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'You don't have to feel trapped': architectural discourses of youth engagement in a community-based learning environment

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Abstract

The rigid architectures inherent within formal schooling continue to influence young people's disengagement from education. Globally and locally, policy makers have proposed education reform and innovation, politicians have legislated for education change, yet still the problem of disengagement remains. This paper investigates one community's effort to support the reengagement in learning of young people aged 15–18 years in regional Australia through a flexible, online, community-based education program. Theoretically, this study used critical discourse as a way in to expose so as to explain dimensions of power and ideological positions as to what counts as learning. Critical ethnography as a methodology extended critical discourse's explanatory authority to a naming of spatial and social architectures and their impact on the young people's lives. Discourses of a braided curriculum, structural conviviality and emotional well-being were found to reduce some barriers to reengagement in learning; develop a shared, multi-disciplinary approach to reengagement; and be inclusive of young people's emotional well-being as central to the reengagement process. At this time of pandemic induced online learning as the new normal on a global scale, young people who are already vulnerable due to individual, school, and socio-cultural marginalising conditions deserve research processes with outcomes valorising their voices and those who work with them.

Keywords: Alternative learning environments, Critical discourse theory, Critical ethnography, Youth engagement

Introduction

Alternative learning environments (ALEs) can potentially empower young people who have disengaged from school-based learning. Throughout the world, education systems have grappled with the problem of disengagement of young people in their senior secondary years and their consequential marginalisation from further education, training and/or employment (Bloomfield et al., 2020; Kennedy-Lewis, 2015; Savelsberg & Martin-Giles, 2008). ALEs for such marginalised youth have been acknowledged, offering alternative ways of addressing educational challenges with cognisance of local contexts (OECD, 2013, 2017). However, what is less well known is the potential of community-based alternative learning environments which exist precariously between

policy settings, jurisdictional alliances, and education systems. In this context then, a community-based alternative learning environment is defined as one in which not-for-profit community groups, local councils or state/nationally administered youth centres auspice learning via a series of partnership arrangements with education and training providers. This paper examines the spatial and social architectural discourses within one community-based alternative learning environment using online learning to support the re-engagement of young people (15–18 years) in regional Australia.

Given the necessary shift to learning provision beyond the school gates as a result of the pandemic, explorations of alternatives increases in relevance. Since the closure of schools worldwide in 2020, a systemic rethink of how we educate young people has emerged (Barbour, 2022). In a time of an ‘emerging new normal’ (Barbour, 2022, p. 14) for education delivery, the provision of online learning in community-based learning environments shows potentialities for how learning can occur without the barriers inherent within traditional school-based practices (Borup & Kennedy, 2017).

The Australian education system, through maintaining traditional approaches to learning in conventional schools, has been criticised as failing to cater for the learning needs of many young Australians (McGregor et al., 2017). In fact, Lamb et al. (2020) identified that 18.4%, or 58,486 of 19-year-olds in Australia, were early school leavers as they did not meet the key milestone of Year 12 completion. These young people are therefore considered to be less likely to engage in further education, training, or employment (Thomas et al., 2017). Early school leaving can be attributed to the focus of learning in schools being too narrowly driven by the need for learning certification, where attaining educational capital (the symbolic capital associated with gaining formal academic certification) overshadows a curriculum that serves a broader purpose of holistic growth and citizenship (Hofer et al., 2021; te Riele et al., 2017). Given how a lack of engagement in education for some young people has been linked to a lack in cultural capital, the provision of learning environments designed to address the holistic learning needs of such young people is essential (Paterson-Young et al., 2021). Community-based learning environments may make it possible to engage educationally marginalised young people via a curriculum that addresses student learning needs through cultural, personal and social curriculum orientations (Brady & Kennedy, 2018).

What is now known about the potential of a community-based alternative learning environment to re-engage marginalised young people in their senior secondary years? This paper responds to that question in three ways. First, a necessarily brief review of literature investigates community-based alternative learning, marginalised youth, and online distance education with clearly articulated inclusion and exclusion criteria applied (“[Literature Review](#)”). Where discernible, spatial and social features of alternative learning environments are identified and interpreted conceptually through the notion of architecture; a term used to denote tangible materials and intangible relationships (OECD, 2013, 2017).

Second, a theoretic-methodological framework (“[Research Design](#)”) is deployed at the nexus of critical discourse theory (Fairclough, 2013a, 2013b), and critical ethnography (Vadeboncoeur & Vallos, 2016). Critical theory provides a theoretical perspective on the dimensions of discourse that describe power relations and social practices implicated in the constitution of knowledge that determines what counts as learning (when, where,

with whom, and under what conditions that may occur) (Fairclough, 2013a, 2013b). Critical ethnography extends discourse's explanatory authority to a naming of spatial and social architectures by providing a methodological platform for questioning the power of these architectural discourses on people's lives. Ethnographic data in this study consisted of observation notes, transcripts of semi-structured interviews, artefacts such as curriculum documents, policies, photographs and other ephemera, as well as a research journal maintained throughout the time-in-field from 2017 to 2019.

Third, the findings from this analytic process provide three discourses with their micro, meso, and macro dimensions constructed through both spatial and social architectures of a braided curriculum, structural conviviality and emotional well-being. Finally, the paper concludes with a critical appraisal of how the evolutionary design of these architectural discourses foreshadow the precariousness ("[Discussion](#)"), yet also the potentialities, for the future of this community-based learning environment and more broadly the advancement of current schooling models towards more inclusive ways of teaching and learning.

Literature review

Learning environments vary considerably in design and purpose (OECD, 2013), with schools the most common environment designated for learning to occur (Hope, 2019; Swartz, 2016). Yet not all young people find schools conducive environments for learning. Accordingly, they either exclude themselves or are excluded from school-based learning, ending up in ALEs marginalised from further education, training and/or employment opportunities post the compulsory years of schooling (Kennedy-Lewis et al., 2016; te Riele et al., 2017). Key search terms framing this literature review were community-based alternative learning, marginalised youth, innovative learning environments, and online distance education. Literature consisted of peer-reviewed research studies, commissioned reports and policy documents published over the last 20 years.

During the initial scoping phase, 6 inclusion and 8 exclusion criteria were established. Included were literature providing knowledge of young people's marginalisation from mainstream school-based learning; factors impacting their engagement with learning; provision of online learning via distance education; the establishment of ALEs for those in the senior phase of learning (notionally 15–18 years old) to foster engagement, with particular attention to spatial and social features of community-based ALEs. Excluded were special learning needs environments for those with multiple disabilities, primary and junior secondary schools, annexes of senior secondary schools/colleges, specialist academy schools, selective-entry secondary schools, philosophically aligned Steiner and/or Montessori environments, as well as more recent make-the-maker science, technology, engineering, mathematics aligned spaces, and open-entry online learning communities. Applying the inclusion criteria brought over 150 items into consideration, however after application of the exclusion criteria only 50 remained. Delimiting the literature review to community-based alternative learning environments as per these criteria, resulted in three areas for detailed analysis.

First, depending on contextual conditions, ideological, curriculum and pedagogical approaches some alternative learning environments may be considered innovative. However, such an appellation is risky because as the OECD (2013) found in its

review of 125 innovative learning environments from over 20 countries, a learning environment is a “holistic eco-system that functions over time and in context [...] based on a conceptual architecture that does not immediately refer to the innovative, or effective or powerful” (p. 23). This architecture considered both spatial and social elements of a pedagogical core (learners, teachers, content, physical learning spaces, digital resources), with the nature of leadership and organisational strategy/ies shaping that core, as well as the relationships among participants and partnerships with key stakeholders (communities, education and training providers) (OECD, 2013, pp. 22–24). The review included an in-depth investigation of 40 case studies utilising this architectural framework, concluding that innovation was determined according to “local circumstances and judgement” (OECD, 2013, p. 26). In its 2017 handbook for innovative learning environments, the OECD clarified innovation as “fresh ways of meeting outstanding challenges in a spirit of openness to disciplined experimentation” (OECD, 2017, p. 9). It is through that lens that this paper proceeds.

Second, at the level of the local and particular, judgements have been made about the spatial and social architectures of alternative learning environments, some of which were deemed to be innovative in their potential to engage marginalised young people (Edwards, 2018; Mills & McGregor, 2014; McGregor, Mills, te Riele et al., 2017; Thomas et al., 2017; Vadeboncoeur & Velos, 2016). Edwards’s (2018) ethnographic study in the United Kingdom investigated a youth centre’s alternative curriculum co-created with disengaged secondary school students, youth leaders, family and teachers. He found a relational pedagogy based on the teachings of Freire (1970; Freire & Freire, 2004) to be a convivial feature of this alternative learning environment.

Further, a multi-sited ethnography of four ALEs across three Australian states and one territory during the period 2012–2014 (McGregor et al., 2017) found they varied in location and governance with one government operated ALE, one non-government operated ALE being funded by government, one ALE within a conventional metropolitan secondary school, and one community-based ALE operating through a not-for-profit organisation. Findings identified spatial architectures of technologies, curriculum, location, time, enrolments, funding, building design impacting learning. Social architectures were determined by staffing, number and life experiences of young people, the nature of communities, relationships among the participants, and partnerships among organisational providers; namely, schools and social service providers. These architectures determined the nature of learning opportunities available to the young people (McGregor et al., 2017).

Third, previous research investigating flexibility, inclusivity, partnerships and community relationships, judged alternative learning environments based on “personal progress made relative to each young person’s unique starting point” (Thomas et al., 2017, pp. 445). This was found to challenge current orthodoxies of the education system that sought metrics based upon external standards of achievements such as senior certificates awarded. Similarly, in a compilation of research from the United States, Canada and Australia, Vadeboncoeur and Vellos (2016) confirm supportive relationships among young people and their teachers mediating previously difficult experiences with re-engagement potentialities enhanced due to both spatial and social architectures of such learning environments. The role of schools in the

provision of community-based alternative learning environments was noted in all studies, although their dominance was mitigated when partnerships with auspicing agencies were strong and sustained.

Considering an ALE as either more progressive or more traditionalist in design (Dewey, 1938/2007), can be useful when considering both spatial and social architectures. A sliding scale of progressive to traditionalist school architecture can provide a basis for analysing how ALEs are experienced. The idea of a continuum to describe such potential was originally theorised in 1973 by Ivan Illich in his book *Deschooling Society*, where he proposed an “institutional spectrum” (Illich, 1973, p. 24) as a theoretical framework to represent the degrees of conviviality and manipulation an institution may have. Theorising ALEs as institutions according to Illich’s criteria, facilitates consideration of conviviality as fundamental for learning organically and tangentially in order to make learning purposeful. This contrasts with what he referred to as features of manipulation within institutions of learning where learning was a lock-step, linear progression through generic curricula designed to foster docile compliancy and assign social rank (Illich, 1973).

In some instances, words are used to suggest conviviality. For instance, the use of ‘flexible’ was found to signify ALEs that were either structurally designed as places of formal learning or were retrofitted former traditional schools (Kariippanon et al., 2020). The naming of the Youth + Flexible Learning Centres (Edmund Rice Education Australia, 2020); and New Zealand Flexible Learning Spaces (Trask, 2019) are but 2 examples from the literature. Irrespective of their name, some ALEs were found to co-exist with local community agencies in a symbiotic relationship with seemingly multiple payoffs for the young people themselves, those with whom they learned, and wider society (Bloomfield et al., 2020). Such ALEs can therefore be considered as sitting towards the convivial end of Illich’s (1973) “institutional spectrum” (p. 24) due to their interpretations of flexible delivery, sometimes deschooled physicality, and predominately progressive pedagogy. However, there are still manipulative elements present in such learning environments that conform to educative purposes of producing certain types of human capital that may no longer service ever-changing needs of capital itself (Boltanski et al., 2007). This proposition emerging from the literature review is explored through the research design to follow.

Research design

Critical ethnography was chosen to frame the research design because theoretically it is concerned with how social structures are seen through the eyes of marginalised groups in capitalist societies (Hammersley, 2006). Methodologically, critical ethnography facilitates exploration of beliefs, values, language, behaviours encountered by such groups so as to advocate for change in “systems of power, prestige, privilege, and authority that serve to marginalise individuals” (Creswell & Poth, 2018, p. 92). Limitations of this approach are acknowledged, especially when the theoretical principles of critical ethnography share considerable ethical (who really benefits) and logistical (data collection) issues consistent with most educational research (Bloomfield & Harrevel, 2020; Tricoglus, 2001).

Data collection

In 2017, ethical clearance for the research was sought from the organisations involved in the study, which included a state government's Department of Education and Training (DET), Local Government Authorities (LGA), and non-government organisations (NGO), as well as Central Queensland University's Human Research Ethics Committee (Approval No. 20566). Jay's Community Hub (pseudonym) was chosen from a larger study of community-based ALEs (Bloomfield et al., 2020) because it provided unique insights into the use of a multipurposed physical space with a holistic curriculum in which different service providers partnered to provide comprehensive life-wide learning experiences. The auspicing body is a nationally recognised, locally administered youth centre operating in a town in regional Australia. The key partnering service provider was the state government's school of distance education, together with community health providers, registered training organisations, and a range of community non-government agency partnerships.

The regionally coordinated school of distance education (SDE) provided an online curriculum (literacy, numeracy), brokered curriculum delivery partnerships with other education and training providers, sourced teachers, and administrative staff, including a guidance officer to support and case manage those young people identified as having high and complex needs. Jay's employed youth workers as facilitators via funding directed through the SDE to the youth centre and coordinated a pool of volunteers to work with the young people who at that time were 15–18 years old. Jay's also provided the internet connectivity so essential for all online learning activities related to curriculum offerings from SDE and other providers.

Geographically, Jay's was adjacent to the local skate park and within walking distance of fast-food outlets of the town. It operated 5 days a week (from 8.30 am to 2.30 pm), with notionally up to 38 students enrolled during the 2017–2019 data collection period; however, usually 3–15 students were observed to attend at any one time. Observations of learning interactions and student work artefacts were gathered from 12 young people over a period of 6 months once informed consent was obtained in writing from the young people and their parents, as well as the staff participants. Four of the twelve young people agreed to participate in a digitally recorded focus group discussion. Semi-structured individual interviews were conducted with seven staff consisting of a facilitator, a teacher, a volunteer, and four administrators (two from Jay's and two from the school of distance education). Other artefacts included photographs and institutional policies of Jay's and SDE.

Analytic process

Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) provided a systematic way to construct descriptive, explanatory accounts of similarities and differences in perceptions between the students, staff, and the semiotic features of artefacts and field notes. Fairclough's (2013a, 2013b) three-dimensional construction of discourse was central to this analytic process which drew upon elements of linguistic and social theory to critique ideologies and power relations mobilised in and through Jay's Community Hub (Fairclough, 2013b). This three-dimensional process required analysis at micro, meso, and macro levels.

First, at the micro dimension of discourse construction, the physical properties of location, building type and purpose, activities of the community provided curriculum, and technology affordances (laptops connected to online curriculum via the school of distance education) constituted the spatial architecture for learning at Jay's Community Hub. These affordances refer to people having access, via the laptops, to the Wi-Fi network, and having the digital literacy skills to engage with the images, audio, and text of the school of distance education's online curriculum. In accordance with the theoretical principles of discourse construction at the micro dimension (Fairclough, 2013a & b), distinctive visual, oral, aural, written, linguistic features of these texts were coded and categorised. Second, at the meso dimension, the social processes by which those texts were produced, distributed, and consumed by the participants were identified through the curriculum of SDE and other education and training providers, partnership collaborations, and relationships among the young people, facilitators, teachers, administrators, volunteers. Third, at the macro dimension of discourse construction and analysis, the socio-cultural conditions under which those practices and processes were enacted, negotiated, and interpreted were articulated through the spatial and social architectures of each discourse.

Findings

Discourses of a braided curriculum, structural conviviality, and emotional well-being were found to constitute the spatial and social architectures of Jay's community-based alternative learning environment. Findings relevant to each are now presented, with discussion to follow. Data from observation notes, artefacts, and researcher journal are presented in narrative style, interwoven with direct quotations from interview data in italics with attribution in brackets to follow.

Braided curriculum

Social workers, psychologists, teachers, trainers, and community volunteers all collaborated to provide a braided curriculum for young people at Jay's. The micro and meso dimensions of this discourse illustrated three braids or threads woven-in to this curriculum, each considered of equal importance to the whole which was tailored to the negotiated learning needs of individuals. It was inclusive of (1) online learning delivered via the school of distance education (SDE) and accessed on-site; (2) a range of credentialled learning (e.g. vocational certificates) through various registered training organisations; and (3) learning opportunities offered by not-for-profit agencies (e.g. a Get Set for Work program, eight different sporting activities, the Braking the Cycle [sic] program to achieve a driver's licence, specialist Youth Support Service, a Men's Shed for mental health and basic trade skills). The SDE curriculum accessed online via laptop computers consisted of literacy, numeracy courses at a senior secondary level, with online teacher support complemented with face-to-face learning support from Jay's facilitators and volunteers.

Jay's had a relaxed atmosphere, with both students and staff welcoming visitors with offers of cups of tea or coffee. Observation notes recorded a range of curriculum negotiations taking place as Georgina, with qualifications in youth work and studying for a Diploma in Counselling, facilitated the SDE curriculum, the offerings of other

vocationally oriented education and training providers, with health and emotional support services from community agencies. For instance, at one particular time, Student A was on the couch with a laptop looking at motor-cross forums to troubleshoot a mechanical issue with a motorbike. Student B was socialising with the facilitator who was encouraging him to begin work. Student C was doing numeracy work on the laptop, breaking off to ask Georgina questions about an upcoming TAFE open day excursion. Student D was working independently on the laptop, not speaking with anyone. These observations recorded the students working individually and at their own pace. There were no assessment deadlines. As they progressed through the work, the teachers from the school of distance education would provide feedback and grades for tasks. The only deadline for both the school curriculum and the vocational training courses offered by external registered training organisations (RTOs) was to have as much completed as possible by the end of Year 12 (final year of senior secondary schooling). Completion was considered advantageous for transitions to further education, skills-based training, and/or work.

Georgina was always joined in the learning space by either a teacher (from the school of distance education), a volunteer, or the guidance officer (provided by the school of distance education). The community curriculum offerings included sexual and reproductive health sessions, parenting workshops, learner driver's license courses, alcohol and other drug information sessions, and a range of sport and fitness programs. The multi-disciplinary nature of learning and support was described by participants as an important feature. Administrator Jerry from the school of distance education noted that Jay's provides "a community-based program [which] only works because [of] the partnerships" (Jerry, Interview, 2017). In this regional area, collaboration between community agencies contributed to the reduction of barriers to formal learning as the school curriculum represented only one element of the learning experience at Jay's Community Hub.

The interconnectedness of curriculum available to these young people was noted by Raymond, a community agency administrator, who described the cross fertilisation among programs:

Young people who are enrolled [through Jay's] also have access to services if they need them [...] young people who may be struggling and may have mental health concerns are already in the building, [...] they become aware of activities that have a therapeutic component or have a – again, a structured component to them, so there's a benefit in their association with the centre because they become aware of activities that they may not otherwise know about (Raymond, Community administrator, 2017).

From a critical perspective, the curriculum specifics of these services are not known. Yet Raymond believes them to have "a therapeutic component" and/or "a structured component" around, for instance, mental health issues (Raymond, Community administrator, 2017). Enrolment at Jay's provides access to and awareness of such services and related activities on offer through this community hub. These young people could access the

Youth Support Service (individual case management and support) and participate in Get Set for Work (small group employability skills training) programs. Additionally, a “couple of young people [...] get some casual work as a childcare worker with our school aged care service” (Gary, Community administrator, 2017). Jay’s location in a regional area meant timely transport accessibility was always an issue. Accordingly, driver training was also provided as and when possible.

Learner licencing stuff, too [...] these kids have got genuine issues, they wouldn't be able to access a car or, you know, some of the kids in the program say their parents don't give a shit. So, you know, get the hundred hours [of supervised driving] up, definite barrier to employment without a licence, so we can offer them that as well and that's all at no cost, so, that's funded. Yeah. So, and that's what I mean, the programs you can offer, I think they just feed off each other. It's... it's good (Gary, Community administrator, 2017).

Gary’s comment that the learning affordances “just feed off each other” (Gary, Community administrator, 2017) suggests that curriculum collaborations support both the individual young people and the community organisations. Raine found such curriculum collaborations helpful when, “Like, I came in on Monday and did my resume with Tremaine [another facilitator], and you can’t do that at a normal school, like ... it makes life easier” (Raine, Youth participant, 2017). Collaborations were dependent though on the community organisations being able to meet their government funding imposed key performance indicators for particular types of services and activities. Likewise, the SDE had to meet government metrics for what constituted effective and efficient online delivery and outcomes of the curriculum.

Therefore, Jay’s Community Hub could be viewed as inadvertently meeting the system’s needs—or simply ensuring its own survival. This discourse of a braided curriculum may therefore be serving the needs of not just the marginalised young people who are part of this learning space, but also serving the needs of organisations seeking to maintain their viability as service providers to the needs of that wider regional community. Socially, collaborations were negotiated initially through “personalised learning programs” (Jerry, SDE administrator, 2017) constructed to address young people’s social, emotional, and academic needs. Spatially, curriculum collaboration occurred in the interstitial spaces between formal and informal learning providers, registered accreditations, and non-registered recognitions of learning participation. Thus, the discourse of braided curriculum was constructed through social and spatial architectures of student-centred, self-paced, and holistic approach to curriculum development and implementation.

Structural conviviality

The braided curriculum relied upon the structural conviviality of community relationships. Discursively, structural conviviality embodies the spatial features of Jay’s at its micro level, with symbiotic social features constructing its meso dimension characteristics. The macro dimension of structural conviviality illustrates not only the social but also the cultural conditions operating at Jay’s Community Hub which embody collectively the values, beliefs, and traditions of the school of distance education, the

host community organisation, supporting community agencies, training providers, students, and staff.

Administrator Ann from the school of distance education believed it to be.

... a complex kind of structure, particularly when those community organisations are responsible for delivering some of the things that are crucial to the program, like internet, and so when you have poor internet that can then make it hard for students to engage, it's a huge risk factor for further disengagement if they can't access the program [online from the school of distance education] (Ann, interview, 2017).

Reliable, strong internet affordance was fundamental to re-engagement when the formal curriculum is online and accessed via laptops which need to be suitable to support that online delivery. The physical learning space in was multipurpose, just like the rest of Jay's Community Hub. It had a kitchenette for food preparation, a lounge chair and pool table, with both individual student desks and an old dining table that were used for studying literacy, numeracy, and basic knowledge and skill builder curriculum online (Observation_02, 2017). Just outside the learning space was an indoor basketball court and beyond that was a public skatepark, both were frequented by the young people when they chose to take a break from formal learning.

Gary considered this community setting “enhances their learning experience [and] exposes them to [...] life” because they see a “whole spectrum of life that you normally don't get [...] in a school” (Gary, Community administrator, 2017).

Like to get to [the learning space] from the front of the building, they have to walk past a kindy gym session where there's young mums and young bubs and... and kids playing around, so, they're used to that now. And, then downstairs you've got the men's shed, you know, they'll see them and the dementia group, the disability access recreation ... and it's about giving them the opportunity to ... to socialise [...] just be around different people, the way they normally wouldn't be [in a conventional school setting] (Gary, Community administrator, 2017).

Conviviality was observed through the use of first names when young people were addressing staff, the lack of uniform (including allowing the wearing of caps) or strict dress code (Observation_02, 2017). Young people were observed talking with staff in a familiar way, conversing about their home situations, their relationships with friends, their employment prospects, and their learning (Observation_04, 2017; Observation_05, 2017; Observation_06, 2017). They had the freedom to express themselves through the clothes they chose to wear, “You don't have certain, like, uniforms, you just wear whatever you want to wear” (Raine, Youth participant, 2017), so long as the standard of dress was deemed to be not be offensive and met occupational health and safety standards. These standards were strongly influenced by the school of distance education, highlighting that at the micro and meso dimensions of structural conviviality, institutions of

formal education still hold power (Artefact_29, 2017). At the micro-level, the uniform was a symbol of the school's control that Raine identified as being absent at Jay's Community Hub. When Raine's statement was analysed at the meso-level, the uniform or lack thereof indicated an imbalance of power in the face-to-face modality between the students and teachers in conventional schools where students were required to wear uniforms, but teachers were not. Further analysis at the macro-level uncovers the power of education system to differentiate between students and teachers. The fact that at Jay's Community Hub students were not required to wear uniforms was seen by Raine as a representation of freedom, however a CDA perspective elicits an alternative reading that by not wearing a uniform these young people are further marginalised from the mainstream through these freedoms granted to them in the interest of reengagement in learning.

Raymond, an administrator from a community organisation, claimed this helped to re-engage young people; while at the same time it valued a longer-term need for structure and routine in order to help these young people become active contributors to society:

So, I see it in sort of two sides. I see there's a need for them to understand that in life, it's not just about education now but it's about life, there will be a structure of some sort and an expectation of young people, but I also appreciate that the very reason they are disconnecting, or just not learning, needs to be addressed as well with some sense of flexibility and understanding (Raymond, Community administrator, 2017).

Raymond provided a balanced view of the structure within the learning space in the way that it reduced barriers to learning, but some structure was necessary due to the heavily structured society for which this learning was preparing them. His words rationalise the need for conviviality with limits, however the limits were not so draconian as to alienate these young people as had happened with their conventional schooling.

Within the opening hours of 8.30–2.30 pm, the young people could drop in at any time and leave whenever they needed. Carly was a young woman who lived independently of her parents. While she still described it as a school, Carly found “this school is so flexible, you can leave anytime, anywhere, like you don't have to feel trapped, you've got your individual, like you know, life” (Carly, Youth participant, 2017). The flexibility that Carly preferred was in contrast to feeling “trapped” when in a conventional school, especially when living independently and having “life” issues to deal with. This sentiment was supported by other young people in the study during a conversation on how Jay's provided freedom to deal with their lives while also supporting them when choosing to engage in learning.

There is “no point in wagging here, if you don't want to go, you don't have to go; [you can] come in, do your work, go home” (Kirsten, Youth participant, 2017). Raine concurred, noting that “there's not as much rules here, like, you either do your work or you piss off; whereas if you don't do your work in school, it's either detention or suspension” (Raine, Youth participant, 2017). The notion of “flexible hours” (Val,

Youth participant, 2017) meant that the young people had the freedom to choose when they would attend without pressure from a formal education institution, such as their former secondary school/s.

From the perspectives of the participants in this study, defining features of structural conviviality were reliable technological affordances for learning, flexible hours coupled with the self-paced nature of the curriculum, governance structures predicated upon personalised learning needs and negotiated mutual obligations among all participants. Such structural conviviality mitigated barriers that had led these young people's disengagement from formal learning in schools and fostered re-engagement in learning through the community hub.

Emotional well-being

Emotional well-being was considered just as, if not more, important than formal learning achievements for marginalised young people. Spatially, emotional well-being was discursively constructed through a low staff to student ratio, with youth workers as the facilitators on-site coordinating operations of Jay's as a community hub. Consequently, the evidence now provided suggests that these young people felt socially safe when their emotional well-being was supported as equally important for learning.

Trisha was a community agency administrator who identified the significance of the low ratio of staff to young people, which at Jay's averaged 1:5.

In a big group of kids, the focus is the group, whereas with the small cohort, the focus can be more one-one-one and, with their specific needs. With each one, with different needs at different times. I really love the way in which the program incorporates the life skills as well as the emotional well-being support (Trisha, Community administrator, 2017).

The impact of the low ratio on improving “*emotional well-being support*” (Trisha, Community administrator, 2017) was also identified by Carly, the youth participant mentioned earlier.

Carly viewed this low ratio positively because it improved her access to emotional support from the adults who had more time to talk with the young people:

Yeah, with like if I have problems or something like that. You know, like normal teachers wouldn't be able to just, you know, pull you over on the side when you really need them, but here they're so supportive they, you know, drop everything to go help you because you are important here (Carly, Youth participant, 2017).

Here Carly placed value on how the low ratio learning freed the adults in the space to offer individual support and demonstrated how this made her feel “important”. She commented specifically that “Georgina [youth worker] is really good [...] whenever someone needs help, she comes straight as ... like ASAP, like as soon as possible” (Carly, Youth participant, 2017).

Joel gained confidence from this social and emotional support. He could be himself, with less pressure, “the good thing I like again here is [that] you can be yourself, and there’s less pressure on you and yeah, I guess that helps boost a lot of kids’ self-confidence” (Joel, Youth participant, 2017). Similar to Carly, Joel appreciated that “staff members also care about your personal problems that you may be having at home.” The views of both Carly and Joel reflect the aforementioned holistic approach to learning and the perspective on learning development that some participants, particularly those from youthwork backgrounds, have described.

There was a high importance placed on having youth workers as the facilitators who were supporting the young people within the physical environment of the learning space. Ann, the overseer of the formal curriculum from the school of distance education, described a culture of care within the supportive environment when she identified the value of having caring and approachable facilitators. She explained in her interview just how crucial the facilitators were:

Our facilitators, are there the full time that the space is open, so they have the opportunity to have those even deeper relationships with the students, and they can offer that additional support, but then that also comes back to the school to offer support to them so that they know the kinds of things to say to kids when they come up to them and say, hey, I’ve lost my housing at the moment, or my payments have been cut, what do I do? So, we need to make sure that the facilitators have the support and knowledge and capacity to be able to support those kids (Ann, School administrator, 2017).

Ann highlighted how “additional support” was not just a structural feature of the low ratio learning, but the way that facilitators built “deeper relationships” with the young people provided opportunities to create a more supportive environment (Ann, School administrator, 2017). The supportive environment that the facilitators created within the learning space at Jay’s Community Hub may have been grounded in their “knowledge” from their youthwork experience, but it was also their “capacity” to care that supported these young people (Ann, School administrator, 2017).

The capability of staff to provide emotional support to the young people was viewed as essential. The ability of caring staff, like Georgina, was described by Carly and Joel; and Ann elaborated on how this was made possible through the opportunity for deeper relationships. On the one hand, this could be seen as the result of low ratio learning, self-paced curriculum, flexible learning affordances. However, on the other hand, young people themselves and administrators both in SDE and community organisations in partnerships with Jay’s attest to the staff’s capability to connect with the young people and their ability to identify needs and address them. Gary believed that they established the socio-cultural conditions for emotional well-being.

They’re the right people ... you really need the staff that are nurturing, but not to the point where they’re wet fish and they’re just going to be a ... a pushover, and ... and if they ... I believe it enhances, again, enhances their educational experience, young people, by having those staff there and the – the environment they create there, sim-

ply because it's smaller, it's theirs and they get on well with the supervisors and the volunteers (Gary, Community administrator, 2017).

Gary's conceptualisation of staff being the "right people" emerged from his description of them as "nurturing", as people who "enhance" the learning experience for the young people and create an environment where the young people feel supported (Gary, Community administrator, 2017).

The social architecture of this emotional well-being discourse featured informality in personal relationships among staff and young people, where learning was self-paced, and support extended beyond just low ratio learning. At a micro-level the young people identified that staff genuinely cared and displayed behaviours that supported this i.e. dropping everything to help on an individual level with a young person's personal problems (Joel, Youth participant, 2017). At the meso-level Ann and Gary identified that the type of training and experience that staff had was a feature of this supportive environment. Ann spoke of how the facilitators were trained youth workers who had both the knowledge and capacity to support these marginalised young people (Ann, School administrator, 2017). This was reiterated by Gary when he spoke of having the "right person" for the job, emphasising the need for not just staff with appropriate qualifications but also with the necessary disposition to support these young people (Gary, Community administrator, 2017). The discourse of emotional well-being, along with the discourses of braided curriculum and structural conviviality indicated these young people's willingness to reengage with learning.

Discussion

Theoretically, critical discourse provided a way of thinking differently about community-based alternative learning environments for young people marginalised from conventional senior secondary schooling. Its analytic process named the micro, meso and macro dimensions of discourse through which spatial and social architectures of learning philosophies, policy implications and practices were exposed, explained, and critiqued (Fairclough, 2013a; Wodak & Meyer, 2009). Notwithstanding its acknowledged limitations, three discourses constructed through this process also demonstrate the power of critical ethnography as a methodological approach incorporating a range of qualitative data types from different sources (LeCompte & Schensul, 1999; Madison, 2011). While not all have been provided in this paper due to obvious word limits, the photographs, field note drawings and observations, journal entries, curriculum documents, interview transcripts have enriched our necessarily limited depiction of the rich tapestry of a braided curriculum, structural conviviality, and emotional well-being discourses constructed at this confluence of theory and methodology.

The braided curriculum illustrates the innovation potential of a community-based ALE such as Jay's to construct individualised curriculum profiles with such young people. The spatial and social architectures necessary to achieve this braided curriculum have been identified through an online curriculum delivered by a school of distance education, and a multi-disciplinary team delivering not only curriculum leading to accredited training, but also needs-based learning through community agencies. This multidisciplinary

collaboration of youth workers, guidance officers, teachers, industry trainers, community volunteers and administrators developed a holistic curriculum responsive to each young person's particular learning needs. Yet in the very strengths of a braided curriculum lie its weaknesses because it is only as effective as its spatial and social architectures. For instance, a single, double or triple strand of the braid may weaken the whole if the online distance education curriculum does not offer the range of subjects suitable for academic pathways of particular students; or if training providers offer only a narrow selection of vocational certificates because of their funding mandates and scopes of practice; or, if the community agencies cannot deliver timely, appropriate services for whatever reason.

Thus, structural conviviality is necessary to bring a braided curriculum to life and it is essential for its sustainability. Here the precariousness of organisational capacities and individual capabilities for conviviality was identified. This demonstrated the significance of the spatial architectures of this discourse from its micro (e.g. technological affordances), through meso (flexible hours and self-paced learning), to macro dimensions of the governance structures through which mutual organisational obligations were negotiated. The social architectures of the emotional well-being discourse were perhaps understandably foregrounded through empathic interpersonal relationships among the young people and other staff involved with Jay's Community Hub operations.

Together, these three discourses disrupted a school-based learning environment's discursive constructions of what counts as senior secondary learning for these young people. This was evidenced through the social architectures of learning with non-authoritative adults, and the spatial architectures of (hopefully) reliable internet connections, lounges, pool table, and a domestic kitchenette. The notion of a personalised learning program for each young person that was facilitated by youth workers rather than teachers was found to remove the positional power so keenly felt by these young people in their previous learning relationships with adults in school-based learning environments.

Over 40 years ago, Illich (1973) warned that "school is the advertising agency which makes you believe that you need the society as it is" (p. 113). At this precarious time in world history, this advertising agency can no longer satisfy society's needs for the learning of all young people. Indeed, Illich's (1973) philosophical perspective on this problem was remarkably prophetic. For our purposes in this paper, it has provided a framework to explore the proposition that community-based alternative learning environments can be innovative through spatial and social architectures of discourses which provide freedom to learn in an organic way so as to make it purposeful for the learner (Rogers, 1969). An argument has emerged where structural conviviality permits reengagement in learning however structure as a concept is not necessarily manipulative. Structure can be convivial in intent and provide ways to develop young people's understanding of the social order within which they interact. Structural conviviality does not mean removing all structure, as this would be counterproductive in supporting these young people to reengage in learning. Structural conviviality can be viewed as a means to engage learners through meeting their learning needs rather than manipulating learners to meet system needs of learning institutions. This community-based learning environment has contrasted with Illich's (1973) depiction of institutionally manipulative learning environments in a lock-step, linear progression through generic curricula design to foster docile

complacency with the social order and assigning social rank accordingly. The innovation potential of a learning environment such as Jay's Community Hub is perhaps yet to be fully realised, although these findings suggest it is possible to re-engage marginalised young people who have felt trapped in conventional secondary schools, through discursive constructions of a braided curriculum, structural conviviality, and emotional well-being.

Conclusion

Young people on the verge of leaving the compulsory years of learning are vulnerable to the vicissitudes of life in general and education in particular. For those who have been for whatever reason marginalised from school-based learning, their educational vulnerability is magnified because they may not have access to individualised curriculum affordances, convivial learning structures, and emotional well-being support services. Previous studies in the field of alternative education found significance in determining qualitatively personal progress of distance travelled (Thomas et al., 2017); and the centrality of interpersonal relationships for envisaging aspirational futures (McGregor et al., 2017; Mills & McGregor, 2014; Vadeboncoeur & Vallos, 2016; Vadeboncoeur & Padilla-Petry, 2017). This paper contributes to the knowledge of community-based alternative learning environments as places free from the trappings of rigid, formal learning environments. Its discursive findings of a braided curriculum, structural conviviality and emotional well-being offer a "de-schooling scenario" (OECD, 2017, p. 86) of community-based teaching and learning in which those who teach are inclusive of those multi-disciplinary knowledges and skills, and not necessarily with registered teacher status.

To respond to the question with which we began the study reported in this paper, critical discourse theory integrated with a critical ethnographic approach provided insights into a community-based alternative learning environment such as Jay's Community Hub. This research has confirmed that a braided curriculum could remove barriers to learning, although both the collaboration necessary for such a curriculum to thrive and the structural conviviality needed to bring it to fruition is challenging indeed. For the young people themselves, the absence of that conviviality puts their emotional well-being at risk. Philosophical alignment with community-based alternative learning environments such as Jay's present policy challenges at a systemic level, while at the level of practice they offer futures-oriented professionals dedicated to working with all young people a scenario for rich engagement via learner agency in their own learning that is well worth pursuing.

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Author contributions

CB led the research project, and conducted the data collection and analysis. CB and BH were the major contributors in writing the manuscript. RF provided conceptual and editorial support. All authors read and approved the final manuscript.

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Declarations

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