malcolm, 2022). Some of this research has focused on what effective support around post-16 preparations may look like. For instance, a study by Gregory and Atkinson (2024), highlighted how Self-Determination Theory (Ryan & Deci, 2000) can be used to explore AP pupils' goals and aspirations around the transition, thus providing a framework for structuring the supports offered. Also recognised, though less commonly explored is the apparent compromise between academic attainment and more affective support (Macro, 2020). Even less commonly explored is the long-term impact of the AP experience for young people, as they progress through this transitionary period and onto early adulthood (Malcolm, 2022; Thompson, 2017).

1.5.2 Entering Adulthood

The transition to adulthood is an evolving concept, with literature describing it with terms such as "emerging adulthood" (Arnett, 2000 p.469), suggesting an extended period of adolescence (Sawyer et al., 2018) or describing a prolonged transition to adulthood(Côté, 2014). Arnett (2000) theorised the period between ages 18 to 25 to be a developmental stage where young people navigate changing societal expectations, employment or further education, relationships, and their sense of identity. Key critiques of this theory argue that although transitioning to adulthood is a key period of change, change is not synonymous with development (Hendry & Kloep, 2010). Côté (2014) argues that referring to this period as a developmental stage minimises the disadvantages that individuals may have experienced regarding the process. Therefore, researchers have highlighted how the success and experience of this transition are influenced by various socio-cultural and economic factors, including education (Côté, 2014; Schulenberg & Schoon, 2012).

Research has explored the role of the EP and other professionals in this fundamental period of a young person's life. For instance, one study highlighted the scope for EPs to work collaboratively at the systemic, individual and group level in preparing for post-16 transition, as well as during the post-16 period (Morris & Atkinson, 2018). This research highlights the scope for the EP role in this critical stage of transitioning to adulthood. However, there appears to be minimal research exploring how EPs can support AP leavers in particular, who are reported to experience an intersection of complex needs which likely contribute to an experience of disadvantage (DfE, 2024d; Timpson 2019). Exploring the lived experiences of AP leavers during this period will further understanding of how EPs and other professionals can improve outcomes for young people in this context.

2. Literature Review

This literature review aims to examine the varying factors that inform the rationale for the present study, by exploring the current state of literature surrounding research topic (Baumeister & Leary, 1997; Siddaway et al., 2019). Key focusing questions have been developed to support a synthesis of the existing literature around the context of AP in the UK. The methodological approach to this review is described, followed by a critique of the selected research. Finally, key themes will be defined and discussed.

2.1 Method

2.1.1 Approach: Systematic Narrative Review

A systematic approach to literature review is considered effective in developing a reliable and impartial review of the literature (Macdonald, 2003). With rigour, transparency, and replicability as core principles of a systematic review, there is an increased likelihood of a high-quality review, which objectively reveals the baseline of knowledge in the area of focus (Mallett et al., 2012; Rother, 2007). Thus, a systematic approach was taken in identifying the literature included in this review.

However, the nature of the research questions which underpin the present review lent towards a narrative approach to synthesis (Sukhera, 2022), particularly given the expectation that a large portion of the literature would be qualitative in nature. This approach enables interpretive meaning making and critical engagements with the available data (Rodgers et al., 2009; Sukhera, 2022). Therefore, a meta-ethnographic approach was taken to synthesising the selected literature. This is an interpretive narrative review approach which highlights gaps and supports the advancement of knowledge in this area (Sukhera, 2022).

The present review is therefore being defined as a systematic narrative review (SNR), as an approach which integrates the principles of systematic search procedures alongside the interpretive strengths of narrative synthesis (Mallett et al., 2012; Siddaway et al., 2019; Sukhera, 2022).

2.1.2 Researcher Positionality

Due to the interpretive aspect of this SNR, the authors positionality as a practitioner researcher is acknowledged and drawn upon in the process of synthesis. This position recognises that research is grounded in professional practice (Heikkinen et al., 2016). Therefore, there is recognition that professional interest and experience around AP will likely shape how the literature is engaged with and interpreted. In line with literature which highlights the influence of self in research as a valuable tool (Braun & Clarke, 2023), this review will incorporate this positionality to critically explore the data.

2.1.3 Review Questions

This SNR aims to illustrate the narratives within the literature that surround pupils who access AP. It is assumed that the journey of post-16 transition and progression to adulthood for students who have experienced the AP context is influenced by factors across their educational journey (Timpson, 2019). Therefore, a comprehensive understanding of what these factors may be is important to better understand the experiences of AP leavers. While narrative literature reviews tend to have broader review questions compared to systematic reviews (Cook et al., 1997), this review seeks to explore a broad area utilising specific focussing questions. Therefore, this SNR seeks to address the following questions, followed by a summary exploring how this relates to EP practice within AP settings:

1. What can the literature tell us about the experiences of children and young people entering alternative provisions?

2. What can the literature tell us about the experiences of children and young people in alternative provision?

3. What can the literature tell us about post-16 transition for young people who access alternative provision?

2.1.4 Search and Screening of Literature

Using systematic searching strategies, a search of the literature was conducted using Boolean operators across two databases: ERIC and PsychINFO (De Klerk & Pretorius, 2019; Laher & Hassem, 2020). These databases were chosen to cover both educational database as well as a psychological sources. Preliminary scoping searches were carried out in order to identify the key terms to be used in the search. A number of keywords including synonyms and alternative names for AP were then used to develop the search strategy (Appendix A). Limited inclusion and exclusion criteria were developed to screen the literature returned from the database, while keeping the results broad (Table 1). The criteria eliminated literature produced prior to the year 2014, in order to ensure the findings were reflective of the developments in educational practice and SEND support following implementation of the Children and Families Act (2014). In line with this, the search was also set to exclude literature that was not based in the UK, as this is where the act applies. Although the Children and Families Act (2014) also introduced a change in the language used to describe behavioural and emotional difficulties, terms which are now considered historical were also included in the search strategy. This was done to widen the scope of literature considered, to be inclusive of terms other than SEMH which are still being used in current research. All types of available data were

included, but the search yielded qualitative and mixed methodology studies exclusively, which influenced the decision to use a meta-ethnographic approach. A visual of the search is included in appendix B. All searches took place over a three-week period from the 12th to 30th of August 2024.

Table 1

Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

Inclusion Criteria	Rationale	Exclusion Criteria
Presented in English	To enable full understanding	Studies written in languages other than English
UK Based	To ensure relevance to the UK context that the present research is grounded in	Studies based out of the UK
Published following 2014*	To ensure relevance to the current knowledge and developments in practice following legislative changes.	Studies published prior to 2014
Specific to pupils related to AP	To ensure consistency with to topic of focus	Studies where AP was a secondary or non-specific consideration

2.2 Critique of Selected Literature

The searches on each database yielded a high volume of results, and eight of these were selected to be a part of this review. However, the initial scoping which identified search terms had also revealed six studies which deemed highly relevant and included. Although this reduces the replicability of the search strategy, it reflects findings from existing research which recognise that systematic reviews require flexible methods to capture relevant literature that may be overlooked in a structured

search (Greenhalgh & Peacock, 2005). Additionally, theses were generally excluded from selection due to the time-limited nature of this project, though three exceptions were made. A critique of the literature was conducted with reference to the Critical Appraisal Skills Programme (CASP) for qualitative research and the Mixed Methods Appraisal Tool (MMAT, 2018). This is not a formal appraisal, as the synthesis aspect of the SNR sits within the remit of a narrative review. However, this process enabled consideration of the quality and relevance of each study.

2.2.1 Overview of Chosen Studies

All studies explored in this review shared a common theme of investigating the experiences and outcomes of students in AP settings. Some of the main themes within these studies were around the initial process of accessing AP, and its impact on the lives of these children and young people. Some studies also provided insight into the individual and systemic factors that influenced the experiences of these students, from the perspectives of both students and the professionals involved in their educational journeys. Though all studies reviewed had a qualitative aspect to their design, a variety of methodologies have been used to shape the literature around this topic. The chosen studies have been discussed in relation to the review question to which they relate. This structuring seeks to provide a narrative illustration of AP experiences from the point of entry to the point of exit. See appendix C to view selected papers.

2.2.2 SNR Question 1: What can the literature tell us about the experiences of children and young people entering Alternative Provisions?

The first question in this review seeks to explore entry to AP for children and young people, and two of the chosen studies were found to relate to this question.

The literature search yielded very few results applicable to this question, suggesting that there is limited research which specifically explores pupils' experiences at this point. This appears to be a gap which the selected studies are beginning to address.

The research methodologies used in both papers allowed for in-depth explorations of participant perspectives. As both studies had student participants, this enabled meaningful contributions of pupil views to the literature in this area. Facey et al. (2020) used semi-structured interviews to gather data from three participants aged 13-14, two of whom were female and one male. Interestingly, this demographic breakdown of participants contrasts with the expectation for a higher number of male participants due to their over-representation in AP settings (DfE, 2024d). However, as the researchers used a self-selective sampling method, it can be argued that this sample is not representative of the group being researched, instead representing the voices of young people who were willing to share their stories. As the researchers also had a small sample size, the generalisability of the findings is also a cause for contention. However, as the researchers applied an interpretive phenomenological analysis approach to data analysis, it can be argued that generalisability was not an aim of the study.

This study sought to gain a detailed understanding of the experiences of pupils who had recently transitioned from a mainstream school to an AP (Facey et al., 2020). This study appeared to build on the ideas that SEMH difficulties were a precipitating factor for pupils entering AP, and that school wide approaches to addressing SEMH often exacerbated these (Graham et al., 2019; Pereira & Lavoie, 2018; Trotman et al., 2015). This feels incredibly relevant in the current climate where mental health is being increasingly recognised in children and young people across the UK and in schools especially (DfE 2017, 2018b).

The study by Trotman et al. (2015) similarly sought to explore the behaviours which influenced school exclusion, from the perspectives of both pupils and staff. However, this study had a much larger participant sample of 49 pupils and eight behaviour coordinators within a collection of associated schools, conducting interviews over a 12-month period. This extended period of time was reportedly due to the large sample size and the ethnographic case study approach to data analysis (Stake, 1995). Similarly to IPA, this approach utilises principles of immersing oneself in all aspects of the data. However, this approach also considers wider data to that gathered from interviewing. This includes data from observing participants, as well as the researcher's reflections as they occur in real time (Armstrong et al., 2019). The depth of understanding that comes from both of these approaches aligns with the aims for both studies to provide a detailed understanding of pupil experiences which resulted in their accessing AP. Therefore, though limited literature was found to relate to this SNR question, that which is available provides a significant contribution to what appears to be an under-researched aspect of the literature surrounding AP.

Though the aims of both studies can be perceived to be similarly focused on SEMH and behaviour, the study by Trotman et al. (2015) contributes a more school-wide perspective through the inclusion of staff as participants. However, it is recognised that this study was published quite soon following the SEND reforms initiated by the Children and Families Act (2014). Therefore, it could be argued that this study provides a much more dated view, compared to that by Facey et al. (2020). Nonetheless, both studies yielded similar findings.

Behaviours which led to exclusion and subsequent transition to AP were highlighted in both studies, and this was often influenced by the transitions from

primary to secondary school as well as that from Key Stage 3 to Key Stage 4. However, these studies presented differing challenges which arose during these transitions. Trotman et al. (2015) reported that pupils felt that there were higher expectations around behaviour and learning in key stage 4 and in secondary school overall. This was also coupled with feelings of overwhelm relating to thoughts around future qualifications and job market considerations. Students also reported that they often felt left out of conversations about their own education, indicating the perception that behaviour and academic performance was felt to outweigh their aspirations for the futures.

Facey et al. (2020) similarly highlighted difficulties for these students in navigating secondary school settings. However, what came up for the students in this study was a significant change in the social expectations of secondary school, compared to primary school. This became a demand for these students which they reportedly found incredibly challenging to manage and did not feel supported with by staff or peers. The term "allies" arose in this study (Facey et al., 2020 p.6), linking to a theme of relationships as a significant contributing factor to these students' experiences. It was implied that a lack of social relationships with peers, as well as a lack of supportive and protective relationships with adults resulted in participants feeling unsafe and unprotected especially regarding their physical safety and mental health. Feelings of isolation and desperation were also named, and students showed some recognition that their behaviours which led to permanent exclusion were a result of these experiences.

This is comparable to the study by Trotman et al., (2015), where participants highlighted the value they placed upon positive relationships between students and staff, which came in the form of direct supports such as mentoring and anger

management classes. In line with this, these participants highlighted how their behavioural presentation was shaped by school-wide attitudes, with negative attitudes intensifying behavioural challenges. Regarding their AP placements, these students also shared that they valued the alternative educational experiences offered by AP, citing their appreciation for a more personalised and relational learning approach.

Based on the findings from both studies, the transition to secondary school can be interpreted as a triggering factor for pupils with SEMH difficulties, which influences difficulties in a mainstream setting and may result in a subsequent transition to AP. The findings also suggest that a lack of positive relational experiences in these settings as well as pupils being excluded from decisions about their education can contribute to a failed mainstream placement. Interestingly, prior to beginning their study, Trotman et al., (2015) noted that pupil perspectives had been overlooked by the associated schools, when exploring the impact of behavioural challenges which resulted in permanent exclusion, making them essential for this research. The benefit of this was that students were able to illustrate how school-wide perceptions furthered their behavioural challenges, which is arguably a significant contributing factor to unsuccessful mainstream placements. This is particularly notable as the students in this study highlighted a lack of inclusion in decisions regarding their education. However, through this research the students were able to highlight what they felt worked for them. They reflected on the positives of their AP experience compared to their mainstream school, further highlighting a relationship between negative school perceptions and behavioural challenges. This demonstrates the value in the contribution of pupil views in research, not only to

highlight the challenges they experience, but also to evaluate what they feel works for them.

2.2.3 SNR Question 2: What can the literature tell us about the experiences of children and young people in Alternative Provision?

The second question in this SNR explores the experiences of children and young people once they are in an AP. Five of the selected studies addressed this question, and the higher number of available research suggests that this is an area that is increasingly being researched. What stands out from this selection is that there are a variety of contributing perspectives which explore the broad experience of AP placements. Subheadings are used within this section for clarity around the breadth and diversity of the literature identified.

2.2.3.1 AP as a Short-Term Placement.

Atkinson and Rowley (2019) investigated the perspectives of children and young people who had experienced school exclusion, exploring the factors they felt contributed to their successful reintegration into mainstream school. This feels highly relevant given national contextual data which has highlighted challenges around reintegration into mainstream school for pupils in AP (DfE, 2022; 2024d). Similarly, Cockerill (2019) explored the experience of a shared placement between AP and mainstream settings for students with SEMH needs, considering the perspective of pupils, staff, and senior leadership to illustrate understanding at multiple levels in both AP and mainstream settings. Interestingly, both studies had a similar sample of predominantly male student participants, reflecting national statistics which indicate that males are disproportionately represented in APs (DfE, 2024d).

Atkinson and Rowley (2019) sought to present a social constructionist perspective of the views held around reintegration, utilising a Q methodology. This is

a mixed methods approach using a Q-set of statements which the researchers developed based on relevant literature. Participants were asked to sort these statements onto a Q-grid according to specified criteria, enabling them to illustrate their perspectives based on their own experiences. This data was then analysed through a comparison of each individual's Q-grids, to sort participants into one of two common perspectives. The researchers interpreted the findings qualitatively, constructing a descriptive account of each viewpoint. Through this approach, the researchers were able to illustrate the pupils' perspectives, as they related to wider constructions around success in school reintegration.

The findings of this study were grounded in Bronfenbrenner's (1979) ecological systems theory, illustrating the significant role systemic and structural challenges play in the success of pupils reintegrating into mainstream education. Their findings revealed two viewpoints of factors perceived to contribute to successful reintegration, and it can be argued that these illustrate pupil's experience of AP as one that involves learning about themselves. The first viewpoint highlighted the effect of AP being used in an interventional way, where students were able to experience the approach to support that would be beneficial to them in their mainstream setting. Importance was placed on feeling included and supported by both family and key school staff, in a way that did not result in pupils feeling or appearing different to their peers. This demonstrated the extent to which the systems around the student influenced their schooling experience.

The second viewpoint in this study had positive and negative poles. The positive pole highlighted that for the younger pupils' value was placed on peer relationships and social and emotional support. This links to research which indicates that pupils are accessing AP in the first instance, due to a lack of access to

positive social and relational experiences (Facey et al., 2020). Comparatively, the negative pole indicated a need for structure, routine, and strong connections with mainstream settings, with the lack of these contributing to unsuccessful reintegration. Emerging from these findings is the idea of inclusion and belonging are factors which contributed to pupil engagement and successful reintegration into mainstream. This suggests that pupils' positive experiences of relationships and tailored strategies in AP resulted in increased awareness of what they needed from their mainstream school setting.

The study by Cockerill (2019) offered similar findings, reinforcing the importance of belonging in shaping students' experiences in AP and their engagement in mainstream education. This study utilised the Psychological Sense of School Membership scale to measure pupils' sense of belonging to their mainstream school and AP, alongside semi-structured interviews to gather participant views in relation to belonging and acceptance. Three outcomes were identified for participants, the first being that when students felt a sense of belonging in both AP and their mainstream school, they were more likely to engage positively in both settings. This led to improved behaviour and, in some cases, successful reintegration. The second highlighted an alternative perspective, where some students engaged well with AP but continued to struggle with behaviour and disengagement in their mainstream school. These students often felt alienated from the mainstream setting while identifying more strongly with the AP environment. The third outcome was less frequently occurring, but demonstrated that a small number of students became disengaged from both settings altogether. These findings indicate the complexity and at times contradictory experience for students in navigating two learning environments at once. This aligns with the negative pole of

the second viewpoint in the Atkinson and Rowley (2019) study, highlighting the necessity of continuity and suggesting that AP as the intervention alone is not sufficient.

Both studies use of a mixed method approach enabled a nuanced interpretation of pupils' perspectives as they were situated within wider systemic narratives. By presenting a social constructionist perspective, Atkinson and Rowley's (2019) study contributes to a theory that the schooling experience is influenced by factors wider than the individual and can be shaped by whole school attitudes and perceptions held by others (Trotman et al., 2015). Similarly, Cockerill (2019) sought to ground their findings within the context and process by which they may have taken place, through a realistic evaluation framework. This emphasised how attitudes to school could be fostered by school staff and when these were positive, could facilitate successful reintegration into mainstream settings full-time. This is illustrated by findings from staff interviews which highlighted that schools which viewed AP as an extension of their provision rather than a separate placement, were more successful in fostering a dual sense of belonging.

Thus, the studies by Atkinson and Rowley (2019) and Cockerill (2019) reveal significant variability in students' experiences of AP. For some, AP provided a sense of inclusion and personalised support, helping them identify what they needed to thrive in a school environment. However, others experienced AP as a separate, more accepting space, contrasting sharply with the exclusion or lack of support they felt in mainstream settings. This suggests that while AP can offer positive experiences, its effectiveness as a short-term placement depends on fostering a sense of belonging and ensuring continuity of support across both settings. However, it is notable that both of these studies seemed to present AP as a temporary space where return to

mainstream education was the goal. This suggests an impermanence associated with AP placements, which may mean that pupils spend their time in AP waiting to leave. This raises important questions around the impact of an unsuccessful transition back to mainstream settings.

2.2.3.2 Professionals' Perspectives of Student AP Experiences.

While the first two studies paid close attention to pupil perspectives, further studies relevant to this SNR question have focused more on the perspectives of professionals supporting students in AP. In a more recent study, researchers explored Child and Adolescent Mental Health Service (CAMHS) clinicians' perceptions of the mental health needs of young people accessing AP (Kew-Simpson et al., 2022). Focus on these perspectives suggests an ongoing concern around the SEMH needs of pupils in AP, which seems to reinforce previous framings of AP as an interventional space (Atkinson & Rowley, 2019; Cockerill, 2019).

Kew-Simpson et al. (2022) utilised open-ended interview questions with 15 participants with varied years of experience working in CAMHS. The findings highlighted that the mental health needs of young people in AP settings were complex compared to their counterparts in mainstream settings. This was reportedly related to traumatic past experiences and neurodevelopmental diagnoses which were likely perceived as challenging to manage within the mainstream settings that pupils had been excluded from. However, the study also noted that pupils' difficulties were often exacerbated by inconsistent mental health support offered across various APs, owing to a lack of specialist training for AP staff. This highlights a systemic issue of staff capability to support AP students, and implies that students have a variable experience of support. As studies explored later suggest, this variability may

stem from a lack of clarity around the purpose of AP which likely impacts the student

AP experience (Malcolm, 2020).

This study also highlighted systemic barriers within CAMHS, which meant that

pupils were unable to access mental health support until their difficulties had

escalated. This suggests multi-systemic barriers to mental health support which

likely impact pupil access and subsequent experience of AP. Furthermore, where the

findings of this study imply that a large portion of pupils accessing AP have complex

and historic SEMH difficulties, it can be argued they likely have a limited capacity to

experience feelings of rejection associated with unsuccessful reintegration to

mainstream settings. This further highlights the importance of feelings such as

belonging being fostered in AP settings, as a protective factor for these pupils

(Atkinson & Rowley, 2019; Cockerill, 2019).

In a study similarly focusing on the perspective of professionals, the views of

AP heads were explored (Malcolm, 2020). Some consideration went into the

decision to include this article in the SNR, as although the paper was published in

2020, the data for this study were gathered in 2013. This is not within the inclusion

criteria of this SNR, which is focusing on the educational context as it exists following

the implementation of the Children and Families Act (2014). However, the decision to

include this study was ultimately made due to the limited research exploring these

perspectives within the literature surrounding AP. Furthermore, at the time of

conducting the search, this study was situated within the most recent landscape of

guidance around AP. Therefore, this study is considered to contribute meaningfully to

ideas which illustrate the purpose of AP.

The study by Malcolm (2020), gathered the views of heads of AP using a

mixed method approach. Cognitive interviews were conducted with three heads of

AP, data from which was used to refine survey questions which were completed by a sample of 20 heads of AP across an English county. The participants were predominantly female, and the amount of experience in role that participants held varied largely from six months to over five years. Additionally, the type of provision in the county was variable, including settings like PRUs and AP academies, as well as private providers some of which were social enterprises.

What stands out from the findings of this research is an apparent shift from the historical focus of AP as a setting which focused more on behavioural management and offered primarily vocational qualifications, towards AP being a setting which held a more academic focus. For instance, 19 of the heads reported offering GCSE qualifications. Additionally, seven of the heads also described an offer which fit within the category considered to be "academic" (Russell & Thomson, 2009 p. 429), which is defined to mean having a scholastic focus. Only one head reportedly offered a "basic skills" programme (Russell & Thomson, 2009 p. 429), usually considered to refer to qualifications targeted below GCSE level. Though this illustrates a shift in the conceptualisation of the purpose of AP for AP leaders, it also highlights that different settings are at different stages in their journey towards this goal.

This relates to the idea that inconsistent aims across AP settings contribute to varying experiences for AP students, often resulting in a lack of successful intervention or support, as well as unsuccessful reintegration into mainstream (Atkinson & Rowley, 2019; Cockerill, 2019; Kew Simpson et al., 2022). These differences are further evidenced by the findings from Malcolm's (2020) study which highlighted significant differences between each setting's approach to managing challenging situations. For instance, some settings utilised physical restraint and

exclusion, while some settings did not take these approaches at all. This was reportedly influenced by the staff to student relationships within the settings, corresponding with research which illustrates the link between positive experiences of AP and a positive relational approach (Atkinson & Rowley, 2019; Cockerill, 2019).

Malcolm (2020) also explored AP heads' motivations to work in these settings. The heads reportedly held perceptions that these students' complex needs were not effectively supported in their mainstream schools, likely due to limited resources. They felt that AP students experienced difficulties around behaviour, self-esteem and confidence, learning difficulties, and a history of trauma and adverse home life. This mirrors previous findings around the complexity of SEMH difficulties for students accessing AP (Facey et al., 2020; Kew-Simpson et al., 2022; Trotman et al, 2015). However, the AP heads recognised that even pupils with complex needs had significant potential that they should be supported to reach, and felt that their settings needed to offer support that went above regulating behaviour. The findings highlight that this acted as intrinsic motivation for these AP heads to do their role. They expressed that they felt the purpose of AP was to increase access to opportunities for these pupils, while also supporting them through personal challenges and they wanted to do this by honing in on students interests and future aspirations. This contributes an organisational-level perspective on how AP functions as an intervention for students with complex SEMH needs, positioning it as more than a behavioural management setting, but rather as a space where students' aspirations and personal growth are nurtured (Atkinson & Rowley, 2019).

2.2.3.3 Consistently Variable Experiences.

In a thesis linked to the previous research, Malcolm (2015) investigated AP as a setting, with a sociological exploration of how this is experienced by students.

Notably in this thesis is the awareness of AP as a non-temporary space. Instead, here is an exploration of AP which was the final destination for students who subsequently completed a post-16 transition from their AP. The study utilised life history interviews with 18 young adults who had previously attended an AP. As a large aspect of the findings illustrate the participants' experiences of their post-16 transition, this research will be explored in more detail in relation to the following SNR question (question three). However, the findings do illustrate participants' reflections on attending AP, which will be explored here. It is important to note, that the data for this research were also gathered in 2013. This means that although the thesis was published in 2015, the data does not reflect the reality of AP as it has functioned following the SEND reforms implemented by the Children and Families Act, 2014. Nonetheless, an exception was made due to the limited availability of research which explores AP as a non-temporary setting.

A significant aspect of this study is its exploration of the systemic structuring of AP in comparison to mainstream settings. Malcolm (2015) illustrates mainstream settings as a space rooted in traditionally middle-class values, which sustain power imbalances and promote uniformity between members. This emphasises inequalities between students, making it more challenging for those who do not meet expectations to succeed. This is interesting especially when considering previously explored research which highlighted that students who access AP are often permanently excluded due to differences in their experiences of learning and relationships in secondary schools (Facey et al., 2020; Cockerill, 2019; Trotman et al., 2015). Comparatively, AP is described in this conceptualisation as a space where students are able to positively experience difference and conformity is not enforced. Malcolm (2015) argued that through a more relational and inclusive approach,

students are able to have a more positive experience of schooling in AP due to an experience of equality, compared to the inferiority which is experienced in the mainstream setting.

The role of inclusion and belonging appear to be manifesting repeatedly across the literature base (Atkinson & Rowley, 2019; Cockerill, 2019; Trotman et al., 2015). For the participants in Malcolm's (2015) study, this memory of belonging in the AP context stood out especially for those who had experienced bullying, learning difficulties associated with SEND, or school-related anxiety in their previous mainstream settings. They described AP as a setting more tailored to their SEMH needs, where they felt more encouraged to engage with learning due to the positive, trusting, and supportive relationships they had with staff. However, there was some variability in the participants' experiences of AP, as some expressed frustrations at having limited academic opportunities owing to the qualifications available in their APs. Furthermore, some participants also highlighted a lack of agency in decisions regarding their AP placement.

The findings from these studies concur with those across the available literature, and further illustrate the systemic and structural factors which influence the student experience while they are in AP (Malcolm, 2015). Both Malcolm (2020) and Kew-Simpson et al. (2022) illustrate how the support provided in AP is often contingent upon the staff's expertise, the clarity of the AP's purpose, and the continuity of support across settings. It also seems that the literature has highlighted improvements in the social-emotional experience for students accessing AP when it is used as an intervention (Atkinson & Rowley, 2019; Cockerill, 2019). However, there appears to be a lack of focus on the academic achievements of students in AP, particularly regarding their own aspirations (Malcolm, 2015; Trotman et al., 2015).

This suggests that while AP plays a role in challenging deficit-based perspectives and fostering relationships, belonging, and student agency; there are systemic barriers which limit its capacity to provide meaningful academic progression and future opportunities.

Additional research found to relate to this SNR question reiterates these themes. In a more recently published thesis where the researcher explored the views of girls who had accessed AP, similar findings were highlighted (Dance, 2022). This study utilised semi-structured interviews and a narrative inquiry approach to data analysis, to explore the meanings that girls made of their AP experiences. The participants of this study reported their experience of AP to be more inclusive and supportive, compared to mainstream which they found to be more rigid and punitive toward their differences. Though this research is not framed within the same sociological perspective as that by Malcolm (2015), both studies position AP as a space where students feel a greater sense of belonging and receive targeted support. Consistent with previous research, strong relationships with staff and a tailored approach to support were similarly named as factors which contributed to a positive experience in AP. However, this study also described AP as a short-term placement rather than a setting designed to provide long-term academic and personal development. This aligns with existing research, which points to the barriers students face in reintegrating into mainstream settings (Atkinson & Rowley, 2019; Cockerill, 2019), reinforcing concerns that AP often lacks a clear academic trajectory for students.

Moreover, this thesis further illustrates how societal narratives surrounding AP shape student experiences. Through the reflections of one participant, Dance (2022) illustrated how pupils initially held preconceived ideas of AP as a setting for 'bad'

children, or even criminals. These perceptions were largely shaped by mainstream

school environments and broader societal attitudes, and contributed to anxiety and

resentment about their placement. This highlights the significance of research

adopting a social constructionist perspective, such as that of Atkinson and Rowley

(2019), in understanding how wider systemic narratives influence students'

experience of AP.

The literature found to relate to this SNR question highlights a complex and

varied experience for children and young people accessing AP shaped by a range of

systemic and individual factors. Particularly, the relational experience,

inconsistencies in educational provision, and the structuring of AP settings have

been found to influence student experiences. This appears to manifest as a

contrasting experience for students, with some having positive experiences which

counteract deficit-based views which have shaped their educational journeys, while

others experience further exclusion and marginalisation.

2.2.4 SNR Question 3: What can the literature tell us about post-16 transition for young people who access Alternative Provision?

The third question in this review begins to look at post-16 transition for

children and young people who have accessed AP. Interestingly, only two of the

selected papers from the literature search apply here, suggesting that the experience

of exiting AP, much like that of entering, is an underexplored area. It is possible that

this is because the literature base focuses on AP as a temporary destination aiming

to provide intervention, as evidenced by the prevalence of research exploring shared

placements between AP and mainstream settings (Atkinson & Rowley, 2019;

Cockerill, 2019; Dance, 2022). However, research also illustrates the varied

provision and changing definition of AP (Malcolm, 2020), which suggests that for

some students AP is the final destination from which post-16 transition takes place. Additionally, research has highlighted the prevalence of unsuccessful reintegration back to mainstream settings (Atkinson & Rowley, 2019), suggesting that this is a highly relevant area to be explored.

Hamilton and Morgan (2018) examined this transition by exploring the experiences of young people with SEMH needs who had transitioned to college. The researchers utilised semi-structured interviews with eight participants aged 16-18 across two college settings, focusing on factors which influenced motivation and engagement throughout their educational progression. The findings of this study were framed within the Self-Determination Theory (SDT; Ryan & Deci, 2000), highlighting the role of competence, autonomy and relatedness in shaping students' post-16 transition experiences. These are defined in SDT as innate psychological needs, found to be significant factors for individuals to achieve their full potential (Deci & Ryan, 2000). Using the SDT, the researchers illustrated the individual factors which participants felt contributed to their successful progression. As well as a relational approach, the offer of a personalised and interest-based curriculum in college was found to contribute to student motivation to engage with further education. This was alongside an increased sense of self-efficacy in their capabilities. It was also found that students were more likely to disengage or drop out when rigid structures were in place that were not tailored to their needs. Thus, much like previously explored research, the findings revealed the value that students placed on having a tailored, relational approach within their further educational settings (Hamilton & Morgan, 2018). However, this study also highlighted the significance participants placed on having opportunities to interact with older

students. This was found to contribute to their personal growth, facilitating a smoother transition to adulthood.

The findings from this study link with previously explored literature which has illustrated how pupil experiences of AP facilitated increased autonomy through an awareness of how their schooling needs were best supported, and an increased ability to express this (Atkinson & Rowley, 2019; Cockerill, 2019; Trotman et al., 2015). However, Hamilton and Morgan's (2018) findings also highlighted the potential for AP to emphasise social exclusion and limit aspirations for pupils who attend. Participants reported feeling stigmatised due to their history of attending AP and described how they were perceived through a negative lens by their peers, mainstream educators, and even prospective employers. This is in line with previously explored research, indicating how AP leavers were viewed within their wider communities (Dance, 2022; Malcolm, 2015).

When exploring the impact of AP on young adults who had previously attended, Malcolm (2015) highlighted that young people's associations with AP were often framed through a deficit lens, not only within schools but also in social and professional contexts. The findings from this thesis highlighted that many AP leavers faced significant challenges when entering further education or employment, often encountering stigma linked to their history of exclusion. Participants reported struggling with self-perception, as the deficit-based narratives surrounding AP followed them into adulthood, reinforcing feelings of marginalisation and limiting their confidence in pursuing higher aspirations. These findings illustrate that social constructions around AP have an impact that persists into employment for students who access these settings. In addition, Malcolm (2015) also noted that employment opportunities for AP leavers were often limited due to a lack of qualifications and

employer biases, highlighting the long-term impact of inconsistent AP provision (Atkinson & Rowley, 2019; Kew-Simpson et al., 2022; Malcolm, 2020). Some participants described difficulties securing work placements or apprenticeships, as AP was perceived by some employers as a reflection of behavioural difficulties rather than a setting for educational support. These findings illustrate the impact of the tension that exists around the purpose of AP, with the duality of providing tailored SEMH support alongside meaningful academic qualifications often being unmet (Malcolm, 2020). Participants in Malcolm's (2015) thesis highlighted that this left the participants with a feeling of uncertainty about their futures and continuing feelings of exclusion.

The findings from these studies raise important questions about how well AP prepares students for post-16 transitions and adulthood. The inconsistency in provision means that while some students develop an awareness of the support they need to succeed, others become accustomed to learning environments that are rarely replicated beyond AP (Malcolm, 2015; 2020). As a result, some AP leavers struggle to navigate further education or employment, particularly when these settings do not offer the same level of personalised support (Hamilton & Morgan, 2018). This highlights how post-16 transition for AP students is shaped by a complex interplay of individual, institutional, and societal factors, ultimately reinforcing the need for clearer pathways to sustainable progression.

2.2.5 SNR Synthesis: EP Practice within Alternative Provision

This section draws together findings from the reviewed literature in the previous sections, alongside additional studies focused specifically on EP practice, to consider their implications within AP contexts. It also reflects on what literature on AP indicates for EPs working in these settings.

An additionally identified study sought to review the effectiveness of a training package delivered across four PRUs by a team of psychologists (Greenhalgh et al., 2020). The training was developed and delivered by a health-based psychology service focused on upskilling professionals. The team consisted of clinical psychologists and trainee clinical psychologists, educational psychologists, forensic psychologists, and students on placement in the service. The training package was delivered to 64 members of educational staff across the four settings and focused on attachment and developmental trauma. It consisted of two full training days accompanied by six skills development sessions, which focused on embedding learned skills into practice. This training focus is highly relevant due to the significance of a personalised and relational approach within the AP context being illustrated across the previous SNR questions, highlighting the significance of staff confidence in the face of systemic challenges (Atkinson & Rowley, 2019; Dance, 2022; Facey et al., 2020; Hamilton & Morgan, 2018; Kew-Simpson et al., 2022; Malcolm, 2015; Trotman et al., 2015).

Greenhalgh et al. (2020) highlighted the pressures that educational staff in this context felt. This was found to lead to high staff turnover, staff burnout, and overall depletion, which affected their ability to form meaningful relationships with students. Additionally, regular school inspections and budget cuts were found to add to the pressure. This aligns with research highlighting systemic difficulties within the AP context, which result in students' SEMH needs being unmet (Malcolm, 2020). However, the findings highlighted the significant impact of psychologist-led training, which led to increased staff knowledge and confidence, alongside a decrease in staff worries about supporting students with complex attachment and trauma needs. The

use of the skills development sessions was particularly found to be beneficial in bridging knowledge and practice, making the training feel more meaningful for staff.

Thus, the findings illustrate how EPs can contribute to AP at a systemic level by providing training that enhances staff knowledge, confidence, and skill in supporting students with complex SEMH needs. Additionally, the use of pre and post-measures provided clear evidence of how EP-led training could lead to significant increases in staff feelings of competence, while simultaneously reducing anxiety around supporting students with complex needs. Therefore, while training was found to be essential, this study also highlighted the importance of sustained support and follow-ups to ensure long-term effectiveness. These findings are in line with the study by Kew-Simpson et al. (2022), which highlighted inconsistent mental health support and a lack of specialist training for AP staff as a systemic issue negatively impacting student experiences. Considering both studies, it is arguable that there is a clear need for the EP role in supporting AP staff to be well equipped to support the students who access their settings.

In a study that builds on ideas of the systemic contributions of the EP role, Gray et al. (2022) explored staff, pupil and family perspectives of using a person-centred planning (PCP) approach to provide preventative support for pupils accessing AP. While Greenhalgh et al. (2020) focused on staff training in attachment and trauma-informed practice, Gray et al. (2022) explored how EPs can support structured, participatory approaches that place students at the centre of their own educational planning. Their research evaluated the use of the Making Action Plans (MAPs) framework in AP, illustrating how EPs can work collaboratively with staff, students, and families to co-construct meaningful support strategies. This research adopted an Action Research approach using the Research and Development in

Organisations model, a choice rooted in the researchers' aim to develop practice with the chosen AP. This further illustrates the systemic EP role in the AP context, but also demonstrates how EPs can make meaningful contributions to the student experience through the forum of research.

The findings from the Gray et al. (2022) study highlighted the importance of EPs equipping staff with practical skills, similarly to that by Greenhalgh et al. (2020). The MAP was used as a tool to facilitate a joint exploration between staff, parent and student, of the student's past experience, their current needs and their future goals. Its application in this way illustrates how structured and tailored strategies can be co-constructed with pupils to facilitate positive outcomes. However, it is important to note that the original plan for this research was disrupted by adaptations resulting from the COVID-19 pandemic. This meant pre and post-measures to assess lasting impact of the MAPs process could not be collected by staff. Furthermore, there were hopes for up to four students to take part in the MAPs process, with their families and all professionals they invited to participate in the evaluative focus groups. Instead, only two students took part in the MAPs, and focus groups consisted of senior AP staff only. As a result, while the MAP process was viewed positively by staff and encouraged pupil participation, the longer-term impact remains unclear, particularly in ensuring its sustainability beyond the AP placement. Additionally, there is reduced confidence in the validity of the claims made in the findings about the impact of MAPs and PCP overall on student AP experiences.

Nonetheless, the findings of this study highlighted the MAP framework as advantageous for the inclusion of students in the construction of the support and provision they are receive. Gray et al. (2022) noted that the focus on positivity throughout the MAP process encouraged pupil participation and appeared to be

valuable in promoting self-efficacy. This demonstrates how the EP role can contribute to the development of competence, which has been found to be beneficial in the process of post-16 progression for students accessing AP (Hamilton & Morgan, 2018). However, when considering previously explored research, it is arguable that this framing may contribute to further marginalisation of AP students in the long run, by constructing an overly idealised version their educational experience that may not reflect the realities they will face beyond AP.

The complexity of this intervention is also notable in relation to the different types of AP placement. The researchers noted that for students accessing AP as a shared or short-term placement, institutional differences in ethos and practice had the possibility to undermine the effectiveness of MAPs (Gray et al., 2022). This suggests the significance of the EP role in fostering collaborative practice between home and school, but also across educational settings. There is also less clarity around maintaining the outcomes from the MAPs over time for students accessing AP as a long-term placement. This raises important considerations about how EP guided interventions are maintained over time, within the context of systemic issues such as high-staff turnover (Greenhalgh et al., 2020).

The third study included in this summary is a thesis that provides a grounded theory analysis of successful EP practice in key stage four PRUs (Blyth, 2021), further illustrating the systemic and relational dimensions of EP involvement in AP. Similar to the previous two studies, this thesis illustrated a systemic model of EP intervention as a key factor of EP practice. However, this research is grounded in psychodynamic and systemic principles, particularly drawing on theories of containment (Bion, 1962), and attachment-based approaches to organisational support (Winnicott 1960; 1965). Through this theoretical positioning, the researcher

illustrates EP practice that moves away from the traditional framework of external consultants (Farrell & Woods, 2015), towards a more embedded approach offering containment, security and structured supports for both staff and pupils.

Through the findings of this thesis, the researcher presented AP as a dynamic system that functions in a highly emotional state. This is due to the complex pressures and emotions staff must navigate, while being exposed to the pupils' own trauma and SEMH difficulties. The overwhelming emotional pressure resulting from this is highlighted throughout the thesis, demonstrating that APs seem to struggle to function effectively without a figure to provide external emotional containment. This aligns with previous research which highlighted that the pressures staff face in the AP context result in decreased staff efficacy, leading to depletion and reduced capacity for staff to connect with pupils (Greenhalgh et al., 2020).

Blyth (2021) therefore explains that the unique contribution of the EP role is to provide a consistent, attuned and supportive presence, enabling staff to develop their own resilience and capacity through a relational approach. This suggests the significance of relationships at both the individual and systemic levels of AP settings. In the PRUs explored in this thesis, EPs supported staff to manage complex pupil needs through reflective supervision and consultation. This illustrates a means for EPs to contribute to development of AP staff competence through avenues other than training. Similarly Greenhalgh et al. (2020) highlighted the necessity of continuing support which follows on from training. Blyth (2021) also highlighted how the general functions of the EP role can contribute to the containment of APs and their staff. This includes individual work with students, consultation, supervision, and facilitation of multi-agency working. Therefore, a key take-away from these findings is their illustration of how EPs contribute to staff well-being and retention in high-

stress environments. However, Blyth (2021) also notes that the EP role may be systemically constrained, as EPs typically have limited capacity and are usually not fixed in AP settings full-time. This poses a challenge around sustained EP contributions.

The research reviewed in this section illustrates that the EP role in AP extends beyond direct work with students. These studies jointly highlight the systemic-level contributions of the EP in the context of AP. Furthermore, the study by Gray et al. (2022) suggest how EPs can bring parents in the conversations regarding support for their children and young people. These studies also demonstrate the how the EP role is recognised in the AP context. However, systemic challenges such as resource constraints, staff turnover, and the temporary nature of many AP placements raise concerns about the sustainability of EP-led interventions.

While these studies illustrate the impact and contributions of the EP in AP settings, there is a notable absence of research on their role in post-16 transitions and long-term outcomes for students who access AP. This suggests that EP contributions beyond the AP setting, particularly in supporting AP leavers, remain underexplored and undefined in the literature.

2.3 Thematic Overview

Figure 1

Thematic Overview of Literature
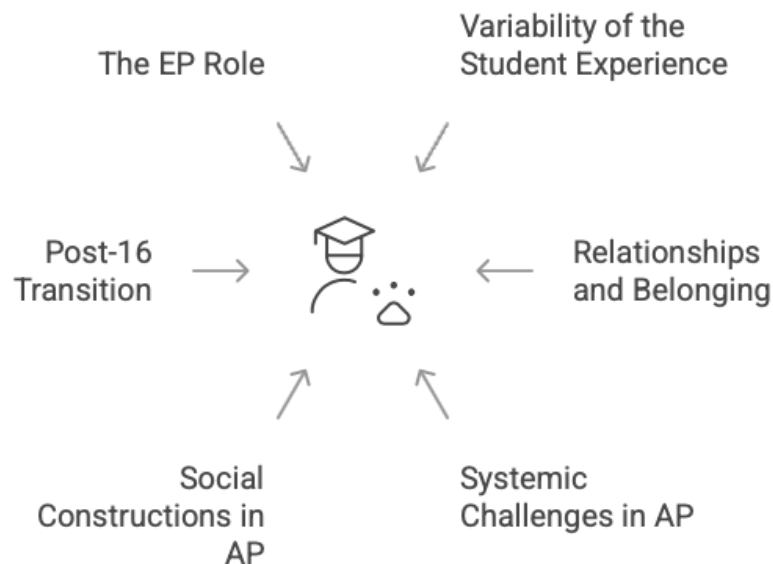
2.3.1 Variability in the Student AP Experience

A key theme across the selected literature in this SNR is the highly individualised nature of student experiences in AP, a longstanding pattern (Atkinson & Rowley, 2019; Dance, 2022; Facey et al., 2020; Malcolm, 2015). This variability is shaped not only by individual pupil needs but also by the underlying purpose of their AP placement and the available provision in these settings. This raises significant questions about the extent to which AP achieves its intended function, particularly given the mismatch between its expected outcomes and the realities of student experiences. While AP is often positioned as an intervention designed to re-engage students with education, the literature reviewed suggests that its impact is far from uniform (Atkinson & Rowley, 2019; Dance, 2022; Facey et al., 2020; Malcolm, 2015).

For some students, AP serves as a stabilising, supportive environment where their SEMH needs are prioritised, and meaningful relationships with staff foster a sense of belonging (Cockerill, 2019; Gray et al., 2022). However, for others, AP reinforces instability, functioning as a fragmented educational space with a lack of clarity about long-term outcomes (Malcolm, 2015). This has implications not only for reintegration into mainstream settings, where students may continue to feel disconnected, but also for those for whom AP is a final educational destination. In these cases, an absence of structured post-16 pathways appears to contribute to continued marginalisation in employment and further education (Malcolm, 2015). The lack of a unified model for AP provision means that while some settings operate as high-quality alternative education spaces, others risk perpetuating educational and social disadvantage for students already navigating an exclusionary system (Malcolm, 2015).

2.3.2 Relationships and Belonging

Despite the differences between student experiences, a recurrent theme across the selected literature is the substantial role that relationships and a sense of belonging play. Many of the student views pinpoint accessing AP as these students' first experiences of being understood, supported, and valued in an educational setting (Cockerill, 2019; Dance, 2022; Facey et al., 2020; Malcolm, 2015; Trotman et al., 2015). The literature illustrates how AP provides an environment where students feel seen as individuals, fostering trust with staff and forming bonds with peers who share similar experiences (Cockerill, 2019; Dance, 2022; Malcolm, 2015; Trotman, 2015). This relational focus has been found to be relevant in encouraging engagement and motivation, as well as contributing to improved well-being and self-esteem for students who access AP (Cockerill, 2019; Hamilton & Morgan, 2018;

Trotman et al., 2015). However, some of the papers illustrated how this experience of camaraderie and community can at times further patterns of disengagement from education (Dance, 2022).

This theme is significant because it illustrates the complexity of relationships and belonging in APs, as they have been presented as both protective and risk factors in the literature. For some students, AP provides a much-needed space to rebuild trust in education, supporting a sense of self-worth and future aspirations (Dance, 2022; Hamilton & Morgan, 2018). However, some students have been found to lean into peer relationships and the shared experience of AP, creating counterproductive social dynamics which further their sense of exclusion (Dance, 2022; Malcolm, 2015; Trotman et al., 2015). This highlights a challenging role for AP, to nurture belonging in a way that does not contribute to further marginalisation.

Notably, there appear to be parallels between the idea of student experiences of belonging in the AP context, and staff experiences of belonging in their roles. Just as students describe feelings of despair and desperation upon entering AP (Facey et al., 2020; Trotman et al., 2015), staff also report isolation and uncertainty, and feelings of overwhelm from the emotional intensity of their roles (Greenhalgh et al., 2020; Blyth, 2021). Blyth (2021) illustrated how the roles of AP staff can extend beyond traditional teaching, involving high levels of emotional labour and an expectation to provide both academic and emotional support to students with complex needs. This dual role can lead to emotional exhaustion, especially in environments where staff feel unsupported in managing students' trauma-related behaviours (Greenhalgh et al., 2020). This along with further research explored in SNR question four, highlights the challenges staff may face in terms of measuring

and feeling assured in their competence, impacting their self-efficacy in role (Greenhalgh et al., 2020).

This mirrored experience between students and staff contributes to the variability of AP as an educational space. The reportedly high staff turnover in AP further exacerbates instability (Greenhalgh et al., 2020; Malcolm, 2020), disrupting student-staff relationships and emphasising inconsistency in the context of AP. Furthermore, given that many AP students have already experienced instability in mainstream education, these repeated relational disruptions may undermine the sense of security needed for meaningful re-engagement or successful post-16 progression (Atkinson & Rowley, 2019; Cockerill, 2019; Hamilton & Morgan, 2018).

2.3.3 Systemic Challenges in AP

Students access AP for a variety of reasons, often following experiences of exclusion, persistent difficulties in mainstream settings, or unmet SEMH needs (Atkinson & Rowley, 2019; Facey et al., 2020). AP is often positioned as an intervention, where students can receive targeted support to encourage them to re-engage with education, and offer the specialist support that is less available in their mainstream settings (Cockerill, 2019; Gray et al., 2022). However, a key issue that has emerged from the literature is the lack of clarity around the purpose of AP. This contributes to systemic inconsistencies, which shape student experiences (Atkinson & Rowley, 2019; Malcolm, 2020). This points to a critique of whether AP effectively functions as an intervention or enables an alternative form of exclusion.

For students accessing short-term AP placements, difficulties reintegrating into mainstream are often related to poor links between the settings (Atkinson & Rowley, 2019; Dance, 2022; Facey et al, 2020). The studies considered in this SNR suggest that many AP settings operate in isolation, without strong connections to the

wider education system, which results in fragmented support and unclear long-term pathways for students (Dance, 2022; Cockerill, 2019; Trotman et al., 2015; Malcolm, 2015). As well as contributing to limited success in reintegration into mainstream (Atkinson & Rowley, 2019), this also has implications for students' post-16 transitions by perpetuating further uncertainty and instability upon leaving secondary education (Hamilton & Morgan, 2018; Malcolm, 2015). This issue is intensified by the inconsistency in academic qualifications offered in AP, with students who complete secondary education in AP leaving with a choice of vocational or academic qualifications (Malcolm, 2020). This, alongside the issues related to staffing, funding, and resource availability (Greenhalgh et al., 2020), results in unequal experiences.

2.3.4 Social Constructions of AP

Much of the literature on AP appears to adopt a social constructionist perspective (Atkinson & Rowley, 2019; Malcolm, 2015), and this perspective illustrates how societal attitudes regarding AP shape student experiences, self-concept, and long-term opportunities. The literature illustrates how narratives of failure and exclusion are often internalised by AP students (Dance, 2022). This has been found to result in students entering AP with low expectations for themselves and the setting (Dance, 2022). Though Dance (2022) reported that these views can change for AP students as they begin to access personalised support, wider societal narratives do not change, nor do the negative labels placed on students who access AP (Malcolm, 2015). This includes ideas that these students are likely to continue on a pathway to crime, or are generally problematic (Dance, 2022; Malcolm, 2015) suggesting conflicting perspectives between AP and wider society.

These negative narratives and the rigid mainstream models are able to be challenged within AP, by rebuilding student confidence in their competence and

autonomy, and offering a sense of relatedness within the setting (Atkinson & Rowley, 2019; Hamilton & Morgan, 2018). However, where APs appear to be operating in isolation from wider society, the shift in the student perspective is not mirrored by a shift in the wider societal perspective. This means that once students leave AP, the pre-existing narratives surrounding AP students are thrust back upon them (Malcolm, 2015). This stigma follows students into adulthood, influencing how they are perceived by colleges, employers, and even themselves (Malcolm, 2015; Dance, 2022). This is then furthered by some students leaving AP with limited qualifications (Hamilton & Morgan, 2018; Malcolm, 2015; Malcolm, 2020). Thus, based on these social constructions, AP faces a risk of becoming a site of containment, rather than empowerment as intended. This results in the construction of parallel pathways from AP compared to mainstream, with mainstream settings functioning as a gateway to further education and employment, while AP often limits aspirations and opportunities (Malcolm, 2015).

2.3.5 Post-16 Transition

The golden thread that runs through each of the presented themes is around the long-term implications for students who access education in an AP. While AP is often positioned as a setting offering relational support and stability, the protective structures that facilitate student engagement within AP do not necessarily translate into long-term opportunities beyond compulsory education (Hamilton & Morgan, 2018; Malcolm, 2015). This creates a contradiction in which students who have experienced difficulties in mainstream settings may benefit from a sense of belonging and increased competence in AP. However, as this support rarely extends beyond their mandatory school years, they are left vulnerable to further exclusion upon exiting education (Malcolm, 2015; Dance, 2022).

As illustrated previously, there are a range of factors that influence post-16 pathways for students who access AP, one of these being the systemic inconsistencies in the structuring and purpose of AP. For students accessing AP as a short-term placement, post-16 progression is likely to be impacted by success in the process of reintegration to mainstream (Atkinson & Rowley, 2019; Facey et al., 2020; Malcolm, 2015). When this is unsuccessful, students may find themselves in an exclusionary cycle, resulting in an unstable educational pathway with disrupted learning and gaps in their qualifications (Cockerill, 2019; Dance, 2022; Hamilton & Morgan, 2018; Malcolm, 2015). This means that even though these young people may return to mainstream settings eventually, their difficulties persist and result in limited post-16 opportunities. Comparatively, while there is variability in the qualifications available for students who complete secondary education in AP, there continue to be limits to the range of subjects and levels of the qualification available (Malcolm, 2020). Additionally, these students have been found to experience challenges in accessing further education and employment, as their qualifications are perceived to be less valuable by higher education settings and employers. This further illustrates the impact of social constructions surrounding AP, resulting in limits to their social mobility (Malcolm, 2015).

The implication of this on student well-being are notable, as many students access AP due to SEMH needs that were not effectively supported in mainstream settings and have persisted during their AP placements (Kew-Simpson et al., 2022). Thus, the experience of uncertainty in post-16 transition may exacerbate or reignite poor self-conceptions and result in long-term disengagement (Hamilton & Morgan, 2018; Malcolm, 2015). Furthermore, without clear pathways to further education, training, or employment, these students are at greater risk of social isolation and

economic disadvantage, reinforcing the cycles of exclusion that led them to AP in the first place (Dance, 2022; Malcolm, 2015).

This points to the lack of research exploring AP leavers' progression to adulthood as a limitation in the literature base. While many studies focus on reintegration into mainstream education (Atkinson & Rowley, 2019; Cockerill, 2019), or the process of the post-16 transition (Hamilton & Morgan, 2018; Malcolm, 2015), there is far less attention paid to what happens when students exit the education system entirely. Malcolm (2015) highlights that students often feel unprepared for the realities of adulthood, particularly in developing independence, resilience, and self-sufficiency. Additionally, the literature reviewed in this SNR provides limited insight into how AP leavers navigate employment, higher education, or independent living, highlighting the scope for research in this area.

2.3.6 The EP Role

The EP role in the context of AP appears to be quite well defined, particularly at the systemic level and while students are accessing the setting. The studies considered in this SNR illustrate EP contributions within these settings, which include staff training, containment, supervision, consultation, and facilitating student inclusion in the construction of their support (Blyth, 2021; Gray et al., 2022; Greenhalgh et al., 2020). Interestingly, the literature in this SNR illustrates a shift away from direct student work towards equipping staff with the tools to manage SEMH needs effectively, reflecting a broader move towards capacity-building rather than reactive, one-to-one interventions. This aligns with research that suggests students benefit most when AP staff feel well-supported and skilled in their roles (Greenhalgh et al., 2020; Blyth, 2021). However, while this systemic role is increasingly recognised within AP, there is little research on whether EP involvement

continues after students leave these settings, or what this may look like. Given the emphasis on relationships and belonging as protective factors for AP students (Cockerill, 2019; Facey et al., 2020; Trotman et al., 2015), the abrupt loss of structured support after leaving AP may contribute to some students becoming vulnerable young adults.

2.4 Conclusion

The literature reviewed in this SNR highlights the complexities of AP as an educational setting. Relationships and belonging emerge as central to student engagement, yet the fragility of these protective factors, due to structural instability, leads to variability of experience and raises concerns about the sustainability of AP's impact. While some students leave AP with improved self-concept and re-engagement in education, others struggle with the stigma attached to AP, reduced qualifications, and a lack of clear progression routes (Dance, 2022; Hamilton & Morgan, 2018; Malcolm, 2015). Additionally, while literature highlights the EP role in secondary education AP settings, there is minimal research into how EPs support AP students beyond this stage. This absence of a structured role in post-16 transitions reflects the broader issue of a lack of clarity around what happens to AP leavers.

3. Methodology

This chapter clarifies the purpose of the present research and outlines the methodological approach. Therefore, this chapter will highlight the key decisions that were made regarding this research, exploring the research aims, data collection and analysis procedures, the research paradigm, and ethical considerations that have been taken into account. This chapter will also explore the successes and challenges faced during the process of this research, considering the influence this may have had on the outcomes.

3.1 The Present Research

3.1.1 Overview

The present study is an exploratory piece of research, looking at the experiences of young people who have completed secondary education in an alternative provision and have since completed a post-16 transition. This qualitative research is informed by an emancipatory paradigm because the research seeks to place an element of control in the hands of those being researched. In this case, the power is located in the stories these AP leavers choose to tell. It is hoped that this research will contribute to literature highlighting the scope of the EP role in supporting children and young people as they progress through education in the context of APs.

3.1.2 Researcher Position

The significance of children and young people's views underpins the researcher's position in this study, recognising that this is essential for driving meaningful change in educational settings (Johnston & Bradford, 2024; Kirby, 2020). The inclusion of children and young people's perspectives is a strength of the

literature surrounding AP, and aligns with the broad objective of centring children's rights within practice and policy surrounding education (McCluskey et al., 2015). Inclusion of young people as active participants in research is accepted as crucial to validate their experiences and recognise their capacity to contribute to enhancing these. However, this can be perceived as tokenistic, particularly when interactions are overly structured and promote an acquiescence bias (Hart, 2008; Kam & Meyer, 2015). Thus, this research seeks to create a research context that promotes a genuine dialogue about the experiences of AP leavers, while considering the role of power dynamics in research with children and young people (Hart, 2008; Kirby, 2020).

The positionality of the practitioner researcher is again acknowledged here, accepting that this research is situated within the context of professional practice with an aim to contribute to its improvement (Heikkinen et al., 2016). This involves approaching data collection as a listener, committed to hearing, understanding, and amplifying participant voices, while holding the ethical responsibility of acting on the knowledge they have shared. Therefore, reflection and reflexivity were central to this study, in shaping decisions around participant recruitment, interview structure, and the ways in which findings were interpreted and presented. The influence of this positionality on the research process will be addressed throughout this chapter.

3.1.3 Research Question and Aims

The views of AP leavers will be gathered to explore the following research question:

"What can we learn from the experiences of young people who have transitioned to adulthood from an alternative provision?"

As illustrated through the review of literature in the previous chapter, there is limited research available that explores the long-term outcomes of AP leavers. Similarly, the role of the EP with young people in this context seems to be underexplored. Therefore, this research seeks to deepen understanding in this area, by centring the retrospective accounts of these young people within the context of EP practice. To that end, this research has two core aims:

- To better understand the experiences of young people who have completed education in an AP and have since transitioned to adulthood.

- To apply the knowledge gained to considerations for the EP role in supporting young people aged 16-25.

3.1.4 Research Methodology

This study has adopted a qualitative methodology, as this approach offers depth, meaning and context in the exploration of data in social science research (Smith & Nizza, 2022). Therefore, this methodology is most appropriate for research exploring individual lived experiences. To ensure credibility, rigour, and trustworthiness, this study has been constructed in line with key principles for evaluating qualitative research (Yardley, 2000):

1. Sensitivity to context: This study is built upon an extensive literature review that explores the wider narratives of young people who access AP, their progression through AP, and the EP role in this context.

2. Commitment and rigour: This is demonstrated through the transparent and systematic approach to data collection and analysis defined throughout this chapter and illustrated in the appendices. Reflection and reflexivity are also key components of this research, with a reflective journal kept by the researcher, excerpts from which are included in the appendix D.

3. Transparency and coherence: The research design, including the paradigm, analysis framework, ethical considerations, and methodology, is detailed throughout this chapter. These have been constructed to ensure consistency between the research question and the research approach.

4. Impact and importance: The gap in the literature surrounding AP has been illustrated through the literature review. This study seeks to address this gap by contributing to the advancement of knowledge in an under-researched area. Through prioritising the perspectives of AP leavers, this research seeks to inform EP practice in the provision of support for this group.

3.2 Research Paradigm

3.2.1 Emancipatory Paradigm

As emancipatory research requires participants to have control over the research process itself (Oliver, 1997), it is acknowledged that this research is not completely located within this paradigm. However, this research has been informed by emancipatory research principles. This study aims to centre the voices of AP leavers in the discussions around their progression to adulthood, and the support that would be most beneficial in this process. This builds upon findings from the literature review which highlighted that AP is something pupils often feel their views do not influence (Atkinson & Rowley, 2019; Dance, 2022; Trotman et al., 2015). For students who access AP, their voices being absent from decisions which directly influence them and their futures furthers the patterns of exclusion that they have been subject to at various points during their academic journey (Malcolm, 2015). Therefore, this research aligns with the emancipatory principle of challenging oppression (Oliver, 1997), which in this case refers to students who access AP having minimal contributions to decisions pertaining to them. More specifically,

attention is also being drawn to the imbalance in post-16 progression for students who complete their education in AP compared to those in mainstream settings through this research (DfE, 2017). This imbalance is evident in research which has consistently highlighted how these students face systemic barriers when transitioning to further education or employment (Hamilton & Morgan, 2018; Isherwood, 2023; Malcolm, 2015).

This study seeks to meaningfully contribute to the literature base by recognising that these participants narratives are legitimate sources of knowledge (Johnston & Bradford, 2024; Kirby, 2020; Oliver, 1997). Based on these emancipatory principles, control is relocated to participants through agency in the stories they choose to share. Where this research has a retrospective nature, participants are able to reflect on their own transitions on their own terms, shaping the direction of the knowledge produced. Thus, through an exploration of the lived experiences of AP leavers, this study seeks to inform the role of the EP in supporting young people past schooling age and into adulthood.

3.2.2 Relativist Ontology

This research takes a relativist ontological position, recognising that reality is not objective but rather multiple, subjective, and context-dependent (Braun & Clarke, 2023; Burr, 2024). It argues that there is no objective 'truth' of AP experience or the transitions following, instead this is shaped by the individual's unique circumstances, the social contexts they exist within, and their relationships with these. This feels particularly fitting, as the literature review illustrates the variability of student experiences in AP highlighting its dependence on personal, systemic, and wider societal factors. Therefore, in the context of this study it is recognised that participants will interpret their transitions to adulthood based on their personal

experiences. This rejects the idea of an absolute reality and instead embraces the complex, individualised nature of the pathway for AP leavers.

3.2.2 Social Constructivist Epistemology

In line with this ontological stance, this research adopts a social constructivist epistemology. This aligns with the argument that there is no objective truth to be discovered. Instead, this research accepts that knowledge is shaped by social interactions, discourse, and interpretation (Amineh & Asl, 2015). As such, this research posits that knowledge is subjective to the individual as well as the person interpreting their narrative (Adams, 2006; Amineh & Asl, 2015; Braun & Clarke, 2023). This epistemology accepts the subjectivity of knowledge as an inherent aspect of the meaning-making process (Adams, 2006). In the context of this study, this means participants' experiences are shaped by the ways they understand them within the context of broader societal and educational frameworks. Given the retrospective nature of this research, it is also acknowledged that participants may reinterpret past experiences in light of their present circumstances.

The literature base exemplifies how students who access AP are often framed within a deficit-based lens, positioning them as students who have failed to access mainstream education (Dance, 2022; Facey, 2020; Malcolm, 2015; Trotman et al., 2015). This lens is challenged by a social constructivist epistemology, which recognises that individuals actively construct their own identities and futures (Adams, 2006). This aligns with the emancipatory paradigm principles which underpin this research, as it centres the participant perspective rather than impressing pre-existing assumptions. However, this also highlights the importance of reflexivity throughout the research process, to ensure the researcher's awareness of the ways in which

dominant societal discourses surrounding AP pupils may unconsciously shape both the research process and the interpretation of participant narratives (Burr, 2024).

3.3 Research Design

3.3.1 Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA)

The research paradigms were felt to lend towards Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA). This is a qualitative research approach that explores how individuals make sense of their lived experiences (Smith et al., 2022). It places an emphasis on meaning-making, which aligns with the accepted ideas in this research, that reality and knowledge are subjective and interpreted by individuals based on social constructions.

3.3.1.1 Theory Underpinning IPA.

Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) is grounded in three philosophical areas, phenomenology, hermeneutics, and idiography (Smith et al., 2022).

3.3.1.1.1 Phenomenology.

Phenomenology is the study of human experience as it is perceived and understood within a particular context (Smith et al., 2022). This focuses on making sense of experiences as they are understood by the individual (Willig, 2008; 2013). Within IPA, it is understood that experiences are personified and situated within a broader socio-cultural context. This emphasises the interpretative aspect of meaning-making, while acknowledging that the researcher should aim to be aware and reflective of their own preconceptions (Smith et al., 2022).

3.3.1.1.2 Hermeneutics.

This refers to the theory and process of interpretation which is a significant aspect of the IPA approach. In IPA there is a process referred to as double hermeneutics, where participants construct meanings from their experiences, and the researcher interprets the participants meaning-making. This follows on from a combination of empathic hermeneutics where participant perspectives are accepted, and critical hermeneutics where the researcher explores areas that the participant may experience challenges addressing. This is drawn from the works of Schleiermacher, Heidegger, and Gadamer, and highlights the dynamic and repetitive nature of IPA (Nizza et al, 2021; Smith et al., 2022). Therefore, hermeneutics describes an iterative aspect of the analysis process in IPA, which involves engaging and re-engaging with various parts of the data to gain a deeper understanding and refine interpretations.

3.3.1.1.3 Idiography.

Idiography describes what differentiates IPA from other data analysis approaches which aim to produce generalised findings across a large participant population. It refers to the in-depth exploration of individual cases, before drawing broader conclusions (Smith et al., 2022). In the process of IPA, the narratives of each participant must be explored in detail, carefully exploring their voice and perspective, before moving on to identify patterns of sameness and difference across the participant sample (Nizza & Smith, 2021). In the present study, this will allow exploration of the nuances and details of each participant's experience.

3.3.1.2 Critique of IPA.

While IPA provides a rigorous framework for exploring lived experiences, a key limitation resides in its focus on idiographic depth which means its findings do

not aim to be generalisable. Additionally, where IPA provides a rigorous framework to explore individual lived experiences, it is not designed to establish causal relationships. These limitations imply that findings from this approach are unlikely to be explanatory. However, this aligns with the aims of the present study, which are focused on understanding and learning from participants individual experiences. Despite these critiques, it can be argued that IPA promotes a deep understanding of subjective meaning-making (Smith et al., 2022). IPA provides clear steps to the analysis process, which enables transparency whilst facilitating the interpretative idiographic process. It is therefore argued that IPA balances both structure and flexibility in its process, while maintaining coherence and rigour (Smith et al., 2022).

Another notable critique of IPA is that the approach depends on participants' ability to articulate their experiences clearly (Willig, 2013). Therefore, as the literature review highlights the varied and occasionally restricted access that AP students have to the curriculum, it is important to acknowledge the possibility that some participants may have difficulty articulating their meanings. This, in line with IPAs reliance on subjective interpretation arguably increases the likelihood of researcher bias (Giorgi, 2010). In the context of the present study, this means participants may have to provide detailed descriptions at a level of depth they are unfamiliar with. This is then being interpreted by the researchers within the context of the pre-existing societal and educational frameworks that influence conceptualisations of AP and progression of AP leavers. This highlights a key issue around the intersubjectivity of the findings. However, reflexivity plays a crucial role in addressing these challenges within IPA. Through careful questioning and iterative analysis, researchers can engage deeply with participant narratives while remaining aware of their own interpretative influence. This ensures that the meaning-making process remains nuanced,

transparent, and firmly rooted in participants' experiences (Smith et al., 2022).

Therefore, despite its limitations, IPA offers a valuable approach for gaining rich

insights into the experiences of AP leavers, facilitating a first step in to advancing

understanding in this area.

3.3.1.3 Alternative Methodologies.

Prior to deciding on IPA as the methodology for this research project, three

alternative qualitative options were considered. These were considered as they were

felt to align with the research paradigms, as well as the researcher's aim to amplify

the participant voice.

3.3.1.3.1 Foucauldian Discourse Analysis.

Discourse analysis was considered due to its focus on the way that language

contributes to the construction of social reality (Willig, 2013). Foucauldian discourse

analysis in particular was considered due to its focus on exploring power and

relationships through their expression in language (Willig, 2013). However, while

discourse analysis approaches acknowledge the socio-cultural influences on

meaning-making, they places greater emphasis on linguistic structures than on the

subjective experience itself, making them less suited for this study's aims.

Additionally, this approach was deemed more susceptible to preconceptions

influencing data interpretation (Willig, 2013).

3.3.1.3.2 Reflexive Thematic Analysis.

Thematic analysis was considered as this is a flexible approach to revealing

patterns in qualitative data (Braun & Clarke, 2022). Specifically, reflexive thematic

analysis was considered because it is a systematic approach to coding data, with the

aim of revealing significant themes across the data. Similarly to IPA, this approach

requires researcher reflexivity and awareness of how wider factors or preconceptions

may shape coding (Braun & Clarke, 2022). Additionally, this approach also falls in line with the aims of this research, recognising the subjectivity of individual experience. However, this approach has been criticised for presenting data without any further interpretation, and not accurately representing participant views (Willig, 2013). Furthermore, it does not inherently prioritise the in-depth, idiographic exploration of individual experiences that IPA provides, making it less aligned with the study's objectives.

3.3.1.3.3 Narrative Analysis.

Narrative analysis was considered due to an implicit aim of this study to illustrate the narratives of AP leavers. This approach explores how individuals use language to construct their narratives (Murray, 2015). Ultimately, much like Foucauldian discourse analysis, narrative analysis was felt to place too much emphasis on linguistic constructions, rather than the actual lived experiences (Murray, 2015; Smith, 2009). This similarly results in descriptive data with minimal interpretation (Willig, 2013). Furthermore, the literature review already provided a broad illustration of AP students' narratives, making an idiographic focus on individual experiences more appropriate for this study.

3.3.1.3.4 Rationale for IPA.

IPA enables a process of detailed and nuanced exploration of lived experiences to understand how individuals make sense of their personal worlds (Smith et al., 2022). It is an approach typically used with a small participant sample, focusing on developing a rich understanding of how participants attribute meaning to specific events (Smith et al., 2022). Additionally, IPA recognises the process of interpretation that is necessary to generate meaning from a participant's narrative as it is not possible to directly access an individual's perspective. Therefore, this

approach will facilitate a detailed exploration of the experiences of AP leavers. It aligns with the study's aim of amplifying individual voices while recognising the diversity of experiences. Furthermore, IPA has been identified as particularly useful for research areas that are underexplored or require greater depth of understanding (Nizza et al., 2021; Reid et al., 2005).

3.3.2 Semi-Structured Interviews

Semi-structured interviews were the selected method of data collection for this study, as this approach is widely used in qualitative research and IPA studies specifically (Nuttall & Woods, 2013; Reid et al., 2005; Smith et al., 2022). Semi-structured interviews are recognised for their ability to elicit detailed accounts of lived experiences, through their guided yet flexible approach (Smith, 1995). This method enables a conversational approach to interviewing, through the use of a loose structure which allows for explorations of unexpected insights (Smith, 2022). Within the present study, this meant that the key aims were maintained, while participants were able to choose to share additional information they felt was relevant to their narratives.

Semi-structured interviews are also recognised for their ability to facilitate rapport building (Reid et al., 2005; Smith et al., 2022). This is particularly relevant within the context of the present study, given the participant population being AP leavers. The comfort this approach offered was felt to enable to participants to share rich details of their experiences, and facilitate IPAs process of shared meaning making between participant and researcher (Nizza et al., 2021; Smith & Nizza, 2022). Therefore, given the interpretative nature of IPA, the choice to use semi-structured interviews was made to both capture participants' narratives, and to encourage them to reflect on the meanings they attribute to their experiences.

3.3.1.2 Interview Structure.

Within this study, the interview was structured around key themes which were relevant to the research question. The interview schedule utilised open-ended questions to encourage participants to speak at length, following guidelines around semi-structured interviewing (Smith et al., 2022; Smith & Nizza, 2022). Additionally, probes such as non-verbal prompts and questions like "how did you feel?", were incorporated to encourage further depth and reflection, while reinforcing participants agency in directing the conversation (Smith, 1995; Smith et al., 2022; Smith & Nizza, 2022). Interview prompts and questions are attached in the appendix E.

3.4 Ethical Considerations

This research is conducted in accordance with the British Psychological Society Code of Ethics and Conduct (2021) and the Code of Human Research and Ethics (2021), with ethical approval obtained from the Tavistock and Portman NHS Foundation Trust Research Ethics Committee (Appendix F). In line with this, procedural steps were taken to ensure informed consent, confidentiality, and well-being. Details around this are in the appendices (Appendix G). The following points illustrate the deeper ethical considerations that informed this research.

3.4.1 Participant Well-being

It was recognised that there was potential for this research to be sensitive in nature, therefore careful considerations were made around the psychological well-being of participants. As a focus of this study was the post-16 progression of AP leavers, areas that were likely to be explored were experiences of exclusion, rejection, stigma, and systemic inequities. Additionally, issues relating to equity, diversity, and inclusion could be explored, potentially increasing participants

awareness of the impact of these factors. Furthermore, the transitional process can be more difficult or challenging for some individuals, due to individual differences such as education, ability or even socio-economic status. This meant there was the possibility for this research to inspire debilitating feelings such as helplessness or reduced autonomy over their experiences (Montreuil et al., 2021). It was also possible for participants to recall experiences of feeling rejected by mainstream education systems, or potential malpractice from professionals they had worked with. Moreover, the categorisation of participants in this study as a marginalised group has the potential to encourage stigmatisation, which may impact participants self-esteem, self-view, and even self-efficacy.

In order to mitigate the risk of these difficulties, the researcher utilised the interpersonal and psychological skills garnered as part of their EP training. This enabled mindfulness of the participants emotional response during the interview process. Additionally, the interview space was designed to be supportive, facilitating a compassionate, attuned, non-judgemental approach. This was furthered by participants having autonomy over the aspects of their lived experiences which they chose to share. Furthermore, if a participant became visibly distressed during the interview, the researcher was prepared to pause or terminate the interview, offer immediate reassurance, and remind them of their right to withdraw or take breaks as needed. The researcher also remained reflexive throughout the process, monitoring their own emotional responses and potential biases to ensure that participant experiences were approached with sensitivity and care.

3.4.2 Participant Expectations

Participants had an opportunity to share their stories, in a safe and anonymous way that was hoped to encouraged frankness and honesty in a way that

is not often allowed or comfortable. This may have been perceived as an opportunity to air out grievances participants had held toward the system, or to highlight strengths that have positively influenced their outcomes in adulthood. Literature indicates how the inclusion of children and young people's voices can empower them in the long run (Aldridge, 2017), and this has also been found to develop higher resiliency skills (Birnbaum, 2017). By basing this within the principles of emancipatory research, the aim was to give this group of AP leavers a voice, and it is hoped that the findings from this research will contribute to the experiences of future young people who will also complete this transition (Aldridge, 2017). To ensure transparency and maintain participant engagement, a summary of the research findings will also be made available to participants on completion of the study.

3.4.3 The Role of The Researcher

Specific considerations were made about the researcher in role as a researcher, compared to the usual role of trainee EP. This meant careful consideration around the provision of a safe space for participants, that did not elicit the consultative function of the EP role. This is because the researcher sought to avoid a therapeutic approach within the research, as the key aim was to listen to and learn from participant stories.

A debriefing process was included at the end of the interview, where the researcher checked in with participants about their feelings and signposted them to additional support where required (Appendix I). Additionally, as there was a possibility for participants to disclose information that raised safeguarding concerns, the researcher was prepared to follow established ethical guidelines by signposting participants to relevant support services and, if necessary, escalating concerns in line with safeguarding procedures. Furthermore, participants were offered an open

channel of contact which they could access after the interviews, to ensure support was maintained throughout their participation and afterwards. However, where the duty of care in the role of researcher is different from that in the role of EP, this support refers to supporting participants to be supported through further signposting.

3.4.4 Power in Research

Inherent power dynamics exist within the researcher – researched relationship, and these are exacerbated by the researcher's wider role as a trainee EP. Oftentimes the researched or individuals who access EP services are positioned in the one-down position, which can result in feelings of powerlessness. However, this issue was carefully considered throughout the design of this research. This includes the decisions around the research paradigms, the process of informed consent, the autonomy participants held over sharing their narratives, and the use of IPA to centre participant experiences. Further considerations were also made regarding the use of language throughout this research, to avoid further stigmatisation. Care was taken to avoid deficit-based language, ensuring that interview questions and subsequent interpretations did not reinforce negative stereotypes about AP students. Additionally, language was adapted throughout the research process to be participant-led, allowing AP leavers to articulate their experiences on their own terms.

3.4.5 Reflexivity Statement

Careful consideration was made around how personal experiences, biases, and professional EP training might influence the interpretation of participants' narratives. To that end, the researcher worked to be highly reflexive and engage in continuous self-reflection throughout the study. This is evidenced through the use of

a reflective journal (Appendix D). Subsequent steps were taken throughout the research process to reduce researcher influence, such as using open-ended questioning, allowing participants to lead the discussion, and maintaining transparency in how findings were analysed and represented. This was supported through regular research supervision, which provided a critical space to enhance reflexive awareness. A reflective record was also kept throughout the research process, allowing the researcher to document thoughts, reactions, and evolving interpretations, ultimately improving the credibility and trustworthiness of the study.

3.5 Participant Recruitment

3.5.1 Sampling Strategy

A purposive sampling method was chosen as it is typical for IPA research and enables participants to be selected based on their relevance to the research question, focusing less on the participant sample being representative of the wider population (Smith et al., 2022). This aligns with the research design. Additionally, where IPA studies tend to lend towards a smaller participant sample, the study sought to recruit a minimum of three participants, and a maximum of six (Smith et al., 2022).

Table 2

Participant Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

Inclusion Criteria	Rationale	Exclusion Criteria
Aged 18 to 26	Originally 18 to 21 but changed due to difficulties within the recruitment process.	Young people under 18 or over 26
Left AP in 2013 or later	Ensures participants experiences are situated within the most recent landscape of education and policy (DfE, 2013; 2025).	Left AP before 2013
Completed secondary education in an AP	In keeping with the focus of the present research	Young people who accessed special schools or completed education in a mainstream setting
Ability to communicate in English	Due the study's use of semi-structured interviews and to ensure participant understanding	Not able to communicate in English

Potential participants were identified through three pathways. The first was recommendations from EPs in LA services or CAMHS, who were approached to either consensually link the researcher with potential participants, or direct the researcher to services or settings where they could advertise for potential participants. The second pathway was by sharing flyers advertising the study on social media. This allowed participants to reach out to the researcher directly via email on their own terms. The final pathway was through direct links to AP settings, who were approached to support recruitment through advertising the study or reaching out to previous students. Table 2 illustrates inclusion and exclusion criteria were developed to ensure that participants were recruited for this study in relation to

its aims. Three participants who had completed secondary education in an AP took part in this study. Contextual details about these participants is outlined in the table below, using pseudonyms to conceal their identity.

Table 3

Participant Contextual Information

Variable	Alex	Lilian	Michelle
Age	22	26	18
Ethnicity Codes	Black British	Black British	Black British
Time Since Leaving AP	7 years	10 years	18 months
AP Placement Duration	3 years	2 years	2 years
Education/ Employment/ Training Status	Employed	Education	Education

3.5.2 Recruitment Challenges

The recruitment process for this study was challenging, but there was some significant learning to be taken from the process. Unlike research with school-aged children and young people who can be accessed through structured pathways such as schools and colleges, AP leavers over the age of 18 are considered a hard-to-reach group. The term 'hard-to-reach' is frequently used to describe populations that are less visible, less accessible, or less likely to engage in research (Brackertz, 2007). Regarding the present study, it was recognised that AP leavers are less centralised than mainstream students. This is because their post-16 pathways are often less clear in comparison to their mainstream counterparts (Hamilton & Morgan, 2018). However, the idea of AP leavers being harder to access meant there was a

risk that their experiences would remain underrepresented in research, further marginalising this group within educational discourse. This suggests a reason why research around AP leavers is lacking in the literature base.

Though there were some initial successes in identifying potential participants through recommendations from EPs and AP professionals, many declined to take part without providing a reason. This was an unexpected barrier, as these individuals had been considered suitable for participation based on the study's inclusion criteria. While it was not possible to say exactly why participation was declined, it was considered that the transition to adulthood was still an ongoing and potentially uncertain process which may have been difficult to reflect on. Due to these challenges an amendment was submitted to the Tavistock and Portman NHS Foundation Trust Research Ethics Committee to extend the participant age range, which resulted in increased success (Appendix F).

3.5.3 Sample Size

The small sample size in this study is reflective of the practical challenges in recruitment. While a larger sample size was sought, the prioritisation of depth over breadth in IPA research means that data from this small sample can still generate ample and detailed accounts (Smith et al., 2022). Additionally, it has also been argued that a smaller number of participants facilitates more thorough engagement with each narrative (Smith et al., 2022). This is fitting, as the literature review illustrates the complexity of the experiences of individuals who access AP (Kew-Simpson et al., 2022; Malcolm, 2015). The aim of this study was not to illustrate broadly reoccurring themes within the participant population, but rather to gain valuable insights into post-16 progression for AP leavers. This aligns with the concept of theoretical transferability, where the researcher, readers and

professionals working with AP leavers can learn from the findings while considering how these may inform their practice (Smith et al., 2009).

3.6 Data Collection

The data collection process was constructed in line with the ethical frameworks underpinning this study, aiming to ensure participants' comfort and autonomy throughout. Each participant was contacted prior to arranging the interview, to provide them with detailed information about the study and gain informed consent. They were also given the option to take part in the interview virtually using Microsoft Teams or in person at the researcher's placement offices, where private meeting spaces were available. This flexibility sought to accommodate participant preferences and reduce potential barriers to participation (Smith et al., 2022). Once a time and location were agreed, participants were given the practical details about how the interview would go. All participants opted for virtual interviews, and a secure meeting link was provided ahead of the agreed time.

Prior to beginning the semi-structured interview schedule, participants were reminded of the research aims, the confidentiality and anonymity procedures, as well as their right to withdraw at any stage up to one week after the interview was completed. Participants were also given the opportunity to ask questions or raise any concerns at this stage. The interviews began with space for rapport building with participants through informal conversation, to reduce potential anxiety (Smith et al., 2022). Once each participant expressed that they were happy to proceed, the Microsoft Teams transcription tool was initiated with participants consent, and the interview commenced following the semi-structured interview schedule (Appendix E). The researcher's experience in role as a trainee EP was beneficial, as this facilitated a sensitive exploration of the topics discussed.

Following each interview, participants were able to jointly reflect on the process with the researcher as part of the debrief process. Here participants were offered another chance to ask questions, raise further concerns, or share any additional thoughts. Participants were also signposted to relevant UK based services which could offer support. However, as one participant was based in the United States, a conversation was had about potential supports available and next steps following the interview. Information about how participants data would contribute to the study and later be disseminated was also shared with participants. All information discussed in this debrief process was also shared with participants in a written format over email following the interview.

3.7 Data Analysis

Data analysis followed the seven-step IPA process outlined by Smith et al., (2022).

Table 4

Signposting IPA Analysis Process

IPA stage	Content	Appendix
Steps 1 – 3: Reading and re-reading, exploratory noting, developing experiential statements	Analysed excerpt from Lilian's transcript, with initial notes and experiential statements (P.1)	Appendix J
Step 4: Identifying connections between experiential statements	Example clustering of experiential statements using Miro digital whiteboard	Appendix K
Step 7	Example clustering of PETs to develop GETs using Miro digital whiteboard	Appendix L

3.7.1 Reading and Re-reading

This first step involves becoming immersed in the data by reviewing the interview transcript multiple times. Where the data were obtained from interviews, it was advised to listen to the audio recording at least once in the re-reading process. The goal of this step was to become familiar with the tone and flow of the transcript, as well as the key moments within the participants narratives overall. The data from these interviews were initially transcribed using the Microsoft Teams transcription tool. This transcription was reviewed alongside the audio recording to correct any errors and identify non-verbal cues which added depth to the data, such as pauses, laughs, or intonation (Smith et al., 2022). The audio recording was reviewed multiple times alongside the automated transcription, to create an accurate transcript which was then re-read multiple times. Initial impressions from the interview data were recorded in the reflective journal.

3.7.2 Exploratory Noting

For this step, a detailed analysis was conducted of each line of the transcript, with initial annotations capturing the content of participant narratives. This step involved taking further notice of the way that language was used, including use of tone, hesitation and choice of words. This was an exploratory step of data analysis where the goal was to represent participants' stories as accurately as possible, whilst taking the first steps towards interpreting the data (Smith et al., 2022). Reflexivity was again key here, in order to be aware of psychological, social, or wider contextual influences on the researchers meaning making in the process (Smith et al., 2022).

3.7.3 Developing Experiential Statements

This stage of analysis involved breaking the data down and capturing meaning with experiential statements (Smith et al., 2022). This meant transitioning from working with the interview transcripts, to working with the initial interpretations in the exploratory notes. Double hermeneutics was key here, as there was a process of meaning being made from the meaning the participants had made. Therefore, these experiential statements produced a combination of participant narratives and the researcher's perspective through a blend of interpretation and description (Smith et al., 2022).

3.7.4 Identifying Connections Between Experiential Statements

In this stage, experiential statements were compared and grouped in an exploration of the patterns within each participants entire narrative. This was a fluid and iterative process which involved moving back and forth through the data and annotations. Experiential statements were digitally recorded on Miro, a digital whiteboard workspace. This allowed the statement to be colour-coded, grouped, moved around, and reorganised according to patterns which emerged (Appendix K). This process required open-mindedness and periods of challenging oneself, to ensure that the grouped statements truly reflected the participants experiences (Smith et al., 2022).

3.7.5 Naming Personal Experiential Themes (PETs)

The grouped experiential statements were then given a title to reflect the pattern of meaning they were describing. These were termed as PETs and represented the interpretations across the entirety of each participants narratives (Smith et al., 2022). The PETs were organised into a table which also outlined

subthemes and provided example quotes in order to ensure transparency in this interpretative process (Appendix M).

3.7.6 Analysing Other Individual Cases

The previous five steps were then repeated for each participant, in line with the idiographic concept of IPA (Smith et al., 2022). Each participants transcript was treated as distinct and separate in order to respect the individuality of each participant.

3.7.7 Group Experiential Themes (GET)

In this final stage, PETs were compared across participants in order to highlight similarities and differences within the patterns that emerged. This led to the construction of GETs. This was a similarly iterative process which involved an in-depth review of the PETs tables created for each participant, at times resulting in subthemes being rearranged to fit emerging GETs. This process was similarly completed using the digital whiteboard workspace on Miro (Appendix L), and systematically documented into a table in order to illustrate how each individual's narrative influenced the GETs (Smith et al., 2022). GETs were also given a title to reflect the patterns they described (Appendix N). The findings from the analysis process are presented in the following chapter.

3.7.8 Process of Reflexivity

Reflexivity was a key aspect of the data analysis process, enabling a critical awareness of how the researcher's professional knowledge and experiences influenced the interpretation of the data. This will be exemplified using Kolb's (2014) Four Stages of Learning reflective cycle. This describes a structured but fluid process of moving from critical reflection to informed action which can be non-linear.

The first stage in this cycle is the concrete experience of learning. In this study's analysis process, this refers to engaging with each participant's transcript and observing initial reactions. This refers to steps one and two of the IPA process, reading and re-reading, and exploratory noting. The second stage is termed reflective observation, which in this study refers to acknowledging the tension between the researcher's interpretations and the participant's meaning making. In the IPA process, this stage is observable when developing experiential statements. For instance, when analysing Alex's transcript his internal locus of control (Rotter, 1966) became apparent during the process of moving from exploratory notes to experiential statements. This led to questions around the factors influencing the awareness of this, resulting in a challenging experience of both holding Alex's meaning making at the forefront and separating this from the researcher's perspective, which was influenced by their experiences as a trainee EP. This led naturally to the third stage of the cycle, termed abstract conceptualisation, which involves a critical examination of how theory and professional experiences inform interpretation. In this example analysis, this involved consideration of how existing professional knowledge and perspective may have informed or constrained the interpretation process. This was carefully thought through using the reflective journal (Appendix D), and explored through supervision.

The fourth stage of the cycle is termed active experimentation, and involves an applying the learning from the previous three stages to inform analytical decisions. In the present example this meant responding to reflections and discussions in supervision, resulting in a choice to lean into the practitioner researcher role and take an approach which balanced Alex's meaning making with the researcher's professional understanding. This reflexivity was utilised with each

participant's narrative, enabling a genuinely attuned interpretation of their meaning making.

4. Findings

This chapter seeks to present an in-depth exploration of the lived experiences of three individuals who have transitioned to adulthood, following the completion of their secondary education in an AP setting. An IPA analysis of three interviews was conducted in response to the research question:

What can we learn from the experiences of young people who have transitioned to adulthood from AP?

This chapter has been structured to begin with an initial exploration of the narratives and Personal Experiential Themes (PETs) for each participant, before moving to a broader exploration of the Group Experiential Themes (GETs). The purpose of this structure is to maintain the individuality of each case and honour the unique pathway of each participant. As the chapter progresses, there will be a shift into cross-case analysis which seeks to capture convergence and divergence across the three participants' experiences. Thus, this chapter aims to be rooted in the key principles of IPA which emphasise the duality of interpretation at both the individual and shared levels (Smith et al., 2022).

For clarity direct quotes from participants are presented with the following typological features:

- Quotations are italicised

- Quotations with text cut out: […]

- Tonal emphasis by participants in **bold**

- Transcription page number follows each quote in brackets: (p1)

4.1 Idiographic Analyses: The Personal Experiential Themes

This section illustrates the narratives of each participant, exploring the meanings they have made of their experiences. Each participant's narrative is presented to

reflect their individual journeys, including some micro-analytic interpretation of their use of language, imagery, and emotional expression (Smith et al., 2022).

4.1.1 Alex's Narrative

Alex is 22 years old; he currently plays semi-professional football while working in recruitment part-time. He attended an AP from Year 9 until Year 10, before moving to a different AP for Year 11. Following this, Alex accessed a football college programme. His PETs (Figure 2) depict his experience of growth despite adversity, in his journey to adulthood.

Figure 2

Alex's Personal Experiential Themes
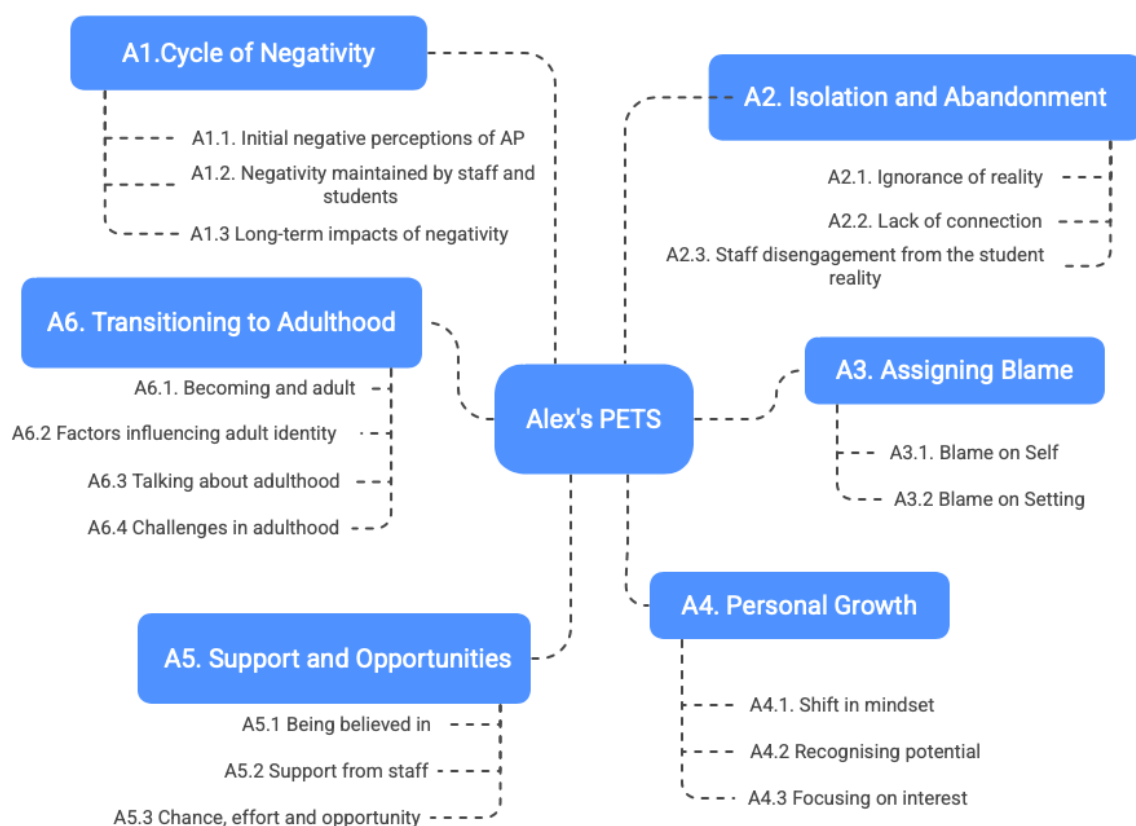
The start of Alex's story of accessing AP is captured in PET A1, where he described an immersive experience of negativity which he perceived to be maintained by all those in the AP context:

> *"At first (pause) it was quite- it was quite overwhelming just because (pause) you're just surrounded with a lot of (pause) negative people let's say, just a lot of negative people and with a negative mindset and the only thing they wanted to do was negative things at the end of the day, (pause) so it did sort of (pause) um I did sort of get attached to it" (pp. 2-3)*

Alex described this experience of negativity in a cyclical manner. He highlighted how it was maintained by staff and students and reinforced through a lack of response within the AP, carrying long-term consequences external to the setting. In the illustrative quote provided, it is notable that Alex described the negativity as *"overwhelming"* (p.2), suggesting a challenge in pushing back against it. He then went on to admit that he became *"attached to it"* (p. 3)*,* an admission that appears almost reluctant and possibly challenging to share, due to his pauses throughout the section. Through this aspect of his narrative, Alex seemed to highlight the consuming power that negativity held during his experience of AP. However, he also used a temporal referent, *"at first",* which seemed to imply that he overcame this.

Throughout the interview, Alex did not use much explicit emotional vocabulary. Instead, he presented emotion through his use of tone, and his speech structure. Pauses, hesitation and implications from language are where much of the emotional interpretation of his narrative has come from. This is evident in PET A2, where Alex seemed to illustrate a sense of isolation and abandonment from his experience of the lack of staff response to the negativity within the AP. He used phrases such as

"turn a blind eye" (p. 5), *"they didn't do anything"* (p. 5), or *"nobody spoke about us
[…]"* (p. 8)*,* to illustrate staff inaction. The implicit expectation that the staff should do

something but did not, suggests the existence of these disappointing emotions.

Thus, this theme highlights that at least in the early stages of his story, Alex felt that

staff in the AP abandoned their duty to do the expected. Here, 'the expected' seems

to be a counteraction of the negativity being perpetuated across the setting.

The concept of isolation in this theme comes from Alex's experience of an

absence of staff action. However, it is also drawn from Alex's references to himself

and peers in AP when describing staff inaction. He regularly grouped himself and his

peers as *"us"* (p. 5, p. 8) or *"my friends"* (p. 5)*,* and this seemed to suggest that he

and his peers were isolated from staff, through staff's lack of acknowledgement of

the realities of their experience within and external to the AP:

> *"we was in a so called (pause) association you would refer to as a gang […]*
>
> *the teachers were definitely aware of it […] nobody spoke about us being*
>
> *involved in it or speaking about the consequences of being in it." (p. 8)*

PET A3 seems to continue on to mark a shift in Alex's narrative where he

experienced a tension between two truths – that he was not helped effectively across

his journey, and that he did not effectively use the help he had previously been

given: *"- I wouldn't say they could have done anything much more." (p. 18)*. Here

Alex seemed to be assessing the role that he himself played, as well as that of both

his mainstream and AP educational settings, in his educational journey. Through this

theme, Alex seemed to illustrate that his narrative was one of redemption. He

described a turning point, which he arrived at through *"assessing the situation"* (p.

12) and accepting accountability for his part in his experience, whilst holding in mind

the reactions he did and did not receive from both settings.

Progression to PET A4 demonstrates Alex's perceptions of himself as someone who was shaped by AP but not defined by it. Throughout this theme it is notable that his speech became more certain. There was less hesitation and increased use of emphasis as he presented his point that being "***focused on football***" (p. 19) has maintained the positive shift in his mindset. Through this concept of 'mindset', Alex signalled the internal nature of this shift and implied throughout his narrative that the accountability for this change was his alone. Interestingly, he seemed to use past and present tense contrasts to indicate how his mindset had changed for the better, and that positivity continued to fuel his future:

> *"I was always gonna wanna do well, wanna do the right things every time to get the best chance of football uh because I was in that sort of environment it was just more of a upward trajectory from then on" (p. 31)*

This temporal contrast seemed to highlight Alex's perception of the ongoing nature of his development. He seemed to make a distinction between his past and present selves, as someone who wanted to "*do the right things*" and has continued to put the effort in to doing so. With this, he seemed to emphasise the significance of his internal resolve across his narrative.

Alex's meaning that he is someone who has chosen to grow despite his AP experience, is depicted in PET A4. However, PET A5 somewhat contradicts this idea by illustrating the role of staff in providing meaningful support and facilitating opportunities to pursue his interest in football. This seemed to have been present across his journey, but became more prominent in his experience of his second AP setting. He described the importance of an adult believing in him:

> *"even I didn't see or believe it, (pause) in myself really and truly but she always believed I'm going to be someone (pause) I'm going to be someone in*

the future I'm gonna be- I'm gonna to do great things. That "I do believe in

you" (p. 21)

His tone here seemed to become warmer and his use of language more

personal, switching form referring to staff as 'they' to 'she' for this key influential adult

in his story. Here, there again appears to be an implicit emotional weight evidenced

though his hesitation, and the simple but powerful way he refers to *"that "I do believe*

in you"" (p. 21) as an influential factor.

In the final theme PET A6, an understanding of Alex's journey to adulthood

and his emerging identity as an adult is established. He described his perceptions of

adulthood as an ongoing process, marked by "*A lot of **responsibilities**, a lot of*

***change**"* (p. 23), which he continued to be adaptable towards. Here religion seemed

to come through as a source of strength in the challenges that he faces in this

journey of adulthood. Time references are prominent throughout this theme, as Alex

explores how his personal history as a young person who did not know his parents,

as well as his educational history, and the breadth of scenarios he has faced, have

influenced his identity as an adult. Through this PET an understanding is developed

of the role of Alex's AP experience in shaping his adult identity.

Alex's narrative seemed to be carefully structured to illustrate the complexity

of his lived experiences, highlighting the key role his sense of agency played in his

transition to adulthood. Through his use of language and non-speech communication

he conveyed his internal resolve to resist the negativity perpetuated in his AP

settings, while also recognising how meaningful staff support contributed to his

motivation to take control of his narrative. Interestingly, though societal perceptions

exist in the background of his story, Alex did not attribute any influence to this on the

meanings he made of his experiences. Instead, he highlighted his own resilience and

determination to move forward. Through his account Alex seemed to indicate the importance of AP in his developmental history, while clarifying that AP was not central to his self-construction.

4.1.2 Lilian's Narrative

Lilian is 26 years old: she currently lives in the United States with her husband and her daughter. She attended an AP when she was in Year 11, until she completed secondary education. She then progressed to sixth form where she completed level two and three qualifications, before taking a break from education. She then went on to university, where she completed a public health degree with a foundation year. She began a career in public health, before moving to the United States. She is not currently employed in the United States and is considering pursuing further education to enable her to continue her career in public health there. Her PETs (Figure 3) portray her experience of transitioning to adulthood as she navigated different pathways and came to realise the variability of the process.

Figure 3

Lilian's Personal Experiential Themes
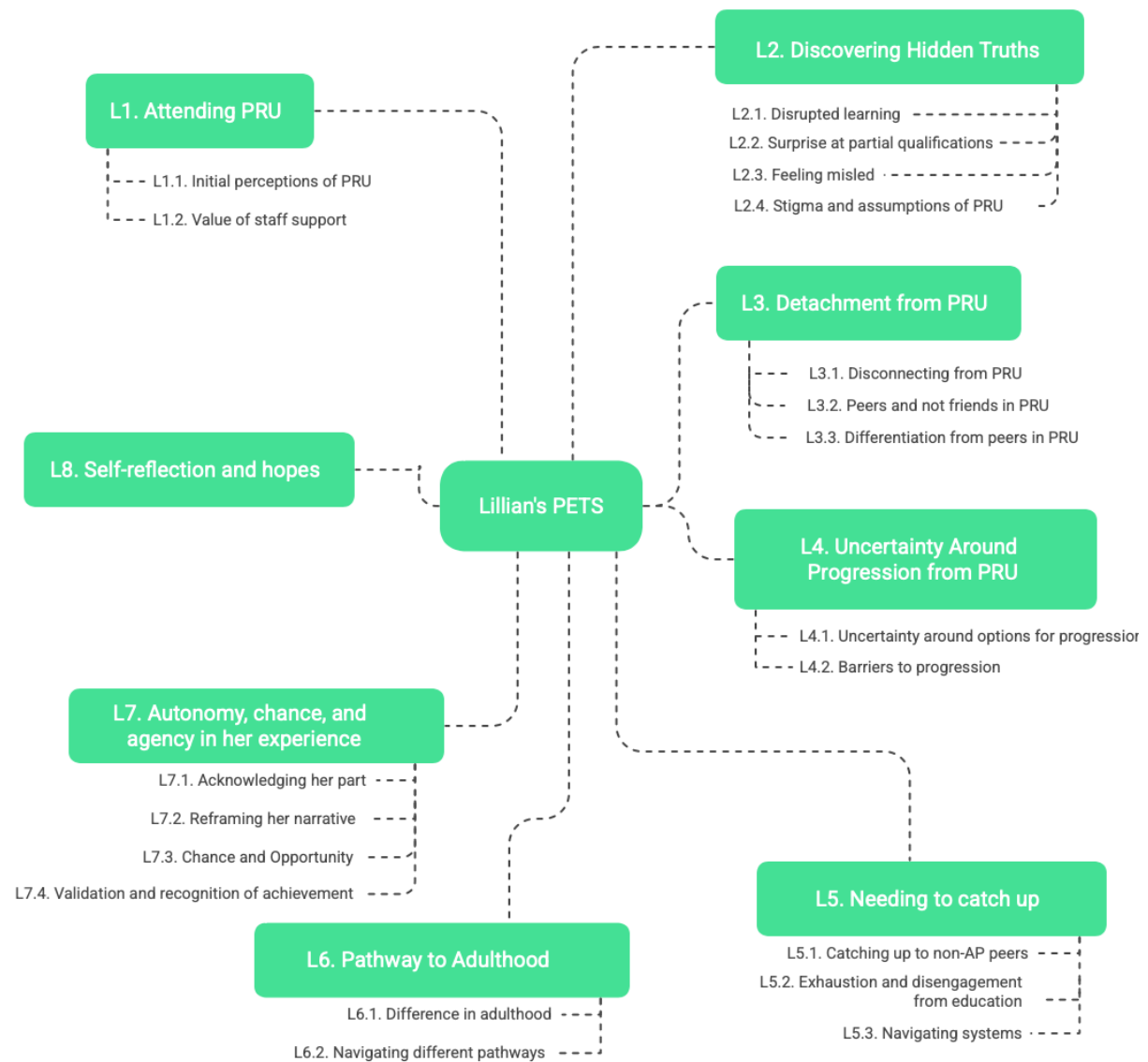
Lilian began her narrative by detailing what she later described as her "*naive*" (p.10) initial perceptions of AP, which she referred to as PRU. *"I didn't (pause) view it as (pause) um like bad or anything. Or think that I would be looked at differently because of it." (p. 9).*

Through PET L1 Lilian compared AP to her previous mainstream setting, detailing an alternative approach to teaching and learning which led to a more beneficial educational experience for her. This theme in Lilian's narrative seemed to be the foundation of her reflective approach to meaning making. Her speech consisted of pauses and hesitation, suggesting an experience of recollection as she sought to go back to her perceptions before the truths of her experience were revealed. This PET reveals a cautious optimism that Lilian seemed to hold at the start of her AP journey, that attending AP would have minimal impact on her future or possibly even be beneficial for her progression.

The second PET refers to the point where Lilian began to recognise that she was in a disadvantaged position as the GCSEs she had worked hard to achieve were only partial. The emotions that came through here were those of frustration, anger, and a sense of being deceived by this misrepresentation of the symmetry between her effort and the subsequent outcome. Here, Lilian began to question the role of the educational system in perpetuating disadvantage for AP leavers:

> *"I don't know if this happens in every PRU or (pause) whatever the case is, but I think um It was more like the **PRUs** fault- not the PRU- like the system or whoever set it up that those are not **full** GCSEs or whatever the case is like (pause) Why would you do that?"* (p. 16)

Lilian articulated her frustration here by sharing her internal monologue as she was confronted with this knowledge. She also utilised colloquial phrases, such as "*Are you taking the piss?"* (p. 4*)* and "*I was **fuming"*** (p. 4) to illustrate the depth and intensity of her emotions when she realised that she was not able to access post-16 education at the same level as her peers. Her sense of disbelief is also conveyed through her use of this casual language, as she emphasises that this disadvantage

was a discovery to her. Lilian explained that she was disappointed by the setting focus on protecting her from the negative perceptions socially held of APs generally, rather that ensuring she was appropriately prepared for her post-16 transition.

> *"I think they- it's just a bad look and they didn't want like (pause) people to* **penalise** *us for that, but essentially like (pause) They* **did anyways***, because (pause) We* **didn't** *have the correct qualifications."* (pp. 7-8)

Lilian then went on to use temporal referents such as "*It was so long ago um (pause)*" (p. 26) to distance herself from AP in PET L3. She shifted from highlighting the benefits she had experienced from accessing such a setting, to framing it as a chaotic space which she considered irrelevant in her journey to adulthood. Her laughter seemed to suggest a sense of absurdity at possibly taking something positive from the setting, and she seemed to express that it was an aspect of her history which she had left behind. This sense of detachment seemed to be something she both experienced at the time and reflected on in the present, as she highlighted the difference between herself and her circumstances, compared to her peers in AP. Through PET L3, Lilian seems to reject the imposition of the AP leaver identity, as she makes a distinction between herself and AP or what she understands to be the typical AP student: "*um 'Cause they were just bad kids. Like I don't think I was a bad kid. (laugh)*" (p. 11).

With this distancing, Lilian seemed to emphasise her individuality and highlight her case as an outlier against the assumptions imposed on AP pupils. She went on to detail a relational pattern of not forming meaningful connections in educational spaces, which seemed to have started from her time in AP. This disconnect seemed to suggest an experience of difference to her peers that was both retrospective and situated in the present: "*No, but I'm like that like I went to*

university and I made no friends the whole time. I was- like, until, like right at the end. So I'm very like that." (p. 12-13).

This difference seemed the be linked to the disadvantage she felt was imposed during her time in AP, as she described a sense of being behind her peers of a similar age who did not experience the same educational disruptions she did. Across her narrative Lilian seemed to describe how this contributed to a great sense of uncertainty during her post-16 transition. She described an experience of knowing what she wanted for her future, but also having reoccurring challenges which meant that her pathway to progression was not straightforward.

> *"But I definitely know that I want to (pause) go back and do- like- get- I don't even know what I wanna get, that's another thing. There's so many stumbling blocks for me, honestly, but it's not (pause)"* (p. 25)

It is possible that these "*stumbling blocks*" which seem to have impacted her educational trajectory are both structural, limiting her access to opportunities, and internal, referring to her self-esteem regarding her capabilities. However, Lilian seemed to indicate a sense of acceptance over the unpredictability of her path, as she later used the phrase *"I'm somewhere in the middle"* (p. 35) as she compared her approach to that of her peers.

In PET L5 Lilian reflected on the experience of exhaustion within her lived experience. She seemed to highlight the emotional weight of an internal sense of being delayed in her progression, and described an experience of educational burn-out which led to a period of disengagement from learning: *"Um and then I didn't go to **university** until (pause) I was 22 just because I was done (laugh) I was like so over education." (p. 16).*

However, Lilian also described her resourcefulness in using both formal and informal means to navigate the system she felt has delayed her. It appeared to be through this experience of navigating the barriers to her progression that Lilian identified what she sought from education: *"I'm really not into that- Like education like that. I want to learn about what I want to learn about."* (p. 22).

Following from this, PET L6 indicates how Lilian came to realise her pathway to adulthood as she navigated multiple uncertain pathways, particularly through comparison to her peers. Here Lilian highlighted her resilience in the face of setbacks and *"stumbling blocks"* (p. 25), implicitly emphasising her perseverance through the journey. Interestingly, despite her desire to distance herself from AP, she seemed to reluctantly accept that it may have had some preparative role in her journey: *"Maybe it could have (pause) subconsciously prepared me for (pause) um like these blocks (pause) that I've faced and (pause)"* (p. 29).

Her pauses suggest her hesitation to admit this, which may be due to how she recognises that preparation, as not upskilling but rather an early exposure to future challenges. Lilian seemed to attribute her experience of success despite her challenges, to a sense of determination and trust in her path: *"Yeah, I'm not fussed 'cause I know it's gonna happen. I know it will happen, when it's supposed to happen (pause) um I guess it's just a different route for me now like"* (p. 31).

PET L7 reveals insights into Lilian's sense of agency within her lived experiences, as she shared her understanding of the various factors which have influenced her journey to adulthood. She began to acknowledge how her own actions placed her on undesirable pathways and reflects on her learning from her experiences:

"Like I went- I tried to do the school thing. Then I was just like, no, this is- this is like not working for me. And then I just started working at like (pause) a betting shop. And then I went to prison (pause). And then I was like, this is not for me (laugh) at all." (p. 34)

Through her use of pauses and laughter, Lilian seemed to signal a sense of self-compassion as she recounted what her alternative pathway looked like, softening the weight of accountability for the decisions she made along the way. There seemed to be a sense of shame in her disjointed pathway, which Lilian distances herself from with humour as a protective mechanism. Through this theme, Lilian seemed to reframe her setbacks as factors which contributed to her becoming a resilient individual. However, though Lilian seemed to see validation in her journey as she has achieved a university degree, this appeared to conflict with a challenge of recognising the achievement in this. It seemed that Lilian's achievements were eclipsed by her challenging pathway, and the possibly lingering sense of delay surrounding her disrupted learning: *"And I've-I've not completed my education as far as I'm concerned, but as far as certain people are concerned, I've-I've completed my education now."* (p. 40).

Notably, Lilian appeared to fluctuate between referencing "*Uni*" (p. 33) and "*University*" (p. 34) across the interview, which may give some indication to how she understood the purpose of higher education in such a setting. When referring to 'Uni', Lilian seems to reference this as a concept, an abstract milestone that should be completed as a part of progressing to adulthood: *"eventually they went to uni and did all of that stuff."* (p. 34*)*.

However, on some of the occasions where Lilian speaks about 'University', she seems to be referencing something driven by necessity for her progression:

"then I decided that I actually (pause) wanted a career that involved (pause) me going to university." (p. 18). Or *"I'm going to university, and I'm gonna just do things (pause) how they are supposed to be done."* (p. 34).

Thus, it is also possible that Lilian has experienced challenges internalising the sense of achievement from reaching this milestone, as she perceives higher education to be an abstract symbol of successful societal progression, rather than something she desired to do.

Conversely, Lilian did express some pride over her story, as she shared her perceptions of possibly participating in this study at a younger age, in PET L8:

"It wouldn't be coming from (pause) a place of pride or anything. It would definitely have been like so much embarrassment behind it. (pause) and (pause) not the positive attitude that I have now. Definitely I would say." (p. 39)

Her repetition of "*definitely*" here seemed to suggest a certainty in the difference of her mindset at this point, compared to then. This is further highlighted through her use of the contrasting terms "*pride*" and "*embarrassment*". Through this PET, Lilian went on to express her hopes for her contribution in this study to benefit other young people whose circumstances may resemble hers, to be better prepared to navigate their own progression to adulthood: *"Like that's what I would want this to do um offer more support for them (pause) And reality checks"* (p. 42).

Lilian's narrative illustrates her complex journey of progressing to adulthood. She reflects on feelings of anger and disappointment which she held towards the process, while recognising her resilience and perseverance as she trialled different pathways to progression. Through her PETs there is an exploration of the conflict of hopeful but naïve impressions of AP, which shifts to realisations of her position of

disadvantage which she comes to understand is enabled by systems around her. She highlights a tension between distancing herself from her AP history, whilst also recognising its influence on her experience of transitioning to adulthood. Tension and difference are key threads which emerge through Lilian's language and tone, as she separates herself from the stigma and social constructions associated with AP leavers, while emphasising her own agency in the process. Lilian's account seems to speak to her conflicting and reflective process of meaning making, as she highlights the substantial role of educational systems in shaping adulthood for both her and other young people in a similar context.

4.1.3 Michelle's Narrative

Michelle is 18 years old: she is currently in sixth form and received a diagnosis of attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) in Year 10. She attended AP for part of Year 10 until she completed secondary education in Year 11, and then progressed to sixth form following this. Her PETs (Figure 4) depict her ongoing experience as she transitions into adulthood.

Figure 4

Michelle's Personal Experiential Themes
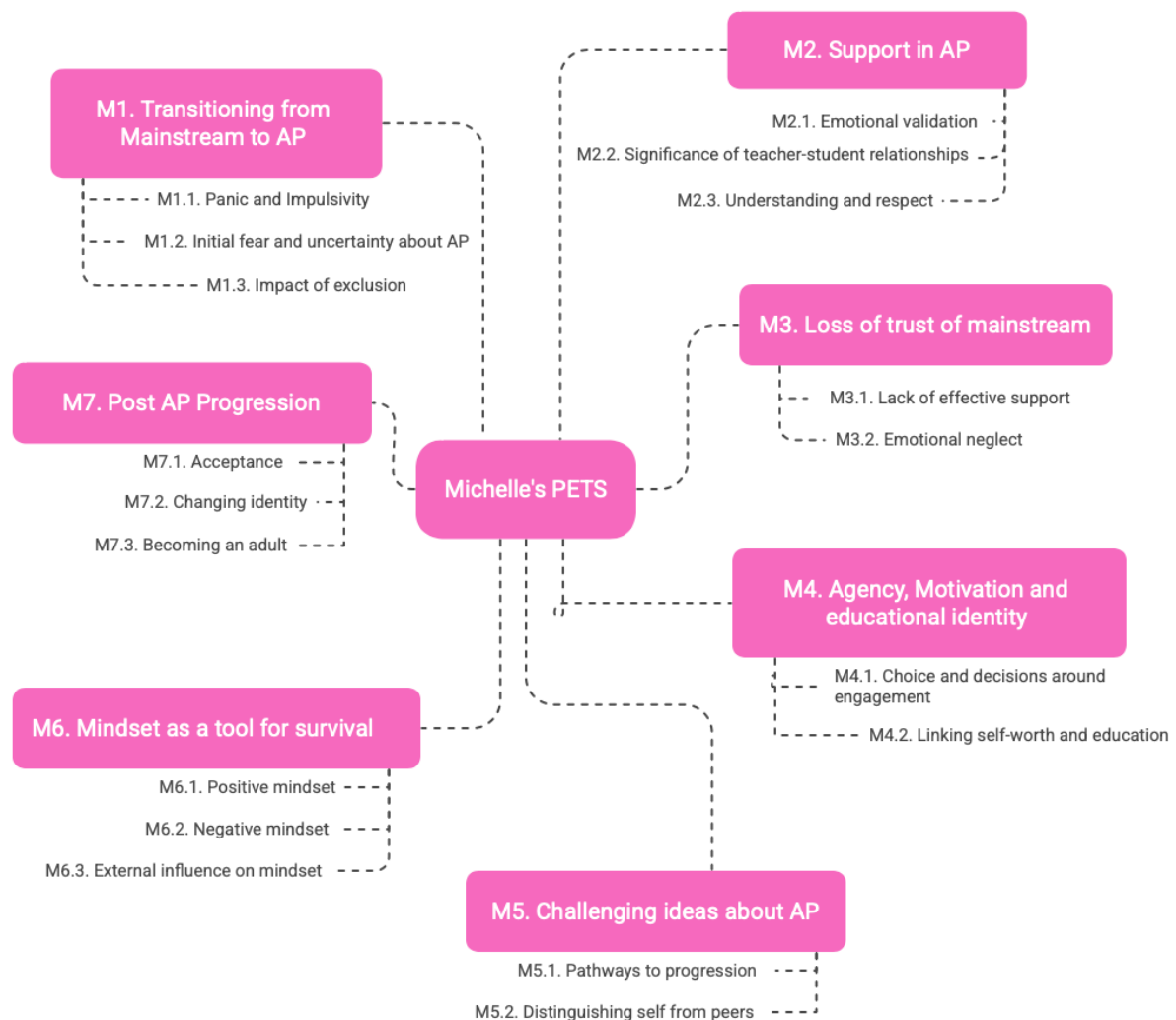
Michelle's account began with an explanation of the impulsive circumstances that resulted in her exclusion from her mainstream setting. She shared her initial impressions of the AP she subsequently accessed, which she refers to as 'Centre'. Through PET M1, Michelle described her transition as an emotionally overwhelming experience, where she felt fear, panic and shame. Here, Michelle seemed to perceive her emotions to be influenced by external factors, such as her family and the wider society who hold prominent views about young people who access AP:

"it was just like it was stressful. My family as well. Like they were stressed like, "oh, what's gonna happen next", things like that I was stressed cause of the pressure on- for my family and yeah, I was just really stressed, to be honest." (p. 2)

Through this theme, Michelle expressed the impact of being "***flung***" (p. 12) from mainstream into AP, which resulted in an experience of abandonment and neglect from mainstream. Throughout her narrative, Michelle compared her mainstream experience to that of AP. She explained that she was initially reserved in AP, a response that seemed to stem from her fear, which was rooted in the negative perceptions her family and wider community held about AP. However, through PET M2, Michelle illustrated the emotionally validating relationships with staff which enabled her true "*character*" (p. 13) to come out. She explained how the AP environment humanised the emotional experiences of her and her peers in AP, contrasting this with the emotional support she received in mainstream: *"Yeah centre like catered (pause) to people that needed behavioural needs way more or even catered to **students** way more."* (p. 9).

Through her emphasis on the word "*students*" Michelle seemed to indicate how AP provided a personified approach to support, while she illustrated the more punitive approach she experienced in mainstream. *"**In mainstream**… If you're like that, they'll just **leave you**. You'll go to isolation for maybe like 3 days. You don't even understand why you felt like that."* (p. 10).

Through this theme Michelle seemed to indicate a neglectful, restrictive, and emotionally illiterate experience in mainstream. Whereas in AP she had an experience that was deeply rooted in warmth, care and attentiveness, which she illustrated through food as a symbol:

*"the food was **nice**! (laughs) like the food was nice so I was like, **happy** like, OK, lunchtime tuck shop. You'll get your plantain chips. You'll get this. You'll get that. You'll get **sweets**. In mainstream. It's like you're just… eating broccoli and… some (laugh) like the food isn't made with **care**. It's just like, "yeah, that's the food you have to deal with it. You can't… get snacks… You can't do this""* (p. 19)

In PET M3 an understanding of Michelle's experience of becoming disillusioned to her mainstream setting is established, as she emphasised her loss of trust in the setting. She highlighted disappointment in their approaches to identifying and supporting her emotional needs and her diagnosis of ADHD, which led to an experience of abandonment and isolation:

"it was kind of like they were looking to it, but it was kind of already too late 'cause I didn't… like, I didn't want the help anymore. I didn't want to understand why I'm like this, but I can look I-, look online and see ADHD. "What does this mean? OK, cool." Find my own ways to cool down in class. But yeah, so that." (p. 12)

The turning point in Michelle's narrative comes through in PET M4, where she illustrated her agency in her education and journey to adulthood. She explained how pressures from home alongside her internal drive influenced her motivation to achieve well in education: "*I was like "nah, like, ay, I know what type of home I come from like. At the end of the day, I need to go home with good grades under… any circumstance.""* (p. 22).

Through this theme, Michelle indicated how she took control of her educational journey by engaging with teaching in the AP, and began to feel hopeful for her future. She also signalled a rediscovery of her educational identity, which she

lost in the process of transitioning to AP. Here, Michelle seemed to imply that her sense of self-worth and perceived opportunity in progressing to adulthood were linked to her educational achievement:

> *"Passed my English, I found- I just- I was just happier, if that makes sense. I was… **way** more happier, like "OK, cool. I'm in sixth form. OK, maybe I can go to uni, like I have more options than others""* (p. 36)

Michelle seemed to indicate a sense of autonomy and pride in her academic success which was enabled by her AP experience. However, Michelle seemed to experience a tension between her positive experience of AP, alongside her experience of AP as it was perceived by her family and the wider society. She referenced a physical risk which existed within and external to the setting, contrasting the emotionally nurturing experience she had described:

> *"But there was some that they would actually come to school to **fight** like (laugh) it was a **Fight Club** for them. For me, it was like… It's my only way of escape. Have a good future, so I might as well."* (p. 29)

In her description of AP as her "*only way of escape*" (p. 29), Michelle seemed to introduce an idea of survival. This suggests an internal confliction between her experience of AP as an institution where she experienced care and meaningful support, alongside her awareness and experience of negative stereotypes associated with the setting. Through PET M5 Michelle seemed illustrate a conscious effort to avoid being reduced to the expectations associated with these negative stereotypes, by differentiating herself from peers who continued on what she termed the "*wrong path*" (p. 25). In this way, she appeared to use her narrative to challenge social constructions imposed on individuals who attend AP, and illustrate the variability within the student population. She did not idealise the AP setting, instead

highlighted the significance of intentionality in shaping her future: *"But now it's like if you want to do well, you will do well, if that makes sense. Other students were like, missing lessons."* (p. 22). Through this theme, Michelle seemed to emphasise her pride at resisting the pre-determined path and illustrate her emerging self-concept as she took autonomy over her education:

> *"And that's why I like when people ask. "Oh, how many schools have you gone to?" I'm not really ashamed to say, oh, I went to the centre" I can happily say, "OK, I went to a centre… where my emotions were **nurtured**. I understood myself more and I actually came out with like. Not bad academics" so yeah."* (p. 20)

In PET M6, Michelle seemed to highlight her resilience and determination across her journey. She illustrated the power and intensity of the negative social constructions and stereotypes of AP, emphasising the concept of survival in her narrative. She highlighted how this negativity was perpetuated through the environmental positioning of the AP "***in the middle of hell***" (p. 16), and the physical restrictions pupils experienced as the entered the setting. Michelle's description seemed to suggest how the APs spatial positioning contributed to an experience of being socially segregated. This desensitised her to an experience of imprisonment, an outcome she had to avoid through her intentionality to survive:

> *"'cause it was like you'll go in (pause) metal detectors…. you're getting patted down so y- your mindset starts to think "ah maybe prison… might look like my future 'cause this what (laugh) they do in prison **anyways**"…"* (p. 25)

Here she presents how she utilised her own mindset as a tool for survival:

> *"You just wanted to be positive like (pause) You just wanted-like it was kind of like prison you just wanna have a positive mindset 'cause once you start*

having a negative mindset like, "oh, I'm not going to make it… this and this is

*going to happen to me" that's where it goes **downhill**. Like, really downhill."*

(p. 27)

Through this idea of survival, Michelle emphasises the internally experienced

threat of being consumed by the negative stereotypes being imposed on her. She is

honest in naming how her positive mindset was challenges by the normalisation of

low expectations, violence, and fear. However, she reinforces the role of

expectations from home as well as encouragement from the teachers in her setting,

to push back against these expectations for AP leavers. This marked a shift in her

framing of the influence of perspectives from home being a pressuring factor, to

being as defensive factor:

"OK, cool. (Kiss teeth) You can't stay here forever. You can't stay here forever.

Like this is not the end of your future." (p. 31)

In the final PET M7, Michelle reflected on the role of AP in her continuing

journey to adulthood, expressing that she does not yet connect with the idea of being

an adult. Though she highlighted the value of the emotional support she experienced

in the setting, she also highlighted the experience of fear and resignation at

completing her secondary educational journey in AP. She indicated an initial sense of

uncertainty as she explored her options for post-16 progression with staff at the AP,

reflecting on the instability of her new identity and mindset as she becomes an adult:

"Like my mind started getting a bit negative, like "EEK… I got good grades,

*but like ay… what's **actually** gonna come out of this?" Like, I was starting to*

panic. I started to be scared." (p. 36)

Michelle went on to explain how she settled post-AP and leant into church to

support her to maintain her new identity, and continue to resist the pull towards the

negative stereotypes she escaped from. She described how church "*kind of gave me structure*" (p. 37) and "*peace of mind, improved my positive mindset*" (p. 37). The intentionality in Michelle's narrative suggests that church is something she sought out, in order to continue to nurture her emerging adult identity. Her reflections also highlighted the value she felt in reflecting on her journey through this study, which has contributed to her sense of pride in her achievements: *"Like I never really thought like, oh, I've actually come quite far but yeah… I really like this."* (p. 40).

Michelle's narrative was a highly reflective account, as she looked back at her educational journey and post-16 transition for the first time. She highlighted her strengths and challenges throughout the process, whilst recognising the external and internal factors which held influence, acknowledging the impact of the institutions she accessed. She also highlighted the variability of her emotional experiences, which range from stress, fear, and panic to confliction and pride at how she has managed to form her identity in the face of exclusion and stigmatisation. Interestingly, through her use of collective pronouns such as "*us*" (p. 28), she seems to highlight the wide and shared experience of survival and navigating the variability of post-AP progression.

4.2 Cross-case Analysis: The Group Experiential Themes

This section presents a cross-case analysis illustrating how each participants PETs and PET sub themes have contributed to the generation of four GETs. It captures patterns of similarity and difference across narratives, to develop a deeper understanding of how AP leavers make meaning of their experiences.

Figure 5

Group Experiential Themes

Perceptions of AP

Creating Distance from the Negativity of AP

Surviving AP

Entering Adulthood

Group Experiential Themes

Transitioning from AP to Adulthood
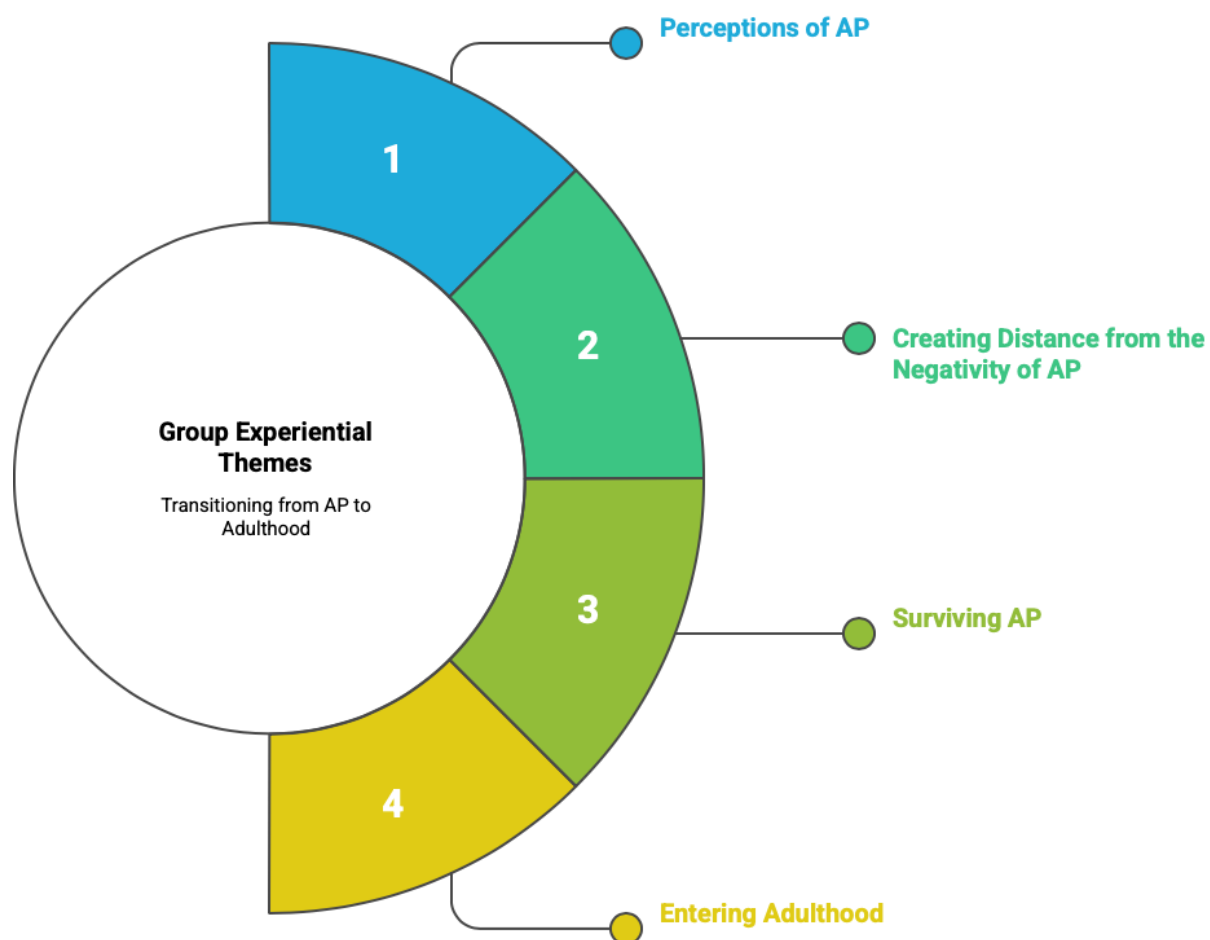
4.2.1 GET 1: Perceptions of AP

Figure 6

Group Experiential Theme one
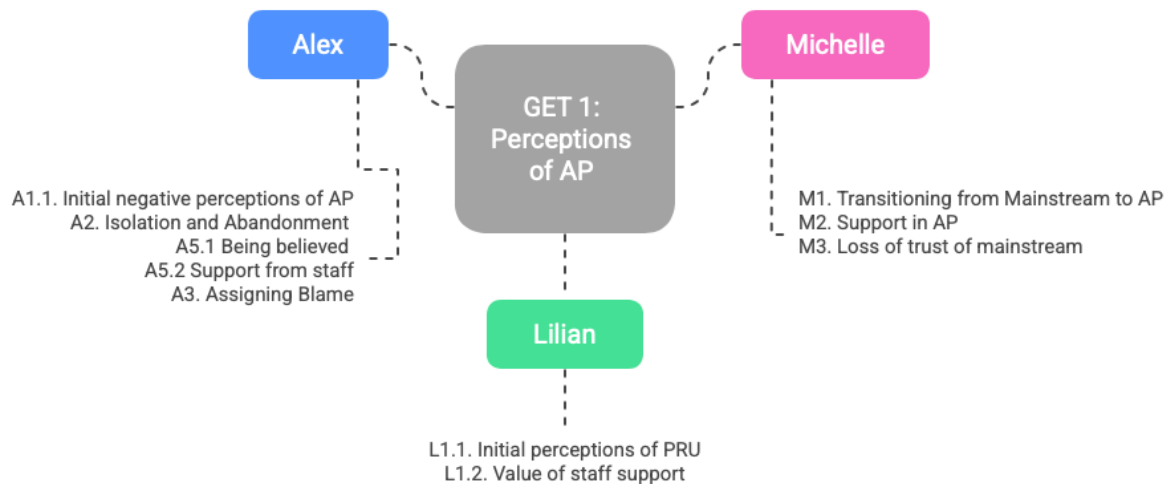
4.2.1.1 Initial Perceptions.

The transition to AP seemed to play a significant role in how participants construed their experiences, and there appeared to be variability in the participants' initial responses to each of their settings. Lilian explained that she initially perceived AP to be a more targeted educational space in comparison to mainstream: *"So (pause) it was a little bit more beneficial for me I would say, (pause) well, initially I thought it was because it was kind of like (pause) Being in a private school."* (p. 1).

This seemed to reflect Lilian's early identification as someone "*considered to take their education a little bit more seriously*" (p. 1). However, this also seemed to contribute to her later experience of disillusionment with the reality of accessing an AP, which led to an ongoing experience of having to catch up to her peers who did not attend AP. In contrast, both Alex and Michelle seemed to initially hold negative perceptions of AP. Lilian and Alex's perceptions seemed to be drawn from what they

first noticed as they accessed AP. For Alex, this was a consuming experience of negativity:

> *"you're just surrounded with a lot of (pause) negative people let's say, just a lot of negative people and with a negative mindset and the only thing they wanted to do was negative things at the end of the day"* (pp. 2-3)

This seemed to be a formative aspect of Alex's narrative, as he later went on to detail his internal drive to resist what he described as an overwhelming experience of negativity. Alex seemed to perceive this experience to be influenced by his own response to the AP environment. Whereas Michelle's initial perceptions seemed to be influenced by social constructions surrounding AP:

> *"because when you hear about like A PRU or centre, you're just thinking of the worst. You hear all the worst stories- all the bad stories. So you're thinking you don't want to be like one of them that end up bad"* (p. 1)

Though both Alex and Michelle went on to illustrate an experience of redemption through their successful progression from AP, Michelle positioned her experience in a way which challenges assumptions regarding AP leavers collectively, while Alex's narrative emphasises his individuality.

4.2.1.2 Encounters with Staff in the AP Setting.

Each participant described the important and complex role of staff-student relationships in shaping their experiences. Building from the foundations of their meaning making, these relationships seemed to have varying functions for each participant. For Alex, these relationships contributed to a sense of disappointment that shifted between himself and his educational settings. He explained how he experienced inaction from staff as ignorance and abandonment: *"they didn't do*

anything and then it was just ended up with my friends just (pause) being in jail." (p. 5).

His language here appeared almost accusatory in nature as he indicated that staff did not do their duty, and illustrated the long-term implications of this for him and his peers: *"because it also led to me doing something bad as well (pause) which also that sort of impacted me in the future"* (p. 8). However, Alex also acknowledged that staff in his mainstream setting were "*trying to help*" (p. 17) prior to his exclusion, pointing out his lack of receptiveness to their support. Here, Alex began to direct his disappointment towards himself, positioning himself as a barrier to his academic achievement:

> *"I don't think I learnt a single thing between year 9 till the end of year to 10, I'd say being truthfully honest, I don't think I actually learnt anything and it was- and that was thinking of it now (pause) that was-that was bad"* (p. 9)

Alex's tone seemed to suggest a sense of regret in how his actions influenced his journey, spotlighting the few attuned moments of care from staff in AP as key in shaping his self-concept. He named the role of hearing the simple phrase "*I do believe in you*" (p. 21), as fundamental in the development of his personal growth as an AP leaver.

Michelle similarly detailed an experience of abandonment from her mainstream setting, as she indicated a loss of trust in the mainstream system due to her experience of punitive and ineffective support around her emotions and her diagnosis of ADHD: "*In **mainstream**… If you're like that, they'll just **leave you**. You'll go to isolation for maybe like 3 days. **You** don't even understand why you felt like that.*" (p. 10).

This is a notable point of convergence in Michelle and Alex's narratives, as both participants highlighted how staff disengagement in mainstream or AP shaped their understanding of self. For Michelle, this similarly highlighted the value of teacher support in her AP which she says made it "*easier for me to **learn***" (p. 18). Through her narrative, she conveyed her lack of faith in the mainstream settings ability to understand or support her:

> *"they didn't really do anything for me, to be honest. I mean, I would have like a safeguarding person that I could go to and (pause) Yeah, like that's because I don't really talk as well (pause) Well, it's hard for me to, like, speak about things (pause) so even when I would go, it would just kind of be pointless or like I would only go if I really need to go"* (p. 5)

This seemed to emphasise the value she placed on the humanising approach of staff in her AP, which supported her to understand her individual needs on her journey to progression: *"In mainstream it was more like "nah you're **bad** you have no more future!" in centre its like (pause) "you're not bad. You just have complications and you just need to deal with them so you can progress.""* (p. 9). This contrast between Michelle's experiences of support in mainstream and AP appeared to be significant as she later reflected on the construction of her identity as an adult.

The significance of relationships with staff in conceptualisations of self is also apparent in Lilian's narrative. She indicated how her perception of staff support as conditional validated her efforts, and reinforced her identity as a student driven to achieve academically:

> *"I did really like the teachers. I feel like they were **encouraging**, and they really tried their hardest. If you were **willing** to try but (pause) I feel like a lot*

of people just didn't really care. (pause) **So** *they didn't do that for everyone,*

but they were cool." (p. 14)

Lilian indicated how her efforts made her deserving of positive relationships

with staff, reflecting her self-perception as someone who deserved positive

outcomes because of the effort she put in. This conceptualisation seemed to

underpin her frustration at realising the wider factors contributing to her

disadvantage.

4.2.2 GET 2: Creating distance from the negativity of AP

Figure 7

Group Experiential Theme Two
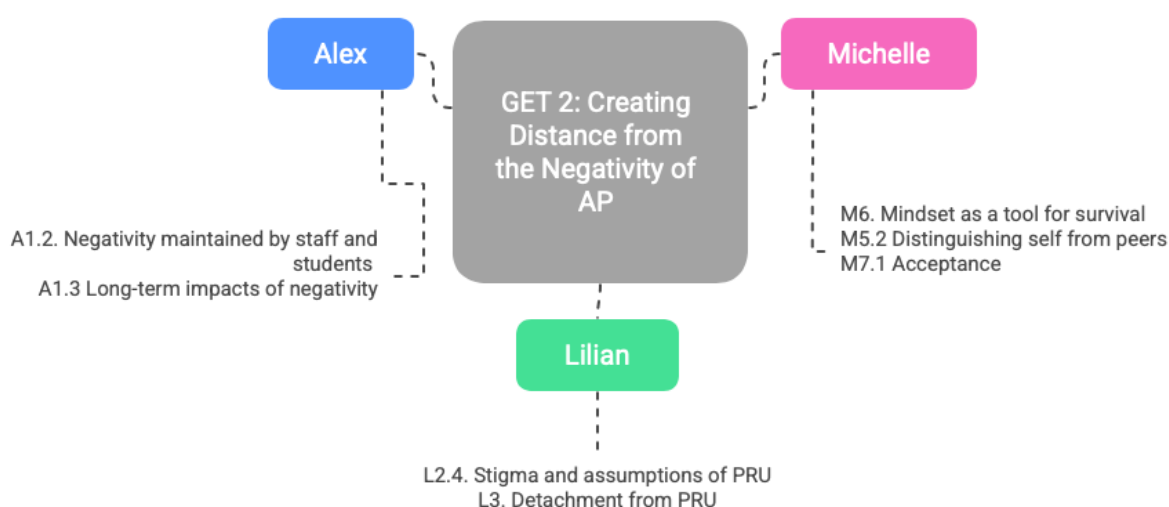
4.2.2.1 Negativity of the Setting.

Each participant's connotations of positivity and negativity were shaped by

their environment. For Alex, the entire concept of AP was framed within a sense of

negativity, a cycle that was maintained by "*more so peers, but also um the staff*" (p.

3). He expands on the lack of staff intervention around negative activity in the

setting, explaining how he was eventually overcome by this negativity:

"just coming to a school just to hear negative things, do negative things and the more you hear the more you- you think about it, you're eventually always going to end up doing it as well." (p. 11)

Alex proceeded to highlight how staff ignorance functioned as complicity that maintained this cycle of negativity as he explained that "*They would hear it, but they wouldn't stop us from doing it I'd say. They'll just hear it laugh along or probably just (pause) turn a blind eye towards it*" (p. 5). Later in his narrative, Alex indicated how he was able to separate himself from this negativity. He introduced his shift towards a more positive mindset, as he explained how the long-term impact of this negative mindset for his peers, compelled him to make the change: *"In year 9 like 3 of my friends they ended up getting life sentence (pause) to prison"* (p. 5).

Through his narrative, Alex seemed to highlight concern over the expected pathways for his future if his mindset had not become more positive. Michelle similarly indicated concern over a predetermined outcome if she did not "*have a positive mindset*" (p. 27), as without this is where "*it goes **downhill**"* (p. 27). She explained how this reinforced her desire to challenge these expectations: *"You can't stay here forever. Like this is not the end of your future."* (p. 31).

For Michelle, this mindset seemed to act as both a shield against the stigmatisation of AP pupils, and a variable that directed her towards a positive future. This links back to the PET across her narrative of a positive mindset being a tool for surviving the negativity perpetuated within AP. Here Michelle also appeared to express a subtle but uncomfortable judgement towards peers who she considered to be deeply entrenched in the negative mindset. She pointed to the consuming nature of the negativity in AP setting similarly to Alex, and seemed to suggest that developing a positive mindset was only possible if one had experienced settings

which were different to AP. Michelle's implication here is that long-term exposure to AP can be damaging to self-concept, resulting in limited hopes for the future:

> *"But some people was like (pause) they've been in there for so long, it's like… there's **nothing** like there's- there's actually nothing to come out of this like… the one boy that I knew was there since year seven I was like "oh, yeah. That's it" like 'cause, you don't know **anything else**. You've never really interacted with people **at all**. So… yeah, a lot- some people had negative mindsets for themselves or didn't have **goals** for themselves so it's like (pause)"* (p. 32)

In comparison, Lilian's narrative grounded the notion that ideas of negativity were imposed on her by others. Over time, she came to realise that she "*would definitely have been labelled (pause) a difficult child*" (p. 10). Here she indicated that the labels externally placed on her as an AP leaver were internalised retrospectively, and this seemed to underpin her detachment from AP. Through her narrative Lilian described how she came to recognise the stigma associated with AP after she left the setting.

Michelle and Alex appeared to respond to the negativity in AP by actively resisting it with their mindsets, whereas Lilian seemed to acknowledge its existence at a macrosystemic level. This seemed to contribute to her actions of distancing herself from AP socially and academically. Therefore, this idea of survival began to peek through Lilian's narrative, though it appears to differ slightly from that of Alex and converge with that of Michelle. Where Alex's act of survival involved resisting AP culture as he defined his self-concept, Michelle and Lilian seemed to push back against the definitions that others assigned to them as AP leavers.

4.2.2.2 Establishing Distance and Separation from AP.

Both Michelle and Lilian distanced themselves from AP through descriptions of their efforts, motivations and aspirations regarding their progression from AP. However, their approaches to this differed. Lilian seemed to make efforts to detach herself from AP and erase its impact on her journey:

> *"Nothing. (laugh) Nothing. That place was just chaos. Like I wouldn't say um I don't know. It's not even something I think about. um It was so long ago um (pause)"* (p. 26)

Lilian appeared to emphasise the differences between herself and her peers in this setting, in what seems to be an ongoing effort to reject the stigma associated with AP: *"I was **managed moved,** so it was supposed to be different"* (p. 9). It is possible that this was rooted in the anger and frustration she felt towards the setting, as attending resulted in her being in a disadvantaged position in her transition to adulthood.

While Michelle also attempted to distinguish herself from constructions of AP, this did not appear to be rooted in a desire to reject the setting. She clarifies that she is "*not really ashamed*" (p. 20) to have accessed AP, suggesting that she is actually distancing from the social impositions placed on AP leavers rather than AP itself. Therefore, it seems her self-distinction from peers in the setting was rooted in a desire to challenge ideas about AP leavers that may sometimes be true, by emphasising her pride in her journey which defies expectations.

She seemed to justify the less successful outcomes of her "*friends*" (p. 25) who "*kind of went down the wrong path*" (p. 25), by suggesting that they were limited as they were entrenched in the AP system: "*Centre's all they ever knew*" (p. 27). Here, Michelle appeared to distinguish herself from peers by describing how she

employed her sense of agency as she leant into her motivation to achieve well and choose differently from the expected path.

In this way, Michelle positions her mindset as a tool to escape stigmatisation. However, she also alludes to the emotional weight of her experience as she became resigned to completing her education in AP:

"*Think that it was the most **scariest** bit 'cause It's like… "oh, you're actually ending your academics here" 'cause when I first came, I was like, "OK, cool. There's a bit of hope… I'm only in **year 10"** and (pause) there was a few people in year 10 that got to leave like […] Some people went to other schools and I was just there, so it was kind of like (pause) "oof" Like it was h- it was heart aching because it was like "ah, this is not where I want to end""* (pp. 21-22)

These feelings seemed to contradict with the positive experience of AP compared to mainstream which she described throughout her narrative. However, it seems that this once again stems from the influence of the societal stigma surrounding AP.

Interestingly Alex did not appear to explicitly distance himself from peers in the AP in the same manner as Michelle and Lilian. Instead, he regularly referred to peers in AP as 'friends' in his narrative, suggesting a sense of affiliation with the AP student population. This collective language seems to suggest that in Alex's process of meaning making, he positions himself and the group as individuals navigating this negative space.

4.2.3 GET 3: Surviving AP

Figure 8

Group Experiential Theme Three
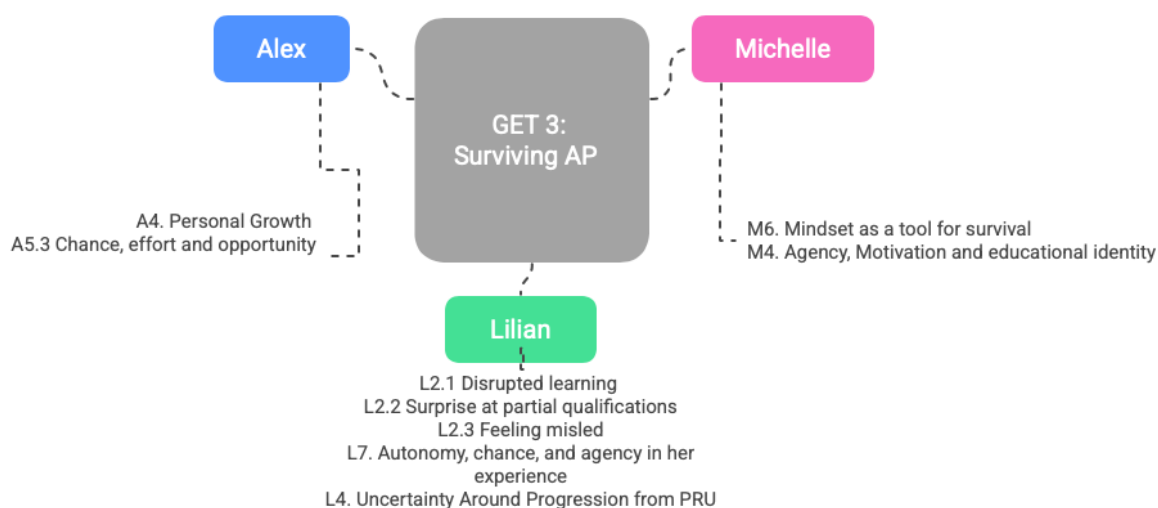
4.2.3.1 Disillusionment and Re-Evaluation.

Disappointment in their experiences is a theme that emerged across each participants' narrative. For Lilian, her sense of disappointment seemed to be primarily located in the educational system which she separated from the staff who supported her within her settings. She described a shocking experience of revelation where she came to realise how her educational journey had resulted in her being in a disadvantaged position compared to her peers:

> *"when I went to go to- (pause) go to college- sixth form, they was like, "oh, these aren't full GCSEs. So like you can't do anything with them". I was like "**what**?!"*

> *they was like, "yeah", […] they was like it's not- You don't- like you basically don't have enough GCSEs like you have like two or three or something […] s**o** they was like you have to do a level one. I was like, (laugh) "are you taking the*

*piss?" You want me to do a level one, to then do a level 2 **to then** go on to do a Level 3? I was **fuming.**"* (p. 4)

For Lilian this was an experience that was overshadowed by a sense of being deceived and resulted in feelings of anger and frustration towards the system. As a result, she seemed to recognise the need to take control over her journey in order to catch up to her peers, as she went on to take an unorthodox approach to starting sixth form at a level closer to her peers. A similar experience of re-evaluation seemed to occur for Michelle and Alex, which fostered this sense of agency in all three participants as they leant further into their autonomy.

4.2.3.2 Societal Expectations for Progression.

Uncertainty was a significant element in how participants made sense of their experiences of transitioning from AP. Lilian described a lack of preparation that she felt was linked to systemic expectations of poor outcomes for AP leavers: *"I don't feel like they prepared us for moving forward, but maybe that's something that they don't think that kids are gonna do. I don't know"* (p. 27). This points to her experience of a systemic issue in which AP was unequipped to support successful post-16 progression, with the assumption being that pupils who access this setting would experience failure in adulthood. In her efforts to reject these assumptions, Lilian went on to detail her experience of transitioning to adulthood through a lens of right and wrong pathways. One such pathway considered to be wrong was imprisonment which Lilian describes as "*not for me (laugh) at all.*" (p34).

The idea of prison emerged as a metaphor across each participant's narrative, of which a micro-analysis is relevant here. For Lilian, this was framed as a "stumbling block" (p25) on her pathway, which imparted lasting anxieties around her employability as she progressed to adulthood. However, this was a more conceptual

idea in Michelle's narrative, for whom her AP environment began to mimic and perpetuate the idea of prison as a pathway to adulthood. This is maintained through her experience of "*metal detectors […] getting patted down*" (p. 25), contributing to her being disheartened about completing her secondary education in AP, despite preferring her school experience there. For Alex, the concept of prison was a potential but highly literal consequence of the negativity he experienced as being maintained by the AP context. He highlighted this as a transitional destination that he actively avoided. Each participant reflected through their narrative on how the concept of prison has shaped the sense of possibility in their progression. Thus, its recurrence in the data seems to illustrate how this societal positioning of AP pupils as being on a pathway to incarceration can be internalised by AP pupils, and may contribute to uncertainty around transitioning to adulthood.

4.2.3.3 Reclaiming Identity.

The concept of identity is present across Alex, Lilian and Michelle's narratives, with each participant recognising a point where their perceptions of self began to change and highlighting how this was maintained. Lilian's self-perceptions appeared to emerge throughout her narrative as she began to recognise her achievements despite her experiences of uncertainty. She illustrated her experience of transitioning to adulthood from AP, explaining how she reframed her expectations for progression. She moved away from ideas of success and failure in her narrative, accepting that she is "*somewhere in the middle*" (p. 35). Though she made comparisons between her journey and that of her various peers, she also positively reframed this idea of difference as she reflected on how her resilience developed across her journey:

"my path has definitely been a bit different to my friends, but (pause)

I'm- maybe I'm more prepared, like I'm a little bit more resilient, so I'm just like,

"OK, this wasn't the plan, and this wasn't what I worked for, and this wasn't

what I put things in place when I tried to prepare for, but it all worked out

*before. So why is it not going to work out now?"" *(p. 32)

Lilian appeared to place more value on the resilience she gained along the

way, as opposed to her academic achievements which she seemed to perceive as

externally validated: *"as far as certain people are concerned, I've-I've completed my*

education now" (p. 40). This is possibly because she is continuing to explore her

options regarding her academic future. However, here Lilian also appeared to

implicitly challenge the idea that successful progression is synonymous with

educational completion.

In a comparable thread, Michelle's sense of identity seemed to be closely

linked to her academic achievement and successful progression from AP:

"Like, even though I went to the centre, I didn't go to prison. So there was still

hope and then passed, and there was hope after that. And now I'm still in sixth

form… thinking of uni and things like that. So I think that was like the unique

*thing that I still **got a chance** to do my academics after that. So yeah."* (p. 38)

For Michelle, a sense of hope seemed to emerge as a contributing factor to

her sense of agency and academic motivation. However, Michelle also emphasised

the role of her familial values in validating her academic journey and changing

identity, as she explained that her mother *"was just happy that I was out of that*

place. I had nothing to do with that place anymore. And I came out with good grades.

So yeah." (p. 34).

Whereas for Alex, the power of his internal mindset shift in shaping his identity

as an AP leaver was emphasised:

"I've continued that sort of mindset and I haven't returned back to it at all from (pause) the age of 16 till the age I am now. I haven't really- That mindset just completely disappeared and also it's even gotten a lot better" (p. 19)

He explained that having the opportunity to follow his passion of football enabled him to develop skills he feels are important in adulthood, such as "*discipline*" (p. 24). However, he also acknowledged the efforts of staff who provided him with opportunities to pursue his interests, and his own motivation to *"do good by them"* (p. 15), as he *"was always gonna wanna do well, wanna do the right things every time to get the best chance of football"* (p. 31).

Unlike Michelle and Lilian, Alex explained that his validation around his achievements was internally driven, as he desired to resist AP acting as a barrier to his progression: "*I knew I wasn't fulfilling my potential. Being in that place and also that place wasn't allowing me to get anywhere near to my potential."* (p. 13).

Though there are differences across each participant's account regarding influences on their changing identities, all three seems to indicate that there was more to their story than a history of attending AP. They highlighted the role of their autonomy and agency in shaping their identities and illustrated how this had shaped their opportunities and progression post-AP.

4.2.4 GET 4: Entering Adulthood

Figure 9

Group Experiential Theme Four
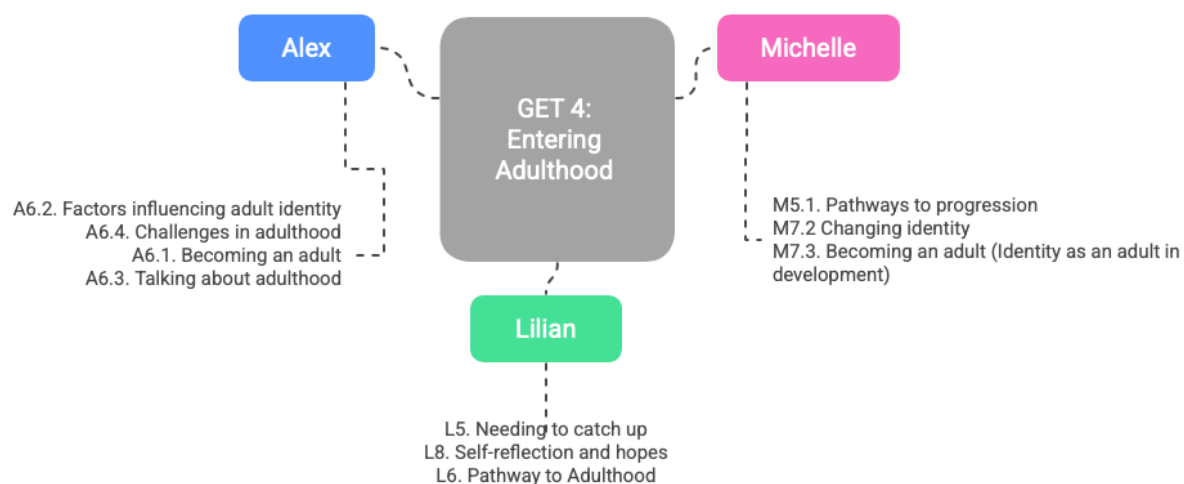
4.2.4.1 Transitioning from AP to Adulthood.

Each participant highlighted the ongoing nature of their journey to adulthood. The complexity and uncertainty of navigating this transitional period were themes that emerged across each narrative, though participants seem to have constructed their meanings of these in different ways.

Alex explained that he felt he could reflect on the process, as he *"left there **well** rather than negatively, I left there **positively** so it was (pause) it was pretty much just something that I just felt like a normal school kid leaving school."* (p. 1). This suggests a positive experience of closure for Alex, as he was successful in overcoming the limitations of the setting. This lends to an assumption that if Alex had faced negative outcomes, he would perceive this as a personal failure to reach his full potential.

He explained how his experience of AP contributed to his maturing from a young age, indicating how this enabled him to adopt a positive mindset and strive for a more positive future. He also highlighted the significance of his alternative education experience in AP, as he reflected on how his transition might have been more challenging if he had returned to a mainstream setting instead of pursuing his passion in football:

*"whereas if - I do think there would have been **maybe** a blockage or possibly a (pause) **backtrack** if I was to go into sixth form or second-uh sixth form or college (pause) just because. (pause) Yeah just because I'm moving back into that sort of mainstream environment yeah so it could become a bit overwhelming"* (p. 31)

Through his narrative, Alex seemed to indicate how AP facilitated his own personal growth, contributing to realising and reaching for his potential. He also highlighted how his various past experiences which extend beyond AP, had prepared him to manage the challenges he experienced in his transition to adulthood. In this way, Alex seemed to illustrate how his varied experiences shaped his mindset, subsequently shaping his identity as a young person prepared to navigate adulthood:

"unique because- I feel like I've experienced that every sort of scenario someone could probably come to me with I've probably experienced I'd say, in many different areas from young from when I'm older um as I've gone older um… in being in football, let downs, success, just different sort of things I feel like I've experienced so yeah" (p. 26)

Comparatively, in Michelle's account the theme of survival which was a thread running through her narrative once again emerged, as she described the end of her AP experience with a sense of release and relief: *"I was just like "it's actually **over**."*

Like I don't know why I was shocked…. I don't know what I expected, but I was just happy that it was over- that I could just be free." (p. 24). This links back to her likening AP to prison, and once again conflicts with the positive and preferable experience of AP that she has described. This sense of confliction is prominent for Michelle as she highlighted a sense of empathy for peers who were unable to escape the confines of negative constructions imposed upon AP: *"So it was- it was kind of **sad**, but I was also happy like. "ay I didn't end up like that." It was **sad**, like it was really sad"* (p. 27).

Through her narrative, Michelle seemed to highlight her perception of the binary split between transitional pathways, which she viewed as either right or wrong. This seemed to underpin her subtle judgment towards peers who were unable to separate themselves from the negativity perpetuated by the AP.

Lilian's transition from AP seemed to be explicitly defined by a need to catch up which persisted across her journey. She highlighted how this led to feelings of exhaustion from overcoming her post-16 challenges, which eventually led to a period of disengagement from learning, followed by a return to higher education fuelled by necessity. Through Lilian's narrative, she highlighted a mismatch between effort and outcome and demonstrated the significance of the resilience she developed across her journey, in navigating this transition. Unlike the goal-orientation of Michelle and Alex's transitions which spoke to escape and progression, Lilian's narrative appeared to illustrate the emotional weight of endurance through challenge and disadvantage.

4.2.3.1 Being an Adult

Where each participant seemed to convey the continuity of becoming an adult, there is a moment of convergence across each narrative where each

participant openly expressed that they did not identify wholly with the label of 'adult'. This was more explicit with Michelle who referred to herself as a *"young adult"* (p. 35) and Alex who explained that he was not the *"complete sort of picture in adulthood"* (p. 24). This suggests that both of their adult identities are still under construction.

Conversely, Lilian seemed to frame adulthood in comparison to her peers, particularly regarding the milestones met during this life stage. What seemed to come through for Lilian, who is the oldest of the three participants, was a quiet sense of inadequacy as she accepts differences in adult pathway:

"I think the 20s and your 30s or this-this whole weird phase (pause) It's-it's different for everyone. (pause) Like some people are married and having kids (pause) and then other people are really striving in their career path or education, whatever they're doing (pause) Some people have it all. Some people are doing it all at once. I take my hat off to them because couldn't be me, (laugh) but (pause)" (p. 32)

Here, Lilian seemed to be making the effort to reframe her perceptions of her journey as being delayed, as she resists the pressure she feels to catch up to her peers and *"have it all"* (p. 32). This suggests an ongoing construction of her self-worth as it relates to her adult identity.

Alex also seemed to frame his journey to adulthood in comparison to his AP peers, highlighting that he received *"the good end of the stick"* (p. 30), by having the opportunity to pursue his passion in football. However, Alex also described the pressures of adulthood that he had experienced and also how he anticipates that these may impact him:

*"laugh) A lot of **responsibilities**, a lot of **change**, a lot of change in terms of (pause). People expect **more** from you the older you get so then- so then*

*having that sort of pressure **can** also allow you to do well but then it can also allow you to do bad (pause) so I feel because (pause) that early change of mindset happened very early on it did allow me to (pause) easily move into adulthood I'd say"* (p. 23)

Both Alex and Michelle presented their religion as a supportive factor in navigating this stage of life, with Alex explaining that *"it's only by the grace I'd say that I'm-I'm handling it well **so far**"* (p. 25). While Michelle explained that church gave her "*structure*" (p. 37) and "*peace of mind"* (p. 37). Here both participants seem to highlight that adulthood is a stage where their strength and resilience have been tested, and they have acquired additional strategies to navigate the stage 'well'. For both Alex and Michelle, religion seems to represent a framework which enables continued survival in adulthood. Lilian similarly implies that her resilience and strength have been tested in adulthood throughout her narrative. However, Lilian extended these ideas as she presents adulthood as a layered journey, as opposed to a destination.

4.3 Chapter Summary

These findings illustrate the complex lived experiences of three young adults who completed secondary education in an AP and have navigated their journey into adulthood. While these stories highlight the uniqueness of each participant's journey, there are key points of convergence highlighted through the GETs, which contribute to a broader understanding of transitioning from AP to adulthood. The PETs from participants' accounts demonstrate a multilayered process of meaning making, as participants construed their identities in the face of educational disruption, challenging environments, and stigmatising social constructions. The foundational beliefs and value systems which have shaped participants' understanding of their

experiences are highlighted, and it is notable how self, society and binary

perceptions of progression stand out as influential factors.

This data both challenges and reflects the national context that AP leavers

exist in (DfE, 2017), indicating the barriers and facilitators these participants have

experienced in progressing to further education, employment or training. Aligning

with previous research, participants indicate protective factors such as relationships,

resilience, and a fostered sense of agency as facilitators of their positive experiences

in AP and outcomes as AP leavers (Atkinson & Rowley, 2019; Cockerill, 2019;

Hamilton & Morgan, 2018; Malcolm, 2015). However, Alex and Michelle also

introduced their religion as a meaningful resource, as they navigated the transitional

period.

The idea of adulthood being an ongoing process is a central theme across

this data. Each participant highlighted how it is marked by an experience of surviving

systemic injustice as well as challenges to their newly constructed identities.

Comparison to peers emerged as an evaluative mechanism through which

participants explored the success of their journeys, particularly for Lilian who came to

accept the inconsistent nature of her journey and outcomes in comparison to her

peers. Through their use of language, tone and hesitations, participants highlight the

effort of taking control of their narratives in defiance of deficit-based assumptions.

5. Discussion

The findings from this study reveal the complex and at times conflicting nature of participants' stories, with the PETs and GETs illustrating their adaptive process of identity construction as they challenged deficit-based assumptions. This chapter seeks to explore the learning from these findings as they pertain to the study's aims. As they have been termed by Smith (2011), key 'gems' (p. 7) which stand out from the data will be explored in relation to the research question:

"What can we learn from the experiences of young people who have transitioned to adulthood from an alternative provision?"

These 'gems' (Smith, 2011 p. 7) are described as compelling and meaningful moments in the data, which enable rich explorations of the phenomenon being explored. They are categorised as shining, suggestive, or secret, depending on the extent to which participants appear to be aware of the meaning and the depth of interpretation required to uncover them through use of the hermeneutic circle. In this chapter, uncovered gems will be analysed, considering how they are situated within the existing literature surrounding AP pupils and their outcomes. This analysis is guided by the aims of this research, to understand the experiences of young people who have completed secondary education in an AP and since transitioned to adulthood, and to consider how this understanding can shape the EP role in supporting young people aged 16 to 25.

This chapter will conclude with an exploration of the strengths and limitations of the present study, as well as considerations of directions for future research in this area. A reflective account of the learning obtained in relation to the researcher's positioning will also be presented, as well as an outline of the dissemination strategy.

5.1 Exploring Gems in the Data

5.1.1 Constructing Meanings

The idiographic nature of IPA enabled an in-depth exploration of each participant's meaning making process regarding their lived experiences within and after AP. Each participant held unique perceptions of how their experiences had contributed to shaping their journeys as AP leavers, though they did not seem to be consciously aware of these. These seemed to stand out as secret gems based on the definition by Smith (2011). Interestingly, these seemed to be implicitly influenced by three key epistemological worldviews, even though participants did not explicitly align themselves with these. A form of realism came through in the binary ways participants made sense of their progressional experience, while social constructivism seemed to be evident in participants personal reflections and self-conceptualisations (Burr, 2024; Willig, 2016). Additionally, though social constructions seemed to have a macro level influence as societal assumption and discourses shaped participants experiences of AP, the influence of these interpersonal interactions at the micro level was also observable (Burr, 2024). Thus, although the present study takes a social constructivist epistemological positioning, each individual appeared to construct their understanding in line with different positions. These ideas are grounded in the argument that subjective realities represent the core reality for the individual, suggesting an interaction between realist and relativist understandings (Charmaz, 2000; Willig, 2016).

5.1.1.1 Sense Making as an Aspect of Development.

Of the three participants, Michelle's account seemed to be most strongly shaped by a social constructionist lens, although this lens was also observed to have some influence in Lilian's narrative. These participants presented a critical

awareness of narratives surrounding AP in mainstream settings and wider social and cultural spaces. They highlighted the impact these had on their sense making and perceptions of success in the transition to adulthood. This aligns with findings from existing research which highlight how attitudes towards AP in mainstream schools and the wider community influence the schooling experience and outcomes of AP leavers (Dance, 2022; Hamilton & Morgan, 2018; Malcolm, 2015; Trotman et al., 2015).

As Michelle's story progressed, she began to highlight her growing sense of agency through the choices she made in her journey. This aligns with existing research which has highlighted how AP fosters student agency (Atkinson & Rowley, 2019; Hamilton & Morgan, 2018). Michelle seemed to credit both her lived experiences as she engaged with the AP environment, while also recognising the significance of her familial values in developing her sense of autonomy regarding her education and post-16 progression. While she acknowledged the role of the members of her community in shaping her journey, her narrative appeared to shift towards a more social constructivist perspective. This illustrates how her understanding seemed to evolve, through personal reflection and engagement with her environment.

However, aspects of Michelle's account also seemed to reflect some realist assumptions, as she presented her binary view of 'right' or 'wrong' in post-16 progression. This is illustrative of the theory that the process of meaning making is an overlap of multiple and sometimes contrasting ways of understanding the world (Willig, 2016). For Michelle, this overlap points to an idea that there are 'right' and 'wrong' paths to adulthood and even though wider society expects AP leavers to go down the 'wrong' path, through her choices she was able to pursue the 'right' path.

This intersection is similarly presented through Lilian's narrative, whose earlier sense-making seemed to reflect a more realist framing, as she presented her idealised correlation between effort and outcome. At first, Lilian's narrative seemed to reflect dominant mainstream education expectations about the association between engagement, attainment and achievement (Putwain et al., 2019). However, this belief is later juxtaposed by her experience of stigmatisation and inadvertently obtaining partial qualifications, which revealed the disadvantaged position she was in an AP leaver. As Lilian reflected on her transitionary experiences, she seemed to realise the influence of systemic inequity on her progression trajectory. Thus, the role of social constructions about AP leavers appeared to gain increasing power throughout her narrative, as she highlighted how society's response to these created barriers to her progression. From here, Lilian seemed to shift towards a personal construction of success in adulthood, as she recognised the subjectivity of this stage.

The fluidity of both Michelle's and Lilian's meaning-making, suggests the necessity for individuals to have an adaptive understanding of their transitional journey. This fostered empathy and self-compassion for them, which has been found to be a predictor of success in post-16 transitions (Kroshus et al., 2021). For Lilian and Michelle, shifting from externally constructed notions of truth to a more critical and subjective understanding, enabled them to challenge deficit-based assumptions of AP leavers through their lived experiences. This reflects a developmental model of personal meaning making, which argues that primary assumptions about truth can evolve in response to validating and invalidating life experiences (Botella & Gallifa, 1995). This seems to challenge arguments which question the developmental nature of transitioning to adulthood (Côté, 2014). Said arguments are rooted in the idea that the concept of "emerging adulthood" as a developmental stage (Arnett, 2000 p. 469),

overlooks the role of variables such as structural and socio-cultural constraints in shaping young people's transitionary experiences, implying equal opportunity for identity exploration (Côté, 2014).

Both Michelle's and Lilian's narratives suggest an internal shift in how they understand themselves, their past experiences and their future trajectories, which is based on the disadvantage and stigmatisation they have faced. This aligns with existing ideas that sense-making in the process of development, can lead to a broader reorientation of self in relation to their past experiences and hopes for their future (Tanner et al., 2008). This suggests a non-traditional course of understanding self in the context of adversity, shaped by the process of making sense of their lived experiences. As such, their narratives highlight both inequity in the experience of transitioning to adulthood for AP leavers due to systemic and societal expectations, as well as the diversity of meaning-making processes which shape how transitions are understood and navigated.

Alex's narrative further emphasises the diversity of the meaning-making process, as his story appeared to be more grounded in a primarily social constructivist worldview compared to Lilian and Michelle. He framed the difficulties he had experienced throughout his journey in relation to his mindset and the belief that he had personally shaped his own path through his choices. This points to the existence of a strong internal locus of control (Rotter, 1966), which acted as a stabilising structure providing reassurance through his journey by reinforcing his sense of agency. This aligns with research which highlights the relationship between an internal locus of control, and a stronger sense of personal meaning for young adults (Singh & Choudhri, 2014). The empowering nature of agency and control in

one's academic journey has also been highlighted in the literature surrounding AP (Atkinson & Rowley, 2019; Hamilton & Morgan, 2018; Owen et al., 2021).

These participants narratives illustrate the variable process of meaning-making, reflecting the influence of personal, cultural, and systemic influences on their understanding of their lived experiences. This seemed to influence their constructions of identity during the process of transitioning from AP to adulthood. The findings from this study build on Coté's (2014) nuanced critique of Arnett's (2000 p. 469) concept of "emerging adulthood", by illustrating that developmental progression in the transition to adulthood may vary between identity exploration and transformation, or alternatively may appear as stability and consistency in the face of adversity. This is dependent on how the individuals understands their experiences. Recognition of the complexity and difference in this process of understanding has significant implications for professionals supporting young people in this stage between adolescence and adulthood.

5.1.1.2 Social Comparison as a Meaning Making Tool.

The participants seemed to draw on social comparison as part of their meaning-making processes, as they framed their progression to adulthood in relation to peers. This seemingly emerged as subtle reflections regarding their success and 'rightness' in their path to adulthood, indicating how they positioned themselves in relation to their social contexts. Research correspondingly highlights the powerful influence that social comparison can have on self-conceptualisation during adolescence (Van Der Aar et al., 2018), highlighting the scope of social comparison in the meaning-making process during this transitionary period.

For Michelle, this appeared to support an increased sense of self-efficacy, as she contrasted her experiences to those of peers who she perceived to have taken

the 'wrong' path. Though this was laced with both empathy and subtle judgement, she seemed to use peers as an external reference point against which she measured her own pride in her journey. This aligns with research highlighting that social comparison plays a key role in adolescent decision-making processes, with peers serving as a frame of reference (Crone & Fuligni, 2020; Silva, 2012). Michelle reflected on how her intentional choices, familial values and experiences before and during AP had shaped her path to adulthood.

Similarly, Alex positioned his narrative as one shaped by resilience and agency, using social comparison as a tool to highlight his self-determination to achieve success in adulthood. Empathy and relatedness came through in his narrative, as he acknowledged the possibility of negative outcomes for himself and the reality of this for his peers in AP. However, through his sense of agency he described being able to shape a path that avoided these outcomes. In this way social comparison acted to reinforce Alex's belief in his sense of control over his journey.

Comparatively for Lilian, social comparison seemed to foster feelings of inadequacy, as she highlighted the differences between her journey and that of peers she perceived to be in a better position than her. This seemed to underpin a significant theme in Lilian's early reflections, of having to 'catch up' to peers in her transition to adulthood. She highlighted the various types of success that imagined others may have, which included some people pursuing careers or higher education, while others pursued marriage, and a select few who did it all at once. This points to the continuing impact of social comparison which continues to influence self-evaluation even after adolescence (Crone & Fuligni, 2020; Van der Aar et al., 2018). What seemed to emerge for Lilian was a sense of distance from her peers in general, rooted in her perceived limitations.

For these participants, social comparison seemed to act in a validating and defensive function, while also signalling instability, uncertainty and relative success in adulthood. This aligns with research which has highlighted that constructions of aspiration in adulthood are subjectively shaped and reinforced through relationships with peers and family (Macmillan, 2006). For Lilian this seemed to explain her perception of being behind in her journey, as she observed other similarly aged young people to be more successful. While for Alex and Michelle comparison seemed to substantiate their perception of doing well, and potentially experiencing some luck in comparison to their peers in the AP context. All participants seemed to use social comparison as a tool to highlight the role of systemic disadvantage for themselves and their peers, whilst also highlighting their achievement and personal growth despite this. This appeared to contribute to their understanding of success in their progression, supporting the argument that conceptualisations of truth and meaning making are layered and contextually shaped (Willig, 2016).

5.1.2 Adulthood as an Ongoing Process

Across each participants' narrative, adulthood seemed to be positioned as a process of becoming. This emerged as a "shining gem" (Smith, 2011 p. 11), as participants seemed to be highly aware of making this point. This is notable as each participant is at a different stage of the transition. Michelle seemingly spoke from an early stage at 18 years old, while Alex and Lilian appear to be in much later stages at 22 and 26 years old respectively. However, all three participants seemed to suggest that the stage of adulthood they were in, was an ambiguous period where their life trajectory was still being established. This aligns with existing research which highlights differences in perceptions of adulthood during different developmental stages (Gurba, 2008). What seems to surface across the literature surrounding the

transition to adulthood, is that becoming an adult is a process negotiated through subjective experiences, increased autonomy, and uncertainty (Gurba, 2008; Macmillan, 2006; Silva, 2012). For the participants in the present study, the concept of adulthood appeared to be fluid, shaped by their lived experiences. This reinforces the idea of early adulthood as an evolving process rather than a stage (Sawyer et al., 2018).

5.1.2.1 Ambivalence Towards the 'AP Leaver' Identity.

One factor that appeared to influence participants ongoing constructions of adulthood, was their sense making in relation to attending AP. Although none of the participants used the term 'AP leaver', this seemed to come through as an aspect of each of their identities. For Michelle, there seemed to be a conflicting experience of pride at surviving AP. This idea of survival was also present for Alex who emphasised his efforts to overcome the negativity of his setting, and for Lilian who attempted to distance herself from what she recalled as a chaotic experience. However, for all participants there was a sense of contradiction regarding their AP experience and how this had shaped their journey to adulthood.

Existing research has critiqued AP's effectiveness at preparing pupils for adulthood by dually offering tailored SEMH support, while facilitating meaningful academic attainment (Malcolm, 2020). This is evident for Lilian especially, who highlighted the contradiction between the personalised support she received in preparation for her GCSEs, compared to the partial qualifications she was left to navigate her post-16 transition with. Alex also seemed to anticipate challenges navigating his post-16 transition in mainstream spaces, as these were unlikely to replicate the personalised support he had received while in AP. This reflects a wider theme of contradiction for these participants which has been illustrated in the

literature base. While their AP experiences fostered an increased awareness of self and the supports they would need to succeed, this did not necessarily equip them for the structural demands and expectations of post-16 spaces, especially when these resembled the mainstream spaces they had been excluded from (Hamilton & Morgan, 2018; Malcolm, 2015; 2020).

Nonetheless, participants did reflect on their nurturing experiences in AP. For Michelle and Lilian, relationships with staff were central to this experience as both highlighted the moments where they felt supported, understood and emotionally contained. This aligns with research which emphasises the critical role of relationships within AP settings (Cockerill, 2019; Dance, 2022; Facey et al., 2020; Malcolm, 2015). This is found to be significant in fostering a sense of belonging regarding both staff and student relationships (Cockerill, 2019; Trotman et al., 2015). Michelle and Alex especially highlighted the collective experience of AP which they shared with their fellow peers, even as they reflected on how their paths differed. Through their narratives, each participant seemed to reinforce existing findings which recognise AP as a dynamic space that fluctuates between positive and negative emotions (Blyth, 2021). However, the participants perceptions of AP as a containing space, were eclipsed by the concept of incarceration which emerged in their narratives in various ways. Prison seemed to act as a symbol which spoke to ongoing stigmatisation, poor expectations, and internalised threat regarding their AP experiences. These ideas echo those within the literature which reflect an experience of social exclusion and implicit expectations of failure around the outcomes for pupils who access AP (Dance, 2022; Malcolm, 2015).

The participants associations with prison reflect an internalised sense of social exclusion, which seems to contribute to a tension in identifying with this idea of

being an AP leaver. Thus, their narratives seem to be constructed to resist the assumptions of failure or minimised potential that can be associated with attending AP. This suggests a continuation of identity construction that is maintained through early adulthood. This reflects findings from existing research which highlight AP leavers resistance to the lasting impact of marginalisation (Malcolm, 2015), illustrating how these participants are actively negotiating how their AP experiences fit into their emerging identities. This emphasises the idea that adulthood is an ongoing process shaped by reflection and redefinition (Gurba, 2008; Macmillan, 2006; Silva, 2012).

5.1.3 Protective Factors in the Transition to Adulthood

As participants constructed meanings from their experiences, five key protective factors emerged alongside the various barriers and challenges they faced in the transition from AP to adulthood. These emerged as suggestive gems (Smith, 2011), appearing to play a significant role in their identity construction in the midst of uncertainty and instability. These surfaced less obviously than the previous shining gem, but more explicitly than the aforementioned secret gem, requiring iterative interpretive work (Smith, 2011; Smith et al., 2022).

Figure 10

Protective Factors

Protective Factors

Personal Agency and Autonomy

Hope and Resilience: Reconstruction of Self in Adulthood

Faith and Belief Systems

Identity Development as a Protective Factor

The Protective Power of Relational Safety in AP
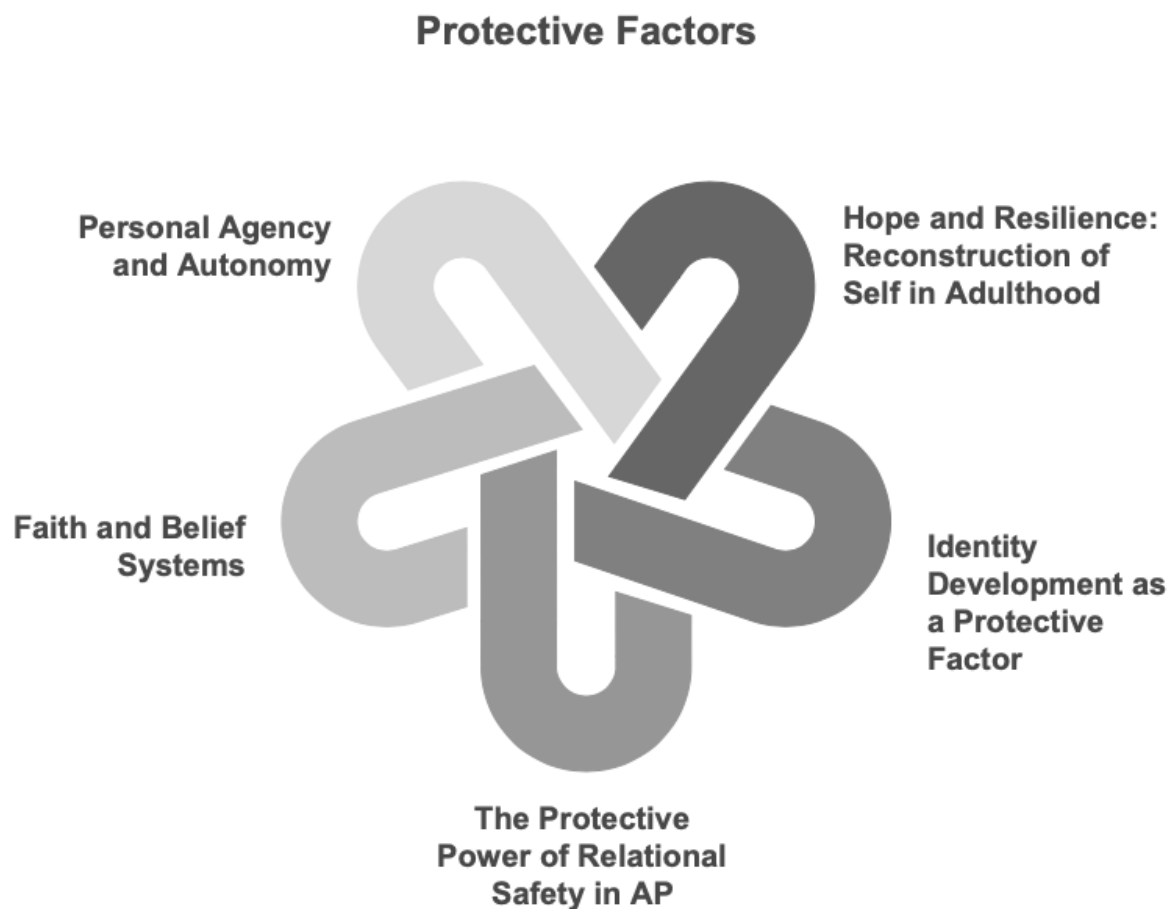
5.1.3.1 Hope and Resilience: Reconstruction of Self in Adulthood

In line with research exploring resilience as a form of coping with transitioning to early adulthood, hope and resilience seemed to develop for participants as an adaptive response to their lived experiences of systemic challenges and stigmatisation (Leipold et al., 2019). These qualities appeared to emerge over time for these participants, and were shaped by their efforts to manage the instability and uncertainty they experienced in the transition from AP to adulthood (Matud et al., 2020). This also appeared to be linked to their conceptualisations of self and identity, aligning with research suggesting that an increased self-concept can reduce psychological distress (Schiller et al., 2016). This illustrates how self-concept and

personal development can be influenced by a complex interaction between the individual and their interconnected systems around them (Bronfenbrenner, 1979).

Furthermore, Alex, Lilian and Michelle respectively referenced AP staff's belief in their capacity for growth, achievement, and emotional regulation, as valuable in developing their sense of competence and hope for their futures. This reflects findings which highlight the significance of relatedness in developing resilience and autonomy around post-16 progression for AP leavers (Hamilton & Morgan, 2018).

All three participants seemed to accept the ongoing nature of transitioning to adulthood, as they recognised that the process was shaped by their internal growth in the face of their experiences. Therefore, hope seemed to shape participants sense of direction, while resilience reflected their sense of competence and capability. These traits did not appear to be fixed, but rather evolving from the participants efforts to navigate and understand their lived experiences.

5.1.3.2 Identity Development as a Protective Factor

Building upon these ideas of the developing traits of resilience and hope, participants' narratives seemed to reveal the protective function of identity construction more generally, in navigating early adulthood. This appeared to act defensively against social stigmatisation, as each participant seemed to reframe their journey to distance themselves from the deficit-based narratives surrounding AP students. For Alex and Michelle, this involved separating their choices and values from those of peers who they felt were consumed by the negative behaviours and limited aspirations expected of AP pupils. Although this suggests internalisation of the stigma surrounding their circumstances (Dance, 2022), this also seems to be a strategy implicitly applied by participants to facilitate their personal growth and autonomy, providing control over how they were perceived.

In response to experiences of social exclusion and academic disadvantage, identity reconstruction seemed to enable participants to work toward more positive, empowered and self-defined futures. In this way, their narratives suggest that resilience and perseverance seemed to be outcomes of their experiences which became vital aspects of their identities, instead of primarily being responses to their challenges. This aligns with existing research which has suggested that individuals tend to prioritise self-development and autonomy in their constructions of adulthood, particularly when overcoming adversity (Macmillan, 2006; Silva, 2012). The role of social comparison is also relevant here, the self-evaluative function of which has also been highlighted in recent research for its significance in constructing a sense of identity (Johnston & Nolty, 2023). For these participants, comparison to peers seemed to act as a lens through which they were able to experience contrast and motivation. Thus, it can be argued that focusing on their identity development acted as a protective mechanism for these participants, equipping them with the skills and aspiration necessary for their transition to adulthood while enabling them to resist stigmatising narratives.

5.1.3.3 The Protective Power of Relational Safety in AP

Participants in the present study highlighted the value of their relationships with staff in AP, which offered a sense of relational safety. This was in contrast to their experiences in mainstream settings, which were lacking in emotional support and academic validation. For Michelle, relationships with staff in AP were foundational for her in understanding her emotional experiences, and the support she needed to manage them. For Lilian, having her effort recognised by staff in AP allowed her to feel seen for her academic potential. While Alex similarly indicated that being believed in fostered his recognition of his own potential. This highlights the

psychological validation that came from these relationships, nurturing these participants sense of competence, which research has found to enable success in post-16 transition (Hamilton & Morgan, 2018).

As research highlights that many students who access AP have already experienced relational disruptions and instability within mainstream (Atkinson & Rowley, 2019; Cockerill, 2019; Hamilton & Morgan, 2018), the relational safety they described in AP seems especially significant. This appeared to have a restorative effect for participants in the present study, who described feelings of fear and uncertainty in the initial stages of their AP experience, stemming from their experiences within their previous mainstream schools. This aligns with findings from previous research which suggest that some pupils who enter AP are coming from mainstream settings where they have experienced lack of peer and adult allies, and thus value the socially alternative space that AP represents (Facey et al., 2020; Malcolm et al., 2015). These experiences can be considered through the lens of attachment theory, which emphasises the significance of secure and trusting relationships during development (Ainsworth, 2006; Bowlby, 1979). In the context of the present study relational safety in AP seemed to offer participants a form of relational repair after their disrupted connections in mainstream settings. This demonstrates a restorative function of relationships for these participants, as they fostered a renewed motivation to engage with learning and created space for self-reflection and development.

The significance of this experience of relational safety for these participants speaks to wider critiques of mainstream schooling. From a socialist perspective, Malcolm (2015) argues that mainstream settings tend to be structured around middle-class norms of conformity and competition, unequally positioning pupils who

deviate from these norms as inferior and unsuccessful. This idea seems to relate to social stereotypes surrounding pupils who access AP (Dance, 2022; Malcolm, 2015). Thus, findings from the present study support the significance of the relational focus of AP, particularly in countering experiences of social exclusion and disconnection associated with accessing the setting (Atkinson & Rowley, 2019; Dance, 2022; Hamilton & Morgan, 2018; Malcolm, 2015). This aligns with Self-Determination Theory which posits that relatedness is a core psychological need (Deci & Ryan, 2000). Here, it seemed to offer participants a sense of inclusion, belonging and validation that was missing from their previous experiences, which positively contributed to their constructions of self.

5.1.3.4 Faith and Belief Systems

Belief systems are understood to be a variable factor in early adulthood, which contribute to the decision-making process and well-being of many young adults (Arnett, 2000; 2007). In the present study, these factors appear to act as a stabilising structure during the transition to adulthood. Alex and Michelle explicitly referenced their religion as a source of strength, offering them structure and hope as they navigate their ongoing journeys from AP to adulthood. While Lilian did not reference religion explicitly, she similarly referenced an internal belief in herself, which seemed to act as a guiding framework through the challenges she faced.

Through each of their narratives, these belief systems seemed to act as a protective anchor, enabling participants to navigate the uncertainty and emotional instability of the post-16 period, whilst sustaining hope that things would work out positively in the end. This aligns with developmental theories, which suggest that belief systems contribute to identity formation and meaning making in adolescence and adulthood (Arnett, 2023; Erikson, 1956).

Research also highlights that life events such as entering employment or moving out of the family home influence the development of belief systems (Botella & Gallifa, 1995; Gutierrez & Park, 2015). This appears to reign true for Lilian especially, whose belief system seems to be solidified by her experiences of progression and success despite her challenges. Therefore, it can be argued that belief systems enabled participants to lean into their sense of competence and resilience as they reframed their experiences of disadvantage and stigmatisation. This seemed to facilitate a sense of optimism as they navigated the ongoing complexities of adulthood.

5.1.3.5 Personal Agency and Autonomy

As participants articulated their experience of the transition to adulthood being subjective and continuous, the significance of personal agency and autonomy emerged as a key theme that cuts across all themes discussed in this chapter. These concepts seemed to play a protective role by strengthening participants capacity to navigate the transition with increased control and direction, despite ongoing uncertainty. This also contributed to a sense of possibility for their futures, and aligns with findings suggesting that young people understand adulthood to involve becoming self-sufficient (Arnett, 2000). This is also a recurrent theme across the literature surrounding AP, which highlights the value students place on personal agency and autonomy, and how these are often fostered in AP (Atkinson & Rowley, 2019; Cockerill, 2019; Hamilton & Morgan, 2018; Malcolm, 2015 Trotman et al., 2015).

The protective nature of agency and autonomy is further supported by research highlighting their role in empowering young adults (Mouchrek & Benson, 2023). For participants in the present study, developing these qualities supported a

sense of authorship over their journeys. This appeared to act as a mechanism for survival, enabling them to actively make the choice to deviate from the expectations imposed on them as AP leavers.

5.1.3.6 Summary of Protective Factors

The protective factors identified from participants' narratives appeared to be central to how they made sense of their lived experiences, enabling them to navigate social exclusion, academic disadvantage, and ongoing uncertainty. These offered emotional grounding, direction, and motivation for participants in their journeys. It is also notable that these factors were interrelated, contributing to participants evolving sense of self in their journey to adulthood. For instance, relational safety appeared to nurture the development of hope and resilience; identity development was shaped by autonomy and personal agency; and each of these was further strengthened by individual belief systems.

Recognition of these factors, alongside the themes presented in this chapter thus far, reflect IPA's idiographic and hermeneutic commitment in the process of analysis. These findings are presented as meaningful and related phenomena, offering valuable considerations for the EP role in supporting AP leavers.

5.2 Implications for EP Practice

The interpretative findings of this study illustrate how the transition to adulthood is a complex and ongoing process, experienced as relational and identity shaping for AP leavers. Though this study focuses on the individual meaning-making of three participants, the findings highlight a pattern across their narratives, that developing into an adult is shaped by an interaction between the individual and the multiple systems surrounding them (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). Participants highlighted how their experiences of AP were shaped by societal norms and expectations,

indicating how this influenced their developmental trajectory. The learning obtained from their experiences points to possibilities for the EP role in meaningfully supporting other young people in a similar context.

Existing literature highlights the relevance of the EP role in AP at a systemic level, particularly in relation to staff training, consultation, supervision, and facilitation of inclusive and collaborative practice (Blyth, 2021; Gray et al., 2022; Greenhalgh et al., 2020). These considerations seem to recognise the protective function of meaningful support from appropriately skilled staff for students in these settings. However, the potential for the EP role as young people progress beyond AP seems to be less defined. This gap feels especially significant, as findings from both the present study and wider literature highlight the risk of vulnerability and disconnection from society when young people lose access to the tailored supports they are accustomed to receiving in AP (Cockerill, 2019; Facey et al., 2020; Malcolm, 2015; Trotman et al., 2015).

The findings from the present study highlight the capacity for responsive and proactive EP contributions with AP leavers aged 16 to 25, which extends beyond the academic context. This includes broader systemic work alongside direct work with individuals, and suggests scope to explore how the EP role might extend into community contexts to support the systems that shape and sustain young people's self-determined belief systems. These considerations appear to be well placed alongside initiatives such as the Preparation for Adulthood programme, which has directed the EP role with young people in this age range to include considerations in areas such as further education, employment, and community participation (Preparing for Adulthood, 2013; Atkinson et al., 2015). These implications will be explored in greater depth in the following sections.

5.2.1 Post-16 Planning

Research has indicated that in the absence of structured post-16 pathways, AP leavers have an increased risk of experiencing social isolation and economic disadvantage (Dance, 2022). This highlights the significance of preparatory support for AP leavers, suggesting that the EP role with AP leavers aged 18 to 25 should begin before they complete secondary education. Though existing literature points to a role of the EP in supporting young people who have an increased likelihood of becoming disengaged from further education, employment, or training (Currie & Goodall, 2009; Gabriel, 2015), these ideas rarely consider AP students specifically. For these young people, disengagement can be directly influenced by the outcomes and stigmas associated with attending AP (Cockerill, 2019; Dance, 2022; Hamilton & Morgan, 2018).

For the participants in the present study, planning around the post-16 transition appeared very different. Alex implied that he was supported to pursue his interest in football, while Michelle explained that she was supported to explore her options for college or sixth form education, but Lilian described a lack of transparency around her transition. This aligns with existing research which highlights inconsistency in preparations for the post-16 transition for AP leavers (Malcolm, 2020). This reflects a broader systemic challenge which is intensified by factors such as the inconsistent structuring of APs, the temporary nature of some AP placements, and the impact of stigmatising social constructs (Cockerill, 2019; Malcolm, 2020; Facey et al., 2020). Thus, the findings from the present study build upon existing literature, highlighting the need for a more structured, transparent, and collaborative approach to planning for AP leavers.

Building on national and legislative guidance (Children and Families Act, 2015; SEND Code of Practice, 2015), EPs appear to be well positioned to support post-16 planning by facilitating psychologically informed, collaborative practice with the systems around the young person. This type of practice is exemplified in the study by Gray et al., (2022), which illustrated the benefits of using person centred planning tools such as the MAPs framework to support young people and those supporting them to work together around their educational planning. This could also involve the use of narrative approaches, personal construct psychology methods, or dialectic frameworks which centre the young person's meaning-making processes around adulthood (Kelly, 1955; Pasupathi, 2001; Vinnie, 1992). These have the potential to identify and reinforce protective factors in the transition process, such as those identified in the present study, grounding support in the young person's lived experiences and evolving self-concept. This is supported by research which highlights that guiding young people through meaning making in times of uncertainty, is crucial in mitigating psychological distress and continuing self-conceptualisation for young adults (Zambelli & Tagliabue, 2023). This implies a role for EPs in providing indirect support for AP leavers, by supporting and upskilling those who support them in the use of participatory and constructivist tools to prepare for the post-16 transition.

However, as illustrated by Lilian's narrative, there is a necessity for transparency in the transition planning process. For Lilian, the lack of this contributed to lasting feelings of inadequacy and social exclusion. More broadly, the findings from this study demonstrate that participants' meaning making around their lived experiences was critical in shaping their development, and the direction of their life course in the transition to adulthood. This suggests that the use of these tools will

need to move beyond tokenistic identification of aspirations, instead exploring how young people's meaning making around their lived experiences shape their perceptions of what is desirable, possible, and achievable. This should acknowledge that the potentially contrasting meaning-making process that young people engage in, are essential to supporting their critical awareness around the transition to adulthood (Willig, 2016). Thus, the EP role in this context seems relevant at a jointly systemic and individual level, in order to facilitate psychologically attuned practice, which scaffolds the construction of consistently stable pathways and support post-16 trajectories for AP leavers.

Frameworks such as the Ladder of Participation offer a useful starting point for considerations of practice that is inclusive of young people, as they encourage a shift from tokenistic involvement to genuine collaboration (Hart, 1992). While Hart (2008) later critiqued the framework for oversimplifying the unrealistic transfer of power to children, this feels appropriate for AP leavers as they are in the process of becoming adults. These young people are in the process of constructing their identities, often in the face of systemic and personal challenges, with the potential for significant uncertainty in the future. Therefore, inclusive transition planning should go beyond asking what the next steps are or exploring manualised and idealised transition processes, to exploring how young people understand the world around them and how they can be supported to navigate adulthood with their worldview. In this way, young people can be supported to become experts in themselves, as they become confident in their understanding of their individual needs. This is supported by research which links agency for young people in their own pathway planning, with an increased chance of successful transition outcomes being maintained (Bason, 2012). Furthermore, this aligns with self-determination theory, which has emerged in

the literature surrounding AP, and helps to articulate the significance of autonomy, competence, and relatedness in supporting sustainable success in the transition for AP leavers (Deci & Ryan, 2000; Hamilton & Morgan, 2018).

5.2.1 EP Involvement in Early Adulthood

For the participants in the present study, the conceptualisation of self in relation to the wider world seemed to occur over time as they progressed into adulthood. For instance, Alex reflected on his realisation that mainstream systems were not an ideal fit for him, acknowledging that returning to such environments after AP might have disrupted his progress. This aligns with developmental theories which suggest that constructions of self and identity continue well into adulthood (Arnett, 2000; Gurba, 2008; Sawyer et al., 2018). Thus, while EP involvement for young people transitioning to adulthood can begin before they turn 16, the findings from the present study highlight the scope for this to continue into early adulthood.

Supporting young people who are above school leaving age in the UK requires meaningful connections with a wide range of services, including further education providers, adult services, and community-based supports (Atkinson et al., 2015; Morris & Atkinson, 2018; Newman, 2020). The findings from the present study highlight the potential for EPs to extend their contributions to these settings to support young people aged 16 to 25, particularly through the offer of targeted training. For instance, drawing on the findings from the study by Greenhalgh et al. (2020), this EP-led training could be aimed at enhancing the capacity of staff and members of the community to support young people with complex SEMH needs, possibly increasing the capacity of safe spaces for vulnerable young people who may be at risk of marginalisation (Dance, 2022; Malcolm, 2015).

The church emerged in this study as one such relevant community context. Alex and Michelle indicated a choice to access church as a safe space, describing its anchoring effect, which helped to build their belief systems and foster strength and resilience through their transitions. This seems to suggest a community-based context through which EPs can support young people between the age of 16-25. While there seems to be limited research around the EP role in these religious settings, one study highlights shared values between key members of the church and psychological practitioners, as important for the formation of effective and collaborative relationships (Benes et al., 2000). Though this may present a challenge as it limits the professionals who can work in this context, this same study highlights how tools such as needs assessments can facilitate dialogue and aid in facilitating effective collaboration between churches and psychology services (Benes et al., 2000). More broadly however, research illustrates the valuable role of EPs in providing training for services or organisations external to school settings, which support young people in the transition to adulthood (Morris, 2017).

This aligns with research suggesting that development and identity formation occur through active participation with the individual's culture and community (Packer & Goicoechea, 2000). The findings of the present study therefore indicate the value of equipping community figures with the skills and understanding to support meaning making and other developmental needs which emerge in the transition to adulthood. This could have particular benefits for AP students who have an increased likelihood of being disengaged from settings which are traditionally structured around expected mainstream trajectories (Hamilton & Morgan, 2018).

Participant narratives in the present study suggested that supportive structures felt most meaningful when they were self-directed, aligning with their own

values and needs. For instance, Alex and Michelle described their choice to engage with church, which they perceived to be supportive and affirmative. It has also been found that young people have reported having limited access to EP services (Newman, 2020), indicating the necessity for support to be accessible and responsive to young people's contexts. Therefore, by actively connecting with post-16 and community-based services, EPs can reduce gatekeeping around their services offering young people support that better aligns with their own perceptions of their needs and worldview (Atkinson et al., 2015; Birch et al., 2023; Cameron, 2006; Newman, 2020). Furthermore, increasing the contributions of the EP role at the community level has benefits for young people's sense of agency, which has been found to be critical for AP leavers (Atkinson & Rowley, 2019; Hamilton & Morgan, 2018; Owen et al., 2021). Allen-Coope's (2023) research, though focused on parental agency in the AP referral process, illustrates how limited access to information and strained relationships with professionals can act as structural barriers against the agency of individuals. This highlights how EPs are well positioned to facilitate access to information, as well as opportunities for genuine participation for AP leavers in shaping their journeys to adulthood.

5.2.3 Summary of Implications

The findings from this study highlight the scope for EPs to engage in relational, flexible and contextually grounded practice to support AP leavers in the transition to adulthood. This includes supporting post-16 planning through the use of psychological tools that centre the young person's evolving worldview, and extending EP contributions to post-school and community-based contexts. This suggests the scope for the EP role in this context at the individual, systemic, and community level, which fosters agency and autonomy while holding the complexities of each young

person's understanding of the developmental journey. Such approaches ensure the continuity of support as AP leavers navigate their potentially unequal journey to adulthood.

5.3 Strengths and Limitations

A strength of this study is the broad contribution it offers to this developing area of EP research. It adds to the currently limited research around the post-16 experiences of students who access AP, by exploring the lived experiences of three participants who have transitioned from AP to adulthood. Additionally, the study's design allowed for an in-depth, idiographic exploration of participants meaning making processes. This revealed the psychological resources and systemic factors that shaped their progressional trajectories, offering valuable insights into the scope for EPs to support young people in this context.

Limitations of this study also relate to the study's design. Where IPA prioritises depth of understanding over generalisability, these findings are not representative of the diverse young people who transition from AP to adulthood. Additionally, as there were only three participants, it can be argued that a larger and more varied sample might have allowed for a more systematic exploration of intersecting differences that might have influenced the transitional experience. Aspects of the individual such as cultural background, or differences in the meaning making process between differently gendered participants were not explicitly explored. This is particularly relevant in the face of critiques around emerging adulthood theories, which highlight how such differences influence outcomes when progressing to adulthood (Côté, 2014; Matud et al., 2020; Schulenberg & Schoon, 2012).

Another limitation is around the retrospective nature of participants narratives. While this illustrated developments in their meaning-making, there remains the issue

of memory distortion. However, it is arguable that meaning making is an inherently retrospective process and therefore this retrospective account articulates how participants construct their understanding over time (Lindberg et al., 2013)

5.4 Future Research

Future research in this area could build on the limitations of this study, by actively investigating the role of intersecting individual differences in shaping the transition to adulthood for AP leavers. This could include aspects such as socio-economic status, culture and identity, gender, and neurodiversity. This has the potential to illustrate how the transition is influenced by factors wider than social constructions and stigmatisation of AP. Future research could also be focused on developing and evaluating post-16 planning tools designed specifically for young people transitioning from AP to adulthood. These could be co-produced with young people themselves and informed by the themes identified in the present study, focusing on strengthening agency, transparent and realistic future oriented goal setting, and establishing individual protective factors such as relational safety. This would ensure relevance and accessibility for the young people they are targeted at.

Furthermore, there is scope for research in this area to capture the evolving transitional experience through a longitudinal methodological design. Such research could also explore the achievement of specific milestones for AP leavers, considering factors which have enabled these. This might include milestones such as securing employment, higher education opportunities, or independent housing.

Building on the considerations for the EP role in this context, it would also be useful for future studies to explore how EPs can connect with community and post-16 settings to support sustainable success in the transition. Research here would benefit from exploring models of community based psychological support, focused

around appreciating diversity and empowering members of the community

(Moritsugu et al., 2019).

5.5 Researcher Reflections

As a trainee EP within the age range of the period considered as emerging

adulthood (Arnett, 2000), reflexivity was key in conducting this research study. I

approached this study with an aim to amplify the voices and experiences of the

young people taking part. This meant holding in mind an awareness that my own

assumptions, shaped by professional training and personal experience, could impact

my interpretations of the findings. Therefore, as well as research supervision and

peer supervision, I utilised a reflective journal to think through and challenge my own

influence on this research. Excerpts from this can be found in appendix D.

Despite these structures, conducting this research had an emotional impact.

Listening to participants' narratives of stigmatisation, resilience, and identity

formation was incredibly moving, prompting me to reflect on my own practice with

young people in this context so far. Furthermore, in reflecting on the challenges I

experienced around recruitment, I now recognise the emotionally heavy request that

it was to ask participants to be open and vulnerable in sharing their transitional

experiences. As the participants who agreed to take part have now informed me,

asking young people in the throes of their transition to reflect on their experience has

the potential to be exposing. While this made me question the value of my research

at the time, I now reflect with gratitude on the time, energy and trust of these

participants who were willing to take part. This research has deepened my

understanding of theories around emerging adulthood; as well as my awareness of

challenges, protective factors, and stigmatisation surrounding pupils in the AP

context. This has encouraged my commitment to participatory, systemic, and community-based approaches in my role, which meet young people where they are.

5.6 Dissemination Strategy

This thesis will be adapted into a presentation and also a format that is accessible to a variety of readers. The presentation will be shared with the researcher's cohort of fellow trainee EPs, and also the educational psychology service where the researcher is currently on placement with the aim of informing local practice around supporting AP leavers through post-16 transition and progression to adulthood. An accessible summary will be developed of this study to capture each participant's narrative, and highlight how the learning from this can shape EP practice with future AP leavers. This summary will be presented in both text and visual format, for instance by developing the study into a one-page poster designed to be easily understood and engaging. The summary will then be shared with the participants of this study via email.

While this study has been informed by emancipatory principles which have meant that participants had autonomy over aspects of the research process, it is acknowledged that at this dissemination stage the researcher has ownership over the study and the findings. This means that participants will receive the findings without the opportunity to influence how these are interpreted or used at this stage. While each participant's narrative has been valued and respected, ultimately the researcher holds responsibility for how the findings are represented. This will be acknowledged transparently when sharing the summaries.

The accessible summaries of this research will also be shared with other interested individuals through various social media platforms. Finally, considerations

will be made around adapting this thesis to be considered for distribution through peer-reviewed academic journals and conferences.

5.7 Conclusion

The transition to adulthood was found to be ongoing and complex for the AP leavers who took part in this study. Through the use of an IPA methodology, this study has highlighted the intersecting and nuanced ways that these participants made sense of their experiences during this transition. They drew attention to the systemic and structural barriers they faced, their internal resolve in the process, and the various factors which contributed to their outcomes so far. These participants' experiences point to the significance of relational safety, as well as evolving constructions of self in relation to one's worldview. At times this involved a deliberate reframing of perceptions of success in adulthood.

The learning from these findings has shaped specific considerations for the EP role in this context, highlighting the scope for direct and systemic contributions targeted specifically around inclusive post-16 planning and developing agency for young people navigating this transition. These findings demonstrate the importance of contextual sensitivity when working with AP leavers, highlighting the significance of fostering autonomy, hope and resilience in order to navigate systems which are often experienced as marginalising. While the significance of these factors has been acknowledged in existing literature, this study situates them within a developmental narrative that is grounded in participants meaning-making processes and informed by theories of emerging adulthood, self-construction, and self-determination (Arnett, 2000; Deci & Ryan, 2000). Through collaborative working with APs, post-16 providers, community organisations and young people themselves, EPs can support

the development of sustainable post-16 pathways that are accessible, transparent and attuned to the evolving concept of self.

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Appendices

Appendix A

Systematic Narrative Review Search Terms

Mapping Terms	Key word search terms
"Alternative Provision"	OR "Pupil referral unit" OR "PRU" OR "AP Free School*" OR "AP" OR "AP Academy"
"Young People (in)"	OR "Students" OR "Pupils" OR "Youth" OR "Adolescents" OR "Young Adult" OR "Children"
AND "experiences"	OR "Story" OR "Journey"
OR "exclusion"	OR "exclu*" OR "Suspen*" OR "fixed term suspension"
"Social Emotional Mental Health"	OR "SEMH" OR "Behaviour*" OR "Mental Health" OR "Behaviour Emotional Social Development" OR "Emotional and behaviour difficulties"

	OR "EBD" Or "BESD"

Appendix B

PRISMA Flow chart
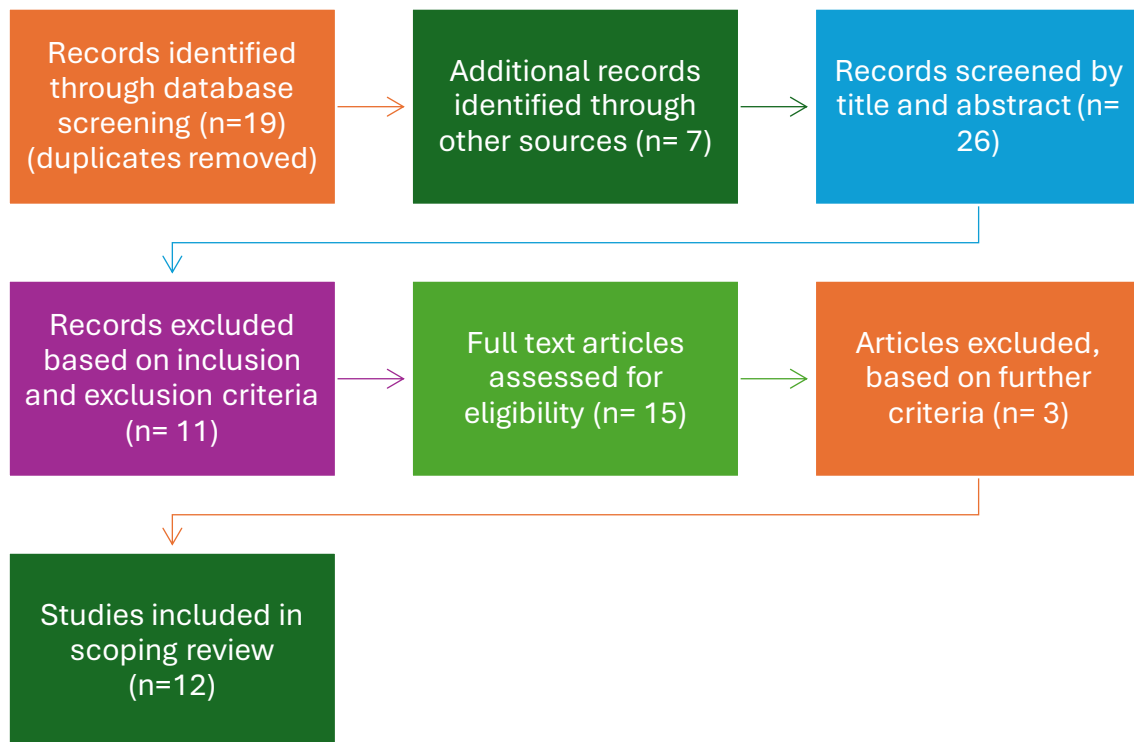
Notes:

- Two theses included despite general exclusion of theses due to time constraints.

- Full text articles from search and other sources assessed for eligibility according to exclusion criteria.

- Light-touch critique conducted using CASP and MMAT tools.

Appendix C

Papers Selected for Systematic Narrative Review

1.	Atkinson, G., & Rowley, J. (2019). Pupils' views on mainstream reintegration from alternative provision: a Q methodological study. *Emotional and behavioural difficulties*, *24*(4), 339-356.
2.	Blyth, F. (2021). *A grounded theory of successful Educational Psychology practice in Key Stage 4 Pupil Referral Units: a jointly constructed perspective* (Doctoral dissertation, University of Essex & Tavistock and Portman NHS Foundation Trust).
3.	Cockerill, T. (2019). Pupils Attending a Shared Placement between a School and Alternative Provision: Is a Sense of School Belonging the Key to Success?. *Educational & Child Psychology*, *36*(2), 23-33.
4.	Dance, D. (2022). *Stories girls tell: a narrative inquiry about girls in alternative provision* (Doctoral dissertation, University of Birmingham).
5.	Facey, D., Holliman, A., Waldeck, D., & Wilson-Smith, K. (2020). Exploring the experience of mainstream education: perspectives from pupils in alternative provision schooling with social, emotional or mental health difficulties. *Psychology of Education Review, 44*(2), 99-101.
6.	Gray, A., Woods, K., & Nuttall, C. (2022). Person-centred planning in education: an exploration of staff perceptions of using a person-centred framework in an alternative provision. *Emotional and Behavioural Difficulties*, *27*(2), 118-132.
7.	Greenhalgh, R., Fflur, S., Donnelly, K., Kirkaldie, H., & McDonnell, L. (2020). An evaluation of the impact of attachment and trauma training for pupil referral unit staff. *Developmental Child Welfare*, *2*(2), 75-91.
8.	Hamilton, P., & Morgan, G. (2018). An Exploration of the Factors That Lead to the Successful Progression of Students in Alternative Provision. *Educational & Child Psychology*, *35*(1), 80-95.
9.	Kew-Simpson, S., Williams, R., Kaip, D., Blackwood, N., & Dickson, H. (2023). Clinicians' perceptions of the mental health needs of young people in alternative provision educational settings: An exploratory qualitative analysis. *Emotional and Behavioural Difficulties*, *28*(2-3), 145-164.
10.	Malcolm, A. (2020). Heads of alternative provision: committed to realising young peoples' potential in an unregulated market. *International Journal of Inclusive Education*, *24*(5), 513-526.
11.	Malcolm, A. D. (2015). Alternative provision as an educational option: understanding the experiences of excluded young people.
12.	Trotman, D., Tucker, S., & Martyn, M. (2015). Understanding problematic pupil behaviour: Perceptions of pupils and behaviour coordinators on secondary school exclusion in an English city. *Educational Research*, *57*(3), 237-253.

Appendix D
Excerpts from Research Journal

10/01	I have reached out to everyone who showed interest. So far I have three participants. I am a bit worried that this may be too small of a sample, even though I have lots of research supporting the idea that a small sample size is okay and even Ideal for IPA. I think I will keep recruitment open until the latest point.
26/01	I have my first interview today and my second one scheduled, but the third participant is no longer getting back to me. I am a bit frustrated and wondering what has made this participant pull back. I will remain optimistic and reach out again after a bit of time. I have completed this interview, it seemed to go well but I am so unsure about my interview technique. I think my EP role came out quite a lot and I had to temper it. The difference between interviews and consultation is not spoken about enough, especially in this context. I think the issue was at times I feel like I was leading, or perhaps to frame it better my questions were not open enough? I will try to allow this reflections to better shape my next interview.
30/01	My second interview today was a bit more detailed I think. I will compare much later. I am quite happy that so far I have a male perspective and a female perspective. In writing my lit review the specific differences between male and female perspectives of AP is something I am interested, but I want to be careful to not add this as a new aspect of the research. I will come back to this when I write up the findings. I really hope I get a third and maybe 4th participant.
21.02	Writing my methodology chapter has been a very insightful process, its been helpful to become re-familiar with IPA in more detail and look at how other researchers have approached doing IPA research. I think I am ready to come back to the data and begin analysis. I am still holding out for at least one more participant !!

Appendix E
Semi Structured Interview Schedule

Semi-structured interview
The areas to be explored are:
- Transfer to an Alternative Provision, and what was the process like.
- Experience of education in an Alternative Provision.
- Courses or learning accessed in Alternative Provision, and perceptions of how these prepared for post-16 transition.
- Support to explore options for post-16 education or working.
- Factors perceived to influence individual experience.
- Support through the process of transitioning to adulthood.

Key questions
- Tell me what it was like to go to finish secondary school in an alternative provision?
- What do you remember about your learning there?
- What has happened since you finished year 11?
- What has adulthood been like so far?
- What do you feel was unique about your experience?
- How do you think you may have felt participating in this study at a younger age, say between 18-21?

Appendix F
Ethical Approval

Appendix F1 – Initial Approval

The Tavistock and Portman **NHS**
NHS Foundation Trust

Quality Assurance & Enhancement
Directorate of Education & Training
Tavistock Centre
120 Belsize Lane
London
NW3 5BA

Tel: 020 8938 2699

https://tavistockandportman.nhs.uk/

Teniola Oloko

By Email

15 August 2024

Dear Teniola,

Re: Research Ethics Application

Title: *'What can we learn from the experiences of young people who have transitioned to adulthood from an alternative provision?'*

Thank you for submitting your updated Research Ethics documentation. I am pleased to inform you that subject to formal ratification by the Trust Research Ethics Committee your application has been approved. This means you can proceed with your research.
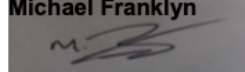
Please note that any changes to the project design including changes to methodology/data collection etc. must be referred to TREC as failure to do so, may result in a report of academic and/or research misconduct.

If you have any further questions or require any clarification do not hesitate to contact me.

I am copying this communication to your supervisor.

May I take this opportunity of wishing you every success with your research.

Yours sincerely,

Michael Franklyn

Academic Governance and Quality Officer

T: 020 938 2699
E: academicquality@tavi-port.nhs.uk

cc.   Course Lead, Supervisor, Research Lead

Appendix F2 – Approval of Amendments

From: Paru Jeram <PJeram@tavi-Port.nhs.uk
Sent: 06 January 2024 12:46
To: Teniola Oloko <TOloko@Tavi-Port.nhs.uk>
Cc: Academic Quality <academicquality@Tavi-Port.nhs.uk>; Dale Bartle <DBartle@Tavi-Port.nhs.uk>
Subject: Proposed Change to Doctoral Research Protocol

Dear Teniola

Apologies for the delays.

I see that your supervisor has been copied into your request and attests to supporting the change.

I can confirm that I have received your updated TREC documentation in light of the challenges you have experienced with recruiting participants and that the change is minor, I can confirm that the changes have been approved. You may proceed with your research.

Your updated TREC form is attached.

Please note that any changes to the project design including changes to methodology/data collection etc., must be referred to TREC as failure to do so, may result in a report of academic and/or research misconduct.

Kind regards,

Paru
Paru Jeram
Senior Academic Governance and Quality Officer
Pronouns: she/her
Spelling mistakes are possible – apologies in advance

Doctoral Student Research and Research Ethics

tavistockandportman.ac.uk

Appendix G
Procedural Ethics

Appendix G1: Consent Form

The Tavistock and Portman NHS Foundation Trust
120 Belsize Lane
London
NW3 5BA

Researcher: Teniola Oloko
Email: Toloko@tavi-port.nhs.uk
Supervisor: Dale Bartle
Email: Dbartle@tavi-port.nhs.uk

Consent to participate in research for Doctorate in Child, Community & Educational Psychology:

What can we learn from the experiences of young people who have transitioned to adulthood from an alternative provision?

Please sign below if you agree with the following statements:

I have read your information letter, and I consent to taking part in this study. I understand what my role will be in this research, and all my questions have been answered to my satisfaction.

I understand that I am free to withdraw from the research at any time, for any reason and without prejudice.

I understand that I can chose to withdraw from the research at any time until one week after our interview has ended.

I have been informed that the confidentiality of the information I provide will be safeguarded. I am free to ask any questions at any time before and during the study. I have been provided with a copy of this form and the Participant Information Sheet.

I understand that my involvement in this study, and particular information from this research, will remain strictly confidential. Only the researchers involved in the study will have access to the data. It has been explained to me what will happen once the project has been completed.

Participant Name: _____

Signature: _____

Date: _____

Appendix G2: Participant Information Sheet

Information to participants
Tavistock and Portman Trust Research Ethics Committee

If you have any queries regarding the conduct of the programme in which you are being asked to participate, please contact:
Paru Jeram, Trust Quality Assurance Officer pjeram@tavi-port.nhs.uk Or Head of Academic Registry (academicquality@tavi-port.nhs.uk)

The Tavistock and Portman NHS Foundation Trust
120 Belsize Lane
London
NW3 5BA

Researcher: Teniola Oloko
Email: Toloko@tavi-port.nhs.uk

Supervisor: Dale Bartle
Email: Dbartle@tavi-port.nhs.uk

Participation in research for Doctorate in Child, Community & Educational Psychology:

What can we learn from the experiences of young people who have transitioned to adulthood from an alternative provision?

I am a Trainee Educational Psychologist working in Bexley and part of the Tavistock and Portman NHS Foundation Trust. I would like to carry out a study exploring the experiences of young people who have transitioned into adulthood from an Alternative Provision (Sometime known by other names such as PRU or Respite Centre). The purpose of this letter is to provide you with the information that you need to consider in deciding whether to consent to participate in this study.

Project Title
What can we learn from the experiences of young people who have transitioned to adulthood from an alternative provision?

Project Description
This research is for my thesis which is part of my Doctorate in Child, Community & Educational Psychology. With this research, I want to find out about what it was like for you, when you moved on from secondary education after attending an Alternative Provision. This is called post-16 transition. There is not much information available on this, and I would like to hear directly from people like you who have experienced this transition. I hope that the findings from this research will help to improve the experience for other young people who will also experience this transition.

All proposals for research using human participants are reviewed by an Ethics Committee before they can proceed. The Tavistock Research and Ethics Committee have reviewed and accepted this proposal of research.

What does taking part involve?
If you consent, you and I will meet either in person at my offices in Bexley, or online using Microsoft Teams. You can let me know what you would prefer.

We will have a 'semi-structured interview', which means I will ask you a few questions, but you can tell me as much information about your experience as you think will be needed. We will only meet once for up to 1 hour. If you decide you want to take part, then before we meet, I would like you to think of a 'pseudonym' which is basically a fake name that I will keep your information under. It is important that this name is random and cannot be used to identify you by anyone other than me.

What will happen to the information I collect?
Your information will be collected using voice recordings and all of your information will be kept under your pseudonym (fake name), so that it cannot be linked back to you. This will keep the information 'anonymous' when I write it up and include quotes from what you have said in the interviews. I will not share what you say with others unless there are concerns about your safety. All of your information will be stored securely and retained for the time of the study and for up to 10-years after the study.

Location
The projects will either take place in a designated space at my office, or online over Microsoft Teams.

What if I change my mind about taking part?
That's fine—you can tell me that you don't want to take part at any point in the study and until one week after our interview, which is when I will then be writing up the study and will no longer be able to separate your information.

How will the results be published?
The information you have shared as part of this project will be used as part of a doctoral research project which will be available through the Tavistock and Portman website. The results may also be presented in journal articles.

How will your information be kept safe?
The General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) protects the rights of people by laying out certain rules about what organisation can and cannot do with information about people. A key part of this is the rule to process the information of each person information lawfully and fairly. This means we need to provide information on how we process personal data.

The Tavistock and Portman NHS Foundation Trust takes its responsibility under the GDPR very seriously and will always make sure that personal information is collected, handled, stored and shared in a protected way. The information gathered during the course of the research will be kept according to the trusts Data Protection Policy, which can be accessed here:

https://tavistockandportman.nhs.uk/publications/data-protection-policy/

Your information will be shared with the members of the research team who are doing the project that you are participating in. This is so they can make sense of the information you have shared and use it to contribute to findings from this project.

The trust will take strong measures to protect your information is specific storage areas for this kind of research information. Only a select group of people will be able to access this. There are also measures in place to ensure that people can only access the information needed to do their jobs.

How do I consent to taking part?
To consent to taking part, you just need to complete the consent form and return to me if we meet in person, OR you can scan and email it to me at the email address above.

If you would like to contact me any point in the study, please contact me on the details above.

Appendix G3: Procedural Ethical Considerations

Informed Consent and Right to Withdraw	Participants were provided with comprehensive information about the research, its purpose and how their data would be used. Additionally, the voluntary nature of participation and their right to withdraw without consequence from the research was emphasised, prior to the data collection. Right to withdraw was also emphasised during the interview process, as participants were able to choose whether or not to share certain aspects of their experience or to not answer some questions at all. Participants then had the opportunity to ask further questions prior to signing the consent forms, as well as throughout and after the interview. All information was provided to participants in a written format, and then again verbally prior to beginning the interview. Though no concerns were raised, participants were given the opportunity to raise and address these before and after the interview.
Anonymity and Confidentiality	Though informed consent was gained from participants in the first instance, they maintain a certain right to regulate how their data is used (Löfman et al., 2004). Participants were therefore informed of how their data would be stored and anonymised as part of the informed consent process, in compliance with General Data Protection Regulation (2018). Confidentiality was maintained in line with the Data Protection Act (2018) and the Tavistock and Portman NHS Trust Data Protection Policy (2020). Key steps taken in line with these were ensuring identifiable details were removed from the transcripts, and direct

	quotations were used responsibly to avoid revealing participants identities. Additionally, participants were instructed to choose a pseudonym under which their data would be stored. This was to support their right to withdraw for up to a week after the interview concluded, at which point their data could be deleted. Participant were also able to use their pseudonym to identify their data in the completed write up of this thesis. Furthermore, as all data was collected electronically, this was securely stored on a password protected device which was accessible only to the researcher.

Appendix H

Recruitment Materials

Appendix H1: Recruitment Poster

Did you finish secondary school in an 'Alternative Provision'?

PARTICIPANTS NEEDED – RESEARCH STUDY

What is this project about?

- This project is about hearing experiences that are not always spoken about.
- Did you attend secondary school in a PRU? A Respite Centre? An Alternative Provision?
- Do you want to tell your story? Do you think it could be helpful for people who have had similar experiences to you?
- We want to hear about what is was like for you to become an 'ADULT'.

Would you like to share your story about what it was like for you to enter adulthood?

- We are looking for people aged 18 and over.
- We can meet online or in person. Whatever works best for you.
- I will work with you to make sure our conversation is confidential and comfortable.

What do I need to do if I want to take part?

- Send me an email letting me know you want to take part, with the subject being 'Take part in study'.
- I will send you a form to sign saying that you are willing to take part. This form will give you more information
- My email address is Toloko@tavi-port.nhs.uk

Appendix H2: Recruitment email to Interested Participants

| Participant consent f... 15.2 KB ⌄ | Information to partici... 17.7 KB ⌄ |

Download All · Preview All
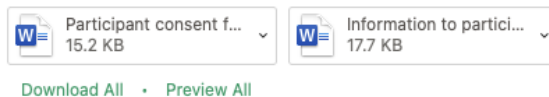
I hope you are well!

Thank you for expressing interest in my study, I am so glad you would like to take part!

Before you proceed, can I just check that these points apply to you:
- You are 18+
- You finished secondary education in an Alternative Provision, Respite Centre, or Pupil Referral Unit in or after 2013
- You can communicate verbally in English

If yes, then please continue.

To give you a bit of information about the study I have included an information sheet, which you can read through before we meet. I will check whether you have any questions when we do meet, or you can email me any questions you have beforehand.

I have included some of the information about what your taking part in the study will involve:

If you consent, you and I will meet either in person at my offices in Bexley, or online using Microsoft Teams. You can let me know what you would prefer.

We will have a 'semi-structured interview', which means I will ask you a few questions, but you can tell me as much information about your experience as you think will be needed. We will only meet once for up to 1 hour.

Before we meet, I would like you to think of a 'pseudonym' which is basically a fake name that I will keep your information under. It is important that this name is random and cannot be used to identify you by anyone other than me.

If you would still like to take part in this study, please read and sign the attached consent form, then email this back to me.

Below I have suggested some of the times we can meet. Please let me know what works best for you, and where you would like to meet (online or in person) when you email me the signed consent form.

Thursday 23rd January, 6pm – 7pm
Thursday 30th January, 1pm – 2pm
Friday 31st January, 10.30am – 11.30am

I look forward to hearing from you!

Kind Regards,
Teniola Oloko (She/Her)

Appendix I

Debrief Materials

The Tavistock and Portman NHS Foundation Trust
120 Belsize Lane
London
NW3 5BA

Researcher: Teniola Oloko
Email: Toloko@tavi-port.nhs.uk
Supervisor: Dale Bartle
Email: Dbartle@tavi-port.nhs.uk

Debrief of participation in research for Doctorate in Child, Community & Educational Psychology:

What can we learn from the experiences of young people who have transitioned to adulthood from an alternative provision?

Thank you for taking part in this study.

This research aims to explore what the process of post-16 transition is like for students who complete secondary school in an alternative provision. With this information, we hope to identify how educational psychologists can support students at this stage of their educational journey.

As part of this study, you were interviewed about your experience in alternative provisions, how you were prepared and supported through the transition, and your experience of the process. While it is possible that experiences that the stories shared may be very different between each participant, the study specifically aims to understand the experience of each person.

We would like to remind you that the information you provided will be kept confidential using the Tavistock and Portman NHS Trust's data protection policy. Your interview responses will be used for research purposed only. If you have any further questions, or concerns about your participation, please do not hesitate to contact the researcher using the email addresses provided.

After the interview, we spoke about your experience of the interview, and your thoughts and feelings. We hope that your participation in this study has not left you with feeling uncomfortable, or with any negative feelings. If you would like to speak to anyone about any personal concerns that have come up from this study, please do access the supportive spaces signposted below.
Thank you again for your participation.

Supportive services:

Mind UK: https://www.mind.org.uk/for-young-people/how-to-get-help-and-support/useful-contacts/

- Crisis management
- Helpline
- Discussion board
- Webchat
- Short-term counselling by phone or online

Young Minds: https://www.youngminds.org.uk/young-person/
- Guidelines and advice around finding support

NHS Resources: https://www.nhs.uk/conditions/social-care-and-support-guide/care-services-equipment-and-care-homes/care-and-support-you-can-get-for-free/
- Equipment and home adaptations
- Benefits that can be claimed
- Help after hospital
- Continuing healthcare
- NHS funded nursing care

Benefits for those looking for work: https://www.gov.uk/browse/benefits/looking-for-work
- Jobseekers Allowance
- Universal Credit
- Pension Credit

Appendix J

Analysed Excerpt from Lilian's Transcript

N	Transcript	Exploratory noting			Experiential statements
		Descriptive comments *Summarising context/ subject*	Linguistic Exploration *Specific use of language*	Conceptual notes *Researcher interpretation*	
	Teniola Oloko 0:18 So tell me what it was like for you to (pause) finish secondary school in an alternative provision. **Lilian** 0:28 um (pause) It was **OK**. There was (pause) the way **my** PRU was, was like um I can't remember exactly how many classes there were for the year-for the age- the year- whatever- the academic year that I was in, but (pause) there was more than one and **I** was in one with people who were considered to take their education a little bit more seriously. So I think there was (pause) four, maybe five of us in that group- in that class. So (pause) it was a **little bit** more beneficial for me, I would say, (pause) well, **initially** I **thought** it was because it was kind of like (pause) Being in a **private school.** Like we got more attention from the teachers. Um (pause) and anything that wasn't understood was like (pause) really **explained** in depth so you would understand it and stuff. So I would say in **that sense** It was more beneficial. **Teniola Oloko** 1:32	Part of the few who took education seriously in PRU Was not the case for others Classes were differentiated based on how serious you were about learning Beneficial to access learning in the smaller setting More effort put into teaching	'my' 'I' emphasis – this is her story 'um' and pauses – finding the right words? 'people who were considered ... education... more seriously' – herself versus those not in her class? 'considered' Judgement? From the PRU? 'Little bit' tentatively better 'initially I thought' – or so she thought at the time, this perception changed.	Took education seriously while in the PRU and was grouped with likeminded students Something about differentiating herself from the type of young people that are typically in PRUs? Or maybe the others in her PRU, who weren't 'serious about education'? Wondering about the differentiation through this early emphasis of herself as 'I' Closer? Teaching, more attentive teaching, detailed	The learning experience in the PRU was tentatively better for her, because she was part of the few who took learning serious. She was seen as one of the few who were more serious about learning, which meant a more positive PRU experience, because teachers gave her more attention. (paid more attention to making sure she learned).

Sample from Lilian's PET: Step 4 – Searching for Connections

Pathway to adulthood

Difference in Adulthood

Framing adulthood in relation to friends which means it is experienced as different p.28	Reluctant acknowledgment of the implicit role AP played in preparation for adulthood, masked with humour. P.29	Tension between judgement and understanding of variability of experience p.33

Reframing unpredictability of adulthood as possible pathways. P. 32

navigating different pathways

|			
Persevered through challenge of higher education to achieve a degree p.17	Divergence from the expected or predicted path. P.29	Navigating between two dominant post-AP trajectories, she experienced a pivotal moment that reshaped her outlook, leading her to reclaim agency over her adulthood. P.34	Recognition of divergence, trust in her path/ journey p.31

Ongoing journey

Acknowledging that this may be the last point p.21	Recognition of an indirect route to achieving her degree and difficulty describing this achievement. P.17

Appendix L

Sample from initial Clustering of GETs

Mindset as a tool for survival

Positive Mindset

Positive mindset enables survival p.32	Positive mindset as survival and challenge of maintaining this p.27	wavering mindset p.32

Negative mindset

Risk and danger become an everyday reality p.16	Power of negative mindset p.27	School exclusion and also spatial marginalisation normalises/ desensitises risk p.16	Internalisation of the negative constructs associated with PRU and the experience of restriction. P.24	Challenge of pushing back against negative mindsets that are maintained by negativity being normalised p.32

external influence on mindset

Role of home expectations and external pressures on maintaining a positive mindset. P.31

Negativity maintained by staff and students

A cycle of negativity was maintained by the AP population – both staff and students. P.3	Experience of negativity influences internal view and eventually actions also p.11

Long term impacts of negativity

negativity maintained in this setting has significant long term impacts p.5	Possibility that negativity refers to a lack of protection and upskilling/ preparation to have a future that was not negative.p.6

Stigma and Assumptions of PRU

The PRU was focused more on the views other settings would hold about attending a PRU, rather the students academic qualifications and post 16 progression which left her in a worse of position anyway. P.?	Developed an awareness of how she would have been perceived by others due to PRU history, even though she was managed moved, not kicked out. P.9	Needed to focus on surviving the PRU. P.12

Appendix M

Sample From Lilian's PETS table

Lilian PETs

PETs	Subthemes	Statement	Illustrative quote
1. Attending PRU	1.1 Initial perceptions of PRU	PRU was not initially perceived as negative p.9	"I didn't (pause) view it as (pause) um like bad or anything. Or think that I would be looked at differently because of it." P.9
		The learning experience in the PRU was tentatively better for her, because she was part of the few who took learning seriously p.1 She was seen as one of the few who were more serious about learning, which meant a more positive PRU experience, because teachers gave her more attention. p.1	"I was in one with people who were considered to take their education a little bit more seriously. So I think there was (pause) four, maybe five of us in that group- in that class. So (pause) it was a **little bit** more beneficial for me I would say, (pause) well, **initially** I **thought** it was because it was kind of like (pause) Being in a **private school.**" p.1
		Teachers were better able to focus on individual students. P.2	"it was smaller classes. So anything (pause) like there was not. It wasn't a teacher that felt like they had to, like, teach 30 kids. There's only five of us. So it was just more one to one, I would say based." P.2
		(paid more attention to making sure she learned). P.1	"Like we got more attention from the teachers. Um (pause) and anything that wasn't understood was like (pause) really **explained** in depth so you would understand it and stuff. So I would say in **that sense** It was more beneficial."
	1.2 Value of staff support	Recognised value of conditional teacher relationships p.14	"I did really like the teachers. I feel like they were **encouraging** and they really tried their hardest. **If** you were **willing** to try but (pause) I feel like a lot of people

Appendix N

Final GETs table

GET 1: Perceptions of AP		
Alex	*Lilian*	*Michelle*
A1.1. Initial negative perceptions of AP A2. Isolation and Abandonment A5.1 Being believed A5.2 Support from staff A3. Assigning Blame	L1.1. Initial perceptions of PRU L1.2. Value of staff support	M1. Transitioning from Mainstream to AP M2. Support in AP ***M3. Loss of trust of mainstream***
GET 2: Creating Distance from the Negativity of AP		
Alex	*Lilian*	*Michelle*
A1.2. Negativity maintained by staff and students A1.3 Long-term impacts of negativity	L2.4. Stigma and assumptions of PRU L3. Detachment from PRU	<u>**M6. Mindset as a tool for survival**</u> M5.2 Distinguishing self from peers ***M7.1 Acceptance***
GET 3: Surviving AP		
Alex	*Lilian*	*Michelle*
A4. Personal Growth A5.3 Chance, effort and opportunity	2.1 Disrupted learning 2.2 Surprise at partial qualifications 2.3 Feeling misled L7. Autonomy, chance, and agency in her experience ***L4. Uncertainty Around Progression from PRU***	<u>**M6. Mindset as a tool for survival**</u> M4. Agency, Motivation and educational identity
GET 4: Entering Adulthood		
Alex	*Lilian*	*Michelle*

A6.2. Factors influencing adult identity A6.4. Challenges in adulthood A6.1. Becoming an adult A6.3. Talking about adulthood	L5. Needing to catch up L8. Self-reflection and hopes L6. Pathway to Adulthood	M5.1. Pathways to progression M7.2 Changing identity M7.3. Becoming an adult (Identity as an adult in development)