

**Nurturing Sites of Inclusion:**  
**Care Practices at an Alternative-to-Detention Afterschool Program**

Ahram Park

Teachers College Columbia University

Submission for the 2019 Morton Deutsch Awards for Social Justice

March 2019

Copyright 2019

## Prologue

*On a warm August afternoon in 2012, Marvin, a staff member, and Raj, a 13-year-old young man are cooking at the grill about ten feet away from the building's back entrance. Jace and Levin, 12- and 13-year-old young men, walk over to them. "What are we eating tonight?" Levin asked. Marvin points the grill with his metal tongs, "Obviously, we are cooking hamburgers and hot dogs." "It doesn't look that good," comments Jace as he looks down at the grill. "It looks lumpy," he adds. "Like Marvin's head?" chimes Levin. When all three young men snicker, Marvin raises his eyebrows at Levin. "Do you want to stand out in this heat and cook instead?" Marvin asks Levin and Jace. The two young men back away slowly. "You're doing great. Don't make kids work." Jace comments before returning to join the other group of young people inside the building.*

*Marvin turns his attention to Raj. He explains to Raj how to use a dial thermometer. Raj places the thermometer in one of the hamburger patties and reads the temperature. Marvin walks to the building. He pops his head inside and asks one of the young people to help bring the food to the table. Levin and Jace carry the empty plates where Raj could place the patties and hotdogs. "It should be done. We checked with this," Raj holds up the thermometer. "But if the burgers are pink, tell them not to eat it," he advises to Jace. When the plates of burgers, hotdogs, and toasted buns arrive, fourteen young people form a line at the table. [...]. After finishing their meal, young people gather at another table to play board games. Their peals of laughters and groans vibrate around the room as one young woman loses all her cards. [...]. The staff halts the game to recognize and hand out awards to three young people for being positive role models. Through the applause and whistles, three young people's names are called. Someone turns on*

*music as the rest of the young people urge the three to do a ceremonial walk or dance as part of their acceptance speech.*



The exchange above took place during Family Night at Voices<sup>1</sup>, an alternative-to-detention (ATD) afterschool program. While Voices is a court-mandated afterschool program for young people in the juvenile justice system between 7-to-16 years old, it has fostered a sense of community. Through social rituals like the bi-monthly Family Night, Voices often creates spaces for young people, their families, and staff members to come together to eat, hang out, and engage in various activities offered at Voices. This sense of community has provided a way for young people to feel at ease. Similar to Jace and Levin ribbed Marvin, young people do not have malice, but in their way create a sense of play while at Voices. Voices staff members have assured that this playful vibe of their relationships helped to balance the guidelines established by the Family Court.

*“It’s sort of like being with your brother or sister. When you are little, you mess with each other but know that you love them. I think the kids see this place...see us,*

---

<sup>1</sup> Voices is a pseudonym for the alternative-to-detention program referred in this paper. Because of the population of this study are minors who are court-involved, pseudonyms will be used to refer to the site, its contractual partners, its location, and the people (both youth and staff members) involved in the program. In addition, images have also been blurred to protect the identities of young people.

*the staff, as big brother or big sister.” Aghil, a staff member reflected. “Don’t get me wrong. We set rules that they have to follow. But we care about them and want them to feel at home. But there is no reason why those two can’t go together” (Fieldnotes, September 2012).*

Over the next six years, I experienced young people continue to return to Voices even when their cases were closed by the court. These young people, affectionately termed alumni, would come to hang out with current participants, participate in the activities, and check-in with staff members. The caring, inclusive environment help evolve the afterschool program space from a court-mandated site to a place that provided activities of their interests.

*“I like coming here. I didn’t feel like that at first when I came. I was maaaaad. [...]” Layla, a 14-year-old young woman recalled, “Now it feels like a second home. Like they’re family, you know? [...]. Voices is like a normal afterschool program that other kids go to. [...]. Voices should be available for every kid, not just the ones who get in trouble like me” (Fieldnotes, May 2014).*

These comments and reflections by various staff and young people nurtured me to consider how formative restricted spaces like Voices could be reformed to include young people to actively engage in their learning experience. One of the themes that emerged from these reflections included transitional care practices by staff and young people.

**Nurturing Sites of Inclusion:**  
**Care Practices at an Alternative-to-Detention Afterschool Program**

*“If you could only sense how important you are to the lives of those you meet,  
how important you can be to the people you may never even dream of.  
There is something of yourself that you leave at every meeting with another person.”*  
—Fred Rogers—

This paper draws from a six-year ethnographic study at an alternative-to-detention afterschool program. It advocates for care practices to transform the relationship and spaces within formative spaces. To consider the need for changes in institutions, this paper will offer a brief historical context of the juvenile justice system in the United States. It also reviews methodological approaches young people and I used to collect data for this research. The paper will also advocate for the need for care practices in sites for educational spaces.

**Historical Context of Juvenile Justice System in the United States**

School policies and criminalization of youth behavior often reinforce one another in relation to one another (Christie et al., 2010; Vareene and McDermott, 1998; Vasudevan and Campano, 2009; Wald and Losen, 2003; Welch, 2017; Welch, 2011). According to the statistics

provided by the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention, over 300,000 young people 10--17 years old were arrested in the United States in 2017. This paper particularly observes young people's difficulties within the juvenile justice system by viewing it as a struggle between humane response and punitive system that was intended to protect court-involved young people under 18-years-old (ACS, 2016; Cornell Law, 2016; OCFS, 2018; OJJDP, 2018).

While the different systems were created with the intent to protect court-involved youth, throughout the history of the United States, the juvenile justice system has struggled between being a compassionate response and a punitive system. In the late 18th century, with many of the population living and working in farming communities, there were limited social and public interactions in the United States. Due to growing religious commitment at the time, there were more strong establishments of right and wrong. However, because the United States government was still being established, crimes committed by youth were handled through local government, who mostly left parents to oversee and punish their children.

One of the prominent English lawyers, William Blackstone, interpreted and adapted common laws of England which governed the American colonies. *Parens patriae*, which declared the King to be the guardian of all his subjects, was transitioned to consider the State as the parent in the United States. As such, the newly established government assumed the right to intervene on behalf of the youth. This government would provide rehabilitation and protective supervision for youth. Children under the age of seven years were considered as infants and lacked moral responsibility. Children between 7-14 years old were believed old enough to understand what was right and wrong; hence, they could be "found culpable by the courts". And any youth older than fourteen were deemed responsible as adults for their criminal acts.

Early in the 19th century, separate local and state organizations began establishing

reformation sites for youth involved in crime (ABA, 2015; CJCJ, 2015; CWF, 2010; Wildings, 2011). Reformation advocates like Thomas Eddy and John Griscom were discerned that young people, regardless of age or gender, were being placed in overcrowded and decrepit penal institutions. These sites also held adults who committed crimes and those who were mentally ill. Through the Society for the Prevention of Pauperism, Eddy and Griscom established the New York House of Refuge in 1825, one of the earliest movements for what would be later known as the juvenile justice system. They focused on reforming and training through industrial schools, and housed youth who were identified as being “abandoned, delinquent, or incorrigible.” All of the qualities in which authorities deemed were a path toward delinquency. Within three years, similar institutions were opened in urban areas like Boston and Philadelphia. On average, the facilities housed 200 youth, but some like the New York House of Refuge housed over 1,000 youth (CJ CJ, 2015; Fox, 1970; Pickett, 1969; Sheperd, Jr. 1999).

These facilities focused on minimizing court proceedings. And the government began using the sites to keep young people away from adverse home environments. They aimed to teach youth sobriety, thrift, industry, and prudence. They also held youth in the facilities until they were deemed reformed. The state policymakers wanted to create an authority for the state to provide homes, education and job training for “youth with delinquent backgrounds.” By the 1840s, there were an additional 25 facilities throughout the country. The House of Refuge Movement evolved to a more reformatory approach of industrial schools. At these organizations, many children were working full day shifts at trades (tailoring, manufacturing, silver plating) in addition to attending school for another four hours. These locations were also separated according to race and gender, and they were governed and managed by private boards.

In the 19th century, there was a rise in scandals at industrial schools. For example, the

industrial schools in Chicago were filled with immigrants who were being physically abused. There were also reports of a lack of due process for youth who have not convicted of criminal conduct. However, these young people were continued to be confined because of a status offense. Finally, the Illinois Supreme Court deemed its Chicago school unconstitutional. The closure of other schools followed including The San Francisco Industrial School. Soon these industrial schools were labeled as a failed system by the city's judiciary committee, and the juvenile court movement began.

The beginning of the progressive era movement brought changing the course to how our society was imagining the space and context of juvenile justice. The Illinois Juvenile Court Act in 1899 gave power to the court to exercise broad discretion to intervene on behalf of young people. The judges' primary goal was to rehabilitate rather than punish youthful offenders. These young people were deemed to require help based on their life circumstances. The judges would offer personalized and informal conversations with young people and their families. Together, they would provide a solution that would meet the best interest of the child.

After the first presiding first juvenile court Chicago judge, Honorable Richard S Tuthill, his successor, the Honorable Julian Mack, described the court's goals:

“The child who must be brought into court should, of course, be made to know that he is face to face with the power of the state, but he should at the same time, and more emphatically, be made to feel that he is the object of its care and solicitude. The ordinary trappings of the courtroom are out of place in such hearings. The judge on a bench, looking down upon the boy standing at the bar, can never evoke a proper sympathetic spirit. Seated at a desk, with the child at his side, where he can on occasion put his arm around his shoulder and draw the lad to him, the judge, while losing none of his judicial dignity, will gain immensely in the effectiveness of his work” (Mack, 1909, 120).

However, there was a shift again in the early in the 1900s when the southern African-American communities and new immigrants began moving to urban areas. As more people

began settling in the United States, cities became crowded, and housing and food availability became scarce. Also, the exploitation, discrimination, and unenforced school attendance played a role in the increase in juvenile delinquency. Two high profile juvenile cases<sup>2</sup> highlighted the disparities in treatment by juvenile court judges. It emphasized how the juvenile court did not have resources, personnel, and facilities to adequately provide due process and uphold constitutional rights to a fair trial. The United States Supreme Court ruled that the juvenile court should proceed as a public social agency to give young people access to due process and right to a counsel. It also ruled that the young people were not entitled to a trial by a jury in juvenile court because it would minimize the difference between juvenile and criminal proceedings—effectively barring the need for its separate existence.

However, in the 1980s and 1990s, the public perceived that the system was too lenient. These perceptions were in response to the increasing drug epidemic and media's coverage on "tough-on-crime" stance by many public officials. In addition, work of social scientists (i.e., Fox, 1995; DiIulio, 1995; Bennett, DiIulio, and Walters, 1996) also played a role in how the public perceived children in the juvenile justice system. Discussing young people involved in the justice system as "*superpredators*" who were "radically impulsive, brutally remorseless," these young people were dehumanized.

Many states passed punitive laws, mandatory sentences, and adult court transfer for certain crimes (felonies) as a trend for juvenile crime accelerated and the public perceived that the system was too lenient. Violent Crime Control and Law Enforcement Act of 1994 also were

---

<sup>2</sup> In *Kent vs. the United States*, Morris Kent's fingerprints were found in the apartment of a woman who had been raped and robbed. The juvenile judge court waived jurisdiction to the criminal court without a hearing. In another case in 1967, Gerald Gault was accused of making indecent phone calls to a neighbor during his probation. He was committed to an industrial school until he turned 21-years-old, after being taken into custody without notifying his parents of specific charges. There was also no records of the proceedings and no sworn witnesses.

provided federal funds for states to build or renovate prisons. While scholars like Fox and DiIulio recanted their work acknowledging that it was based on faulty analyses, the number of youth in juvenile prison still peaked in 1999. There have been efforts to reform the injustice in the juvenile justice systems to protect the rights of people incarcerated in youth facilities. However as Rothman (1980) stated: “When custody meets care, custody always wins.”

In investigations by the U.S. Department of Justice and nonprofit organizations, there were documented reports of the persistence culture of violence at state-owned and privately operated juvenile correction facilities (Associated Press). In its August 2009 report of New York’s juvenile correction facilities, the U.S. DOJ found that in a single facility, 123 youths were injured in staff restraints and girls in a non-secure 50-bed facility were physically restrained 806 times in 2008. Although the State of New York reduced its incarceration rates and closed over fourteen juvenile facilities over the years, assault and injury rates have sharply risen for youth who remain in custody.

Along with this staggering large number of young people impacted by juvenile justice, there has been an increasing culture of violence against youth detained at correctional facilities. In its National Survey of Sexual Victimization of Youth, the Bureau of Justice Statistics (2012) found that at least one in eight youth in state juvenile correction facilities described being victimized sexually—and these modest numbers are solely those that were reported. These pervasive problems of physical abuse by facility staff, sexual abuse, overt use of solitary confinement and restraints, and youth-on-youth assault promote violence and deter the rehabilitation that state and society seem to seek. National studies also indicate that up to 70% individuals released from incarceration are rearrested within two years and 25% of previously detained juveniles fall deeper into the criminal justice system as adults (Holman & Ziedenberg,

2007; Petrosino, Guckenburg and Turpin-Petrosino, 2010; Drake, 2011, Ryon et al., 2013; OJJDP, 2014).

There are numerous arguments against placing young people in correctional facilities. Youth advocates urged that early involvement in the criminal justice system is a significant risk factor for future crime, poor education, and life outcomes. There was an increasing violence against young people with these facilities. Also, young people experienced forms of disruptions when they were detained away from their families and support networks. Isolations, institutionalizations, restrictions, and surveillance further added to the detriment of young people's emotional, psychological, and physical well-being. Concerned about young people, there has been increasing advocacy for alternative community-based (e.g., ATD) to provide early interventions to prevent further delinquency while promoting positive, sustainable development and relationships *for and with* youth. In addition, ATDs reduce the number of young people from being sent to detention centers and provide alternatives for judges where young people could be at home and attend school while their cases were being reviewed.

Even though these alternative programs offer care and support for young people, they become sites of dichotomy. ATDs are viewed as a place for "rehabilitation to fix" troubled youth to a program mandated by the court where young people are forced to attend. ATD programs like Voices become a vital part of how court-involved young people negotiate and (re)imagine the way they see themselves. From being called a criminal and troublemaker to being labeled as marginalized and oppressed, being noted as a victim of institutionalized racism or perpetual youth offender, young people internalize these polarizing and hurtful labels by identifying themselves in these negative ways. Common ways that they refer to themselves when I first meet them include questions like "*Do you like working with criminals?*" "*Do you worry about*

*what I'm going to do to you while being with me?" and "I can't ask other people for things because I'm here at Voices."* When asked further what they meant by these comments, most young people expressed that they have done something wrong. Since they have had problems with the law, young people explain that they “*need to be kept away from other people and fixed before joining them again*” (Fieldnotes, September 2013).

### **Participatory Ethnography with Young People at Voices**

To learn more about ATDs, I have become familiar with Voices, an alternative-to-detention afterschool program for young people between 7-to-16 years old. It provides educational support (assessment, tutoring, school visits); health and wellness programs (assessment; counseling); and legal services (education and representation). Voices also offers program activities including arts-based media (graphic arts, drawing, poetry, photography) and sports (basketball and boxing) workshops. These workshops are facilitated both by Voices staff members and the program’s contractual partners.

Over the past six years, my roles at Voices have been interchangeable as a researcher, co-participant, and co-facilitator for the media literacy and qualitative research workshops. Our engagements helped me to understand the ways young people use multimodal literacy practices. They evoked meaningful engagement with media and text (visual, oral, auditory, written) to negotiate and explore their everyday lives. I also came to appreciate that the unpredicted reactions of youth participants allowed for new ways of seeing for educators and practitioners. As such, it was natural for me to invite young people to be co-facilitators to design workshops and co-researchers to explore research topics that addressed their interests and experiences. One

of our questions was to better understand the context and impacts of ATD. To address our inquiry, this paper asked: *How do young people perceive the space at Voices? And what narratives do young people craft about being present Voices?*

We elected to conduct a qualitative research study because we would be able to describe young people's understanding of their realities. Bogdan and Bilden's (2007) advised focussing on "how meanings get taken up, shift, and circulate across different situations." Also, the descriptions of young people's realities would help me to explore how young people "create, bound, and articulate" about their space (Leander and McKim, 2003).

Out of the many qualitative research methods, young people and I selected an ethnographic approach. Cresswell (2007) and Marshall and Rossman (2011) defined ethnography as a unit of analysis that focuses on describing a culture-sharing group. They also stressed that ethnography studies the social behavior of an identifiable group and its social-cultural system. Ethnography would help to understand how culture work by making connections to movements and relations. It would allow me to examine shared patterns of behavior, beliefs, and languages of a cultural group. It would also seek how the group collectively formed and maintained culture.

Between July 2012-December 2016, young people and I collected 294 field notes and 1,025 artifacts produced by participants (photographs, collages, post-it comments, video footages, group pad notes, and dialogue). The wide range of data in line with the workshop ethos where young people would co-create spaces through their various literacy practices. The data collected in this study have been analyzed through both emic and etic approach (Levi-Strauss,

1985). The themes highlighted the value of negotiation and reciprocity as young people documented, produced, and reflected on fostering care at Voices.

### **Young People and Multimodal Literacy Practices**

Photography and collages became a predominant way young people narrate their thoughts about Voices. Their photographs captured their selfies and images of moments with other young people and staff members. Moving beyond “interruptions,” “disruptions,” “narcissism,” and “self-involvement,” selfies have also encompassed ways young people use digital artifacts as a way to share themselves both across time and space (Hjorth, 2015; Kelly and Kelly, 2013; Turkle, 2013; Selfiecity, 2014; Tifentale, 2014). Selfies and photographic documentations like those taken by young people at Voices created moments of their sociability where they took photographs of one another and reflected on the images. Most times, young people laughed or cringed together at funny or bad photographs, while at other times they asked others to pose similarly.



Figure 1: Photographs documented by young people during Voices moments

After requesting printed copies, young people used these photographs to create collages. Young people would carefully examine the printed photographs for over thirty minutes before picking specific images. Their images helped to reflect, elicit, and conceptualize their ideas and create their realities and social meanings around family (Butler-Kisber and Podma, 2010; Davis and Butler-Kisber, 1999). Using the word family to describe Voices, young people would mention that they were choosing photographs and including text to illustrate how they saw other participants and what other participants meant to them. Young people also wanted to capture moments that stood out to them and compared these moments at Voices to those in their neighborhoods.

Through their multimodal literacy practices, young people embraced and embodied care practices themselves to others. Through the space at Voices, young people would refer to their photographs to remember other participants and how they came to know each other. In attending to these moments and being open and receptive to what they were doing, we were able to understand better that their moments of literacy practices were also a way for young people to share who they were to other young people and a way to foster relationships.

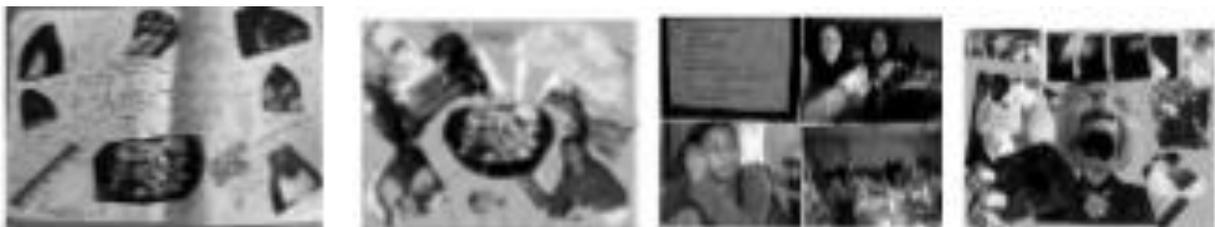


Figure 2: Collages around “Voices Family” produced by young people

While wanting to separate themselves from why they were mandated to attend Voices, these digital documentations and (re)productions of the printed photographs became an

empowering process for young people. They could share images of themselves, images of others, and images of activities that depicted their lives in a more positive way. Because young people at Voices were aware of the scrutiny and the labels that they carry, these digital and print forms expressed a part of themselves on how they want to be seen. Within the space at Voices, they became producers, curators, artists, photographers (Nemer and Freeman, 2015; Senft and Baym, 2015).

Their seamless use of multimodal practices from outside to within Voices became a way to share part of who they are and how young people saw themselves. Their openness and invitation to glimpse into their personal lives spoke to the level of comfort and care that they felt at the program. In their collages and conversations, current and former young people and various staff members explained that Voices was like a second home where they attended to the wellbeing of all.

Throughout their collage making and reflections afterward, through their Gallery Walk, young people demonstrate their understanding that Voices was a site that was nurtured around care. As such, when new young people were placed at Voices, current young people like Jace, Layla, and Levin would help the newcomers adjust. They would provide information about the workshops that were available and encourage the newcomers to attend non-workshop related events (barbeque, movie theater trips, and camping). From the acceptance and embodiment of care practices, young people engaged in (re)authoring “their selves” (Bartlett, 2007; Campano and Ghiso, 2011; Vasudevan, 2006). Rather than labeling themselves as “criminals who needed rehabilitation,” they became “professional photographers” who taught newcomers how to use the camera and workshop co-facilitators who helped newcomers engage with the activities.

Their care practice also transitioned outside Voices. Young people's career wish-lists included being a firefighter who rushes to the scene to save people from burning buildings, a(n) attorney or politician who creates wellness policies to improve the lives of other young people. They also created online memorials and music videos to create awareness of issues facing their communities. For example, young men created videos about the culture of violence and high mortality rate of young men of color in their neighborhoods. Meanwhile, the young women created social media campaigns addressing the nonexistent media coverage of sexual harassment faced by women of color. These responses inspired the need for me to learn the ways care practices are negotiated and embodied across the lives of young people. *How could formative spaces be cultivate a sense of community and create pathways for young people to flourish within an ATD program?*

### **Frameworks and Recommendations for Care Practices**

To explore these questions, I look to ethos of care. Young people embody care practice in how they interacted with other young people and staff members. Rooted in feminist theory, care practices have been packaged as a nurturing stance where educators need to adopt a receptive stance where they are open to understanding their students (Bubeck, 2002; Noddings, 1984, 1992, 2002a, 2002b; Rabin and Smith, 2013; Rosseau, 2004; Vasudevan et al., 2014). These care practices encompasses many pedagogical stance that encourages educators to foster relationship with their students and be open to cultivating spaces for students to share their experiences with one another (Freire, 1970; hooks, 1992, 2003; Ladson-Billing, 1994; Moll et al., 1992; Morrison, 2002; Vasudevan et al., 2010). These pedagogical stances have paralleled this invitation to invite

care by cultivating relationships especially within the context of sharing ideas through different mediums and modes (poetry, collage, media making).

Care practices could be viewed as embodied negotiated understanding, responsiveness, and transference among members of Voices community. Young people made sense of Voices by adapting and contributing to the changing care practices through sharing their multimodal literacy practices (dialogue, media, arts, text). Because care is both an active and passive process, embodying a caring stance, have required both young people, staff members, and workshop facilitators to take pauses to watch, listen, and ask questions without making assumptions.

In education, care practice is rooted in two main ideas (Noddings, 1992; 2002a; 2002b). First, educators have to be receptive by being open and making a constant effort to listen without making assumptions. When educators are able to achieve the level of openness and receptiveness, they move onto the second phase and respond by meeting the needs and experiences offered by others. Scholars have furthered hoped that once this level of responsiveness has been reached, students would also embrace similar care practices in their own lives in interacting with other people outside those immediate learning environments (Bubeck, 2002; hooks, 1992; Noddings, 1984, 1992).

Through this paper, young people, staff members, and I wanted to share narratives that counter the relational attitudes towards the juvenile justice system and the young people who are bounded and identified through their involvement. Advocating these care practices was not just about highlighting the goodness about ATDs, but emphasizing the contributions young people could and would make to their communities. In our current era of disparities locally, nationally, and globally, there has been a push for a more civic-minded approach to promote and enlighten in a democratic and humane engagement of people. We offer that these civic engagements do not

happen just in schools but in afterschool programs and our everyday interactions. Furthermore, these engagements should not only be restricted those who seem to fit the ideal of an educated model citizen but should include everyone from different walks of life.

Young people at Voices and I further offer that by taking this reflective care practice, where educators foster an inclusive environment where young people feel safe, appreciated, and accepted, young people are not just affecting how they engage with other people, but also how young people understand, treat, and engage with their selves. Through these spaces of receiving care and taking up care in their own ways, young people reimagine their roles not as recipients needing change or educated, but rather as changers and contributors who actively negotiate and engage in making sense of who they are, how others perceive them and their various literacy practices, and how we perceive the world (Campano, 2007; Hull et al., 2005, 2010; Ito et al., 2010; Jenkins et al., 2009; Thomas, 2007; Vasudevan et al., 2010). Going forward, young people and I hope to examine how institutional spaces could be reimaged and cultivated to flourish a pathway where young people are welcome to contribute and address social issues in their communities through their everyday care practices.

