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Thinking with theory as a policy evaluation tool: The case of boarding schools for remote First Nations students

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Abstract
Many recent policy documents have outlined the challenges of delivering high-quality education in remote First Nations communities and proposed that boarding schools are one important solution. These documents have influenced the increasing uptake of boarding options and there has been considerable public investment in scholarships, residential facilities and transition support. Yet the outcomes of this investment and policy effort are not well understood. The authors of this article came together as a collaboration of researchers who have published about boarding school education for First Nations students to examine the evidence and develop a theory-driven understanding of how policies drive systems to produce both desirable and undesirable outcomes for First Nations boarding school students. We applied complexity theory and post-structural policy analysis techniques and produced a useful tool for the evaluation of boarding policy and its implementation.

Keywords
boarding schools, policy evaluation, residential schools, theory of change, thinking with theory

Introduction

This is a collaborative paper motivated by a shared interest in better understanding the systems that produce a myriad of outcomes for remote First Nations young people who attend boarding schools[1] away from home. Boarding as an 'intervention' should be seen as one response to the larger issue of First Nations education. Governments have grappled with how to address the failure of remote education for a long time, but in the last decade, boarding has been identified as a practical solution to the problem. Our intent is to inform better policy leveraging of desirable outcomes. Scholarly research exploring this topic has rapidly expanded in Australia over recent years. It has generated awareness of a range of immediate and long-term outcomes for First Nations youth and their communities which have resulted from policies prioritising boarding school over place-based secondary opportunities. The challenge now is to deploy this evidence in the development and implementation of more nuanced future educational policy that optimises desirable outcomes.

To achieve this goal, the authors agreed that critical scrutiny of existing policy was necessary to uncover the complex interaction of community-based, school-based, policy and political actors on educational outcomes for remote First Nations young people. The authors therefore applied an adaptive and inclusive methodology and a thinking with theory (Jackson & Mazzei, 2018) approach. This led to a theory of change and the inception of an evaluative framework to assess potential impacts of policy design and implementation practices. The authors are non-Indigenous researchers from Australia with significant professional experience in remote and boarding school education. The work stems from a broader participatory approach which included both First Nations and non-Indigenous researchers and practitioners. Our

thinking has evolved from our initial reflections in 2016, to an exploratory presentation of ideas at the Australian Association of Research in Education conference in 2017, to this article which moves the discussion on from a recognition of boarding's complexity to a more focused use of theory for policy use.

Background

The attendance of remote-dwelling First Nations young people at boarding schools has attracted considerable media attention in recent years, particularly from passionate proponents who want to see improved outcomes for remote First Nations young people (Australian Broadcasting Corporation, 2013, 2017; Burin, 2017; Penfold, 2014). Indeed, an analysis of literature and media stories carried out by Benveniste et al. (2014) concluded

> The imperatives for boarding as represented in the media stories are also about the benefits in terms of opportunity, choice, social capital and knowledge acquisition that would not be possible within students' home communities. The other major imperative is about addressing 'disadvantage' and 'closing the gap'. (p. 11)

However, greater clarity is required as to why boarding schools are important from the perspective of members of remote communities. Significant investment continues for the development of programmes specifically designed to support the transition to boarding school for remote First Nations young people, as well as to the funding of boarding school scholarships across Australia, seemingly irrespective of the (limited) evidence relating to the outcomes of such investments.

Impacts of boarding schools for remote First Nations students

Despite the emerging body of literature, our focus in this article is not on evidence of outcomes of boarding schools for First Nations students from remote parts of Australia. Where there was only one major piece of work written on the topic since the turn of the century – Mander's (2012) PhD thesis on boarding experiences in Western Australia – there are now more than 40 peer-reviewed articles or theses that address the issues faced by remote First Nations students attending boarding schools. Thorough summaries of this literature can be found in Guenther and Fogarty's (2018) examination through capital lenses of boarding, Parson's (2019) systematic review of First Nations scholarship recipients, MacDonald et al.'s (2018) discussion of boarding school utility for First Nations students and Guenther et al.'s (2019) systematic review of outcomes for remote First Nations students.

There have also been numerous reviews (Commonwealth of Australia & Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet, 2017; KPMG, 2016), inquiries (Crawford & Schwab, 2017; Halsey, 2018; House of Representatives Standing Committee on Indigenous Affairs, 2017; Queensland Productivity Commission, 2017) and a Royal Commission (Commonwealth of Australia, 2017) that have dealt directly or indirectly

with boarding schools or facilities and scholarship programmes in Australia. To be clear, common to all of these reports, is that boarding is constructed as a 'feasible' response to the challenges of providing high-quality secondary education in remote communities (see Wilson, 2014, p. 146).

What is evident from this literature is that the outcomes of boarding for First Nations students are mixed. On one hand, there are indications that boarding can deliver improvements in economic participation, secondary school completion, transitions into higher education, and a range of other individual and community benefits. These positive indications provide a sense of hope. On the other hand, the literature also highlights risks and costs associated with participation in boarding. These include a disconnection from family and kinship groups, cultural ceremonies and rites of passage, mental health risks, and reduced familial connections (Benveniste et al., 2019; Mander et al., 2015; Redman-MacLaren et al., 2017). Despite the growing evidence about boarding provision, there is little if any research (excluding the various inquiries and reviews) that evaluates policy in this area.

Theorising policy analysis

Post-structuralists argue that successful policy outcomes only have value if we can understand how the 'problem' as identified in policy came about (Bacchi & Goodwin, 2016). This stance elicits the voices at the margins of society, rather than just focusing on the norm or average. In the case of boarding, we could ask 'whose problem is the challenge of remote education?' Is it students', families', schools' or is it just a problem for governments? It also allows researchers to consider the intersection of power relations between marginalised minorities and the dominant majority. It enables the problematisation of 'specific individual behaviours [thereby enabling] the targeting of an identified minority for particular forms of treatment, while the majority is encouraged to behave "normally"' (Bacchi & Goodwin, 2016, p. 41).

One view of policy is that it arises as 'the result of pursuing governmental goals, making decisions and testing their consequences, in a structured process involving identifiable players and a recognisable sequence of steps' (Maddison & Denniss, 2013, p. 6). An alternative view is that 'government is seen as an arena, or a space, in which a range of political actors, all recognised as having a legitimate place at the policy table (stakeholders), interact to produce policy' (Maddison & Denniss, 2013, p. 7). For the purpose of this article, we adopt the position that policy phenomena are not facts. They reflect the perceptions of the majority – in this case, of what substantiates educational success in achievement, retention and employment outcomes for remote First Nations young people.

By naming the policy arena, we can explore dynamics and discourses of power, and shed light on the otherwise invisible structures that are taken as 'given' and without question (Paul-Jones, 2013). Informed by the examination of power in policy making, we adopted Bacchi and Goodwin's 'What is the problem represented to be?' (WPR) tool to view governmental policy practices as an activity that produces outputs. In this case, 'activities' are related to boarding provision, within the frame of the larger apparent problem of remote First Nations education.

Complexity theory as a frame of reference

Policies developed to explain what works best, and improve the way that transition experiences can be enhanced, as well as the use of scholarship programmes to enhance access, are generally based on linear thinking towards achieving a singular policy outcome: for example, improvement in Year 12 completion rates. However, there is a danger of this type of linear thinking in response to complex socio-historical issues (see, for example, Jörg, 2011). This approach can often fail to capture the nonlinear aspects of life and the lived experience for both individuals and groups and the contexts from which they come (McCausland, 2019), resulting in an 'artificial representation of reality' (Renger et al., 2019, p. 82). Complexity Theory embraces the ambivalence and discord often associated with social phenomena, seeing this milieu as typical rather than unusual. Complexity Theory has origins in systems science (Flood & Carson, 1993). A system has been described as a collection of elements that behaves as a whole (Meadows, 2008). In complex systems, the cause and effect processes are intertwined with nonlinear and unpredictable relationships (Snowden, 2011).

Notwithstanding the limitations of linear thinking described above, Theory of Change can be a useful evaluative analytical tool. Beyond recognising the complex social, historical and political settings from which current policies have emerged, and within which they continue to influence, a Theory of Change enables the evaluation of policies' efficacy and exposes intended and unintended consequences which flow from them.

Theory of Change. A Theory of Change considers what happens (outcomes) as a result of interactions between context and mechanisms (Pawson, 2013). Developed in the tradition of theory-based evaluation, theory is concerned with how and why an intervention works (Marchal et al., 2018; Rogers, 2014). In particular, it studies the interrelationship between a given programme, identified mechanisms of change and the outcomes they intend to achieve. A number of studies claim Theory of Change is the best approach for dealing with complex social and political change processes, because it emphasises the links between objectives, strategies, outcomes and assumptions (see, for example, Stein & Valters, 2012; Vogel, 2012). In applying this approach, the authors acknowledge the limitations of linear logics in complex systems (Renger et al., 2019). Others argue that the evaluation of nonlinear processes involving multiple stakeholders and relations demands multiple theories of change (Barnes et al., 2003). Arensman et al. (2018) argue for a focus on understanding how processes develop and evolve in reality. They suggest refining the use of existing theories of change to understand change as initiated from practices in which human interactions are central. In this article, we are seeking to articulate a Theory of Change where it currently does not exist for boarding interventions. Renger (2010) describes a process of developing theory from source documentation and this at least in part is what we have tried to do for the purposes of this article; where the source documentation is evidence we ourselves have generated from research.

Methodology

This article reports outcomes of two methodological processes. First, the authors' collaborative knowledge of the existing research literature is reported. Each author has contributed to this and is well placed to draw on this evidence. Second, authors developed a 'Theory of Change' framework. Hence, this article offers new knowledge created from a collective understanding of collaborating researchers through a process of 'thinking with theory', putting 'theory to work to see how it functions within problems and opens them up to the new . . .' (Jackson & Mazzei, 2018, p. 720). Thinking with theory integrates data, theory, texts and philosophy as a process, rather than a discrete method. By drawing on our collective data, knowledge, readings, philosophical positioning and our questions, 'new assemblages' can be created (Jackson & Mazzei, 2018, p. 717). Specifically, while it is recognised that the product of this collaborative inquiry reported in this article (Wyatt et al., 2018) is not a definitive end in itself, it does offer an evidence-based framework to assess the potential impacts of policy design and implementation practices for remote First Nations young people attending boarding schools.

Thinking with theory

We consider attendance at boarding schools as an 'intervention' for remote First Nations young people, and based on our research, reading and collective observations, we propose both the intended and unintended outcomes of boarding interventions. It is important to stipulate that this article is not trying to determine what works or what constitutes best practice. Rather, in the complex system of education – which we suggest boarding is a part – 'what works' is at best an elusive hope without substance (Biesta, 2007). Rather, consistent with the notion of thinking with theory, we ended up with expressions of 'difference within' (Jackson & Mazzei, 2013, p. 263), which helps explicate the variations and ambiguities within the boarding system, dependent as they are, on context and mechanisms. Out of this analysis, several sets of potential outcomes were put forward, all of which made it more difficult initially to establish causal pathways to any successful outcome. Through the process of 'thinking with theory', we finally circled around a series of statements, which can be described as 'Normative Truth Statements' (Guenther & Falk, 2019). These Normative Truth Statements are 'at least for a time' (p. 1021), meaning that as new evidence comes available, the truth can be either contested or confirmed.

Community of practice – workshops

In preparing this article, authors agreed to work collaboratively using a two-step workshop process during which we shared our thoughts. The workshops were mediated through an online collaboration platform called Adobe Connect and facilitated by two of the authors (first and second authors). A product of the workshops was the identification of various contexts, mechanisms and outcomes that contribute to and emerge from remote First Nations young people attending boarding schools away from home.

Once identified, these contexts, mechanisms and outcomes were explored through the prism of Theory of Change.

Findings

In presenting the findings, we consider boarding school education for remote First Nations students not only as an intervention but also as a complex system. It could be argued that the elements of the system are interventions (e.g. scholarship programmes and transition support services designed to improve retention and entry to higher education) by themselves with quite specific purposes (e.g. Abstudy as an intervention designed to improve access). We treat these elements as mechanisms designed for the outcomes discussed earlier in the literature.

Contexts

The context for remote boarding includes several elements related to individual students, their families, their community and school. Specifically, the culture and language of the home community and location of the school, their histories, economies, the legislative and regulatory parameters, and less tangible elements such as aspiration, spirituality, racism and acculturation contribute to the context. For the individual student, these elements cannot be deconstructed or compartmentalised. Figure 1 represents how we itemised the contextual elements of boarding interventions. The elements are set inside a larger circle as they are inseparable from each other, and while the elements are represented as equally sized circles, they do exert varying degrees of influence on each other, and on the intervention and students themselves.

Mechanisms

Mechanisms are the vehicles through which outcomes are achieved (or not). As we discussed these mechanisms, we identified six groups that related to the individual (e.g. identity capitals and resilience), funding (such as Abstudy and scholarships), the educational institution (such as school values and teacher qualities), the boarding model (e.g. boarding standard compliance and cultural safety), policies (e.g. Closing the Gap) and communities (and their histories, agency and leadership). These multilevelled mechanisms are represented as cogs in a machine (in Figure 2). Adjusting one mechanism inevitably affects another (positively or negatively). As seen in Figure 2, there are many permutations and combinations; the six clusters hold more than 50 elements, representing the system's complexity.

Outcomes

Figure 3 summarises three sets of possible policy outcomes: intended outcomes, unintended outcomes and other (un)desirable outcomes. Successful boarding interventions are often described in terms of intended outcomes such as helping young people to

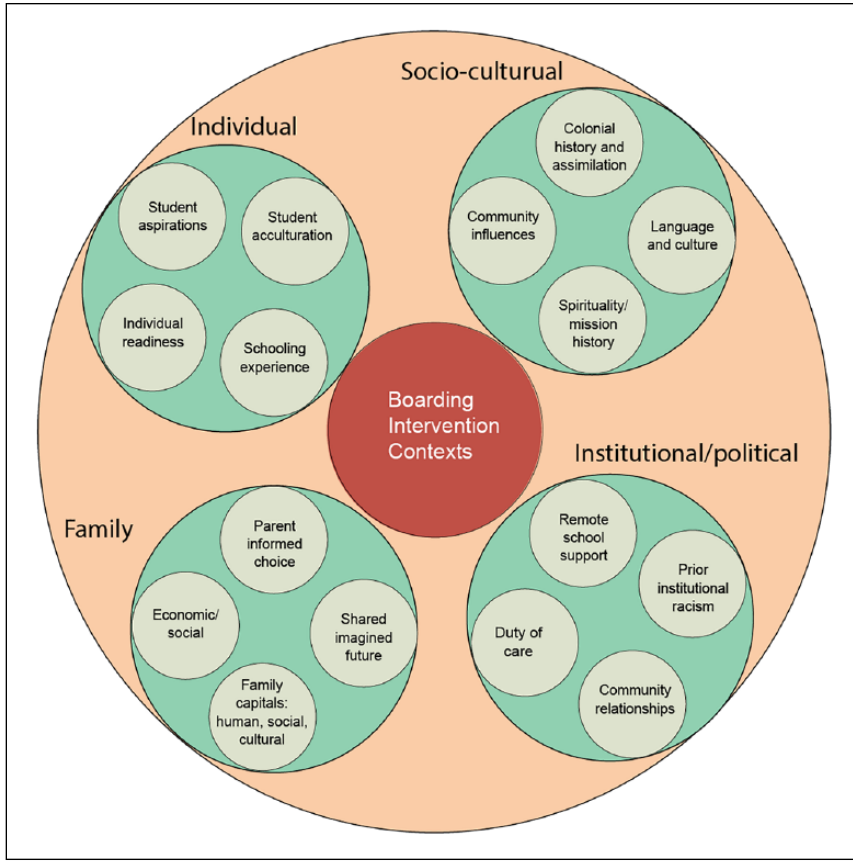

Figure 1. Boarding intervention contexts.

complete year 12, go on to university, gain employment, be prepared as leaders and role models, or access a range of external opportunities that would not have been possible without the intervention. However, there is a less positive side of boarding that emerges from research, which is increasingly being highlighted, mostly through qualitative evidence. These unintended outcomes include a range of outcomes including mental ill-health, social distress, cultural loss, language loss, missed opportunities, criminal behaviours and identity confusion (Guenther & Fogarty, 2018; MacDonald et al., 2018; Parsons, 2019). The other outcomes relate to the broader level impacts of social cohesion, community capability, health, well-being and safety, and self-determination – which could be desirable or undesirable for different groups of people at the same time. It is possible that the intervention could result in all three types of outcomes involving a combination of system actors. For example, a student could finish year 12 (a 'good' outcome for school-based actors) and return to community only to experience social and cultural dislocation (a 'bad' outcome for community-based

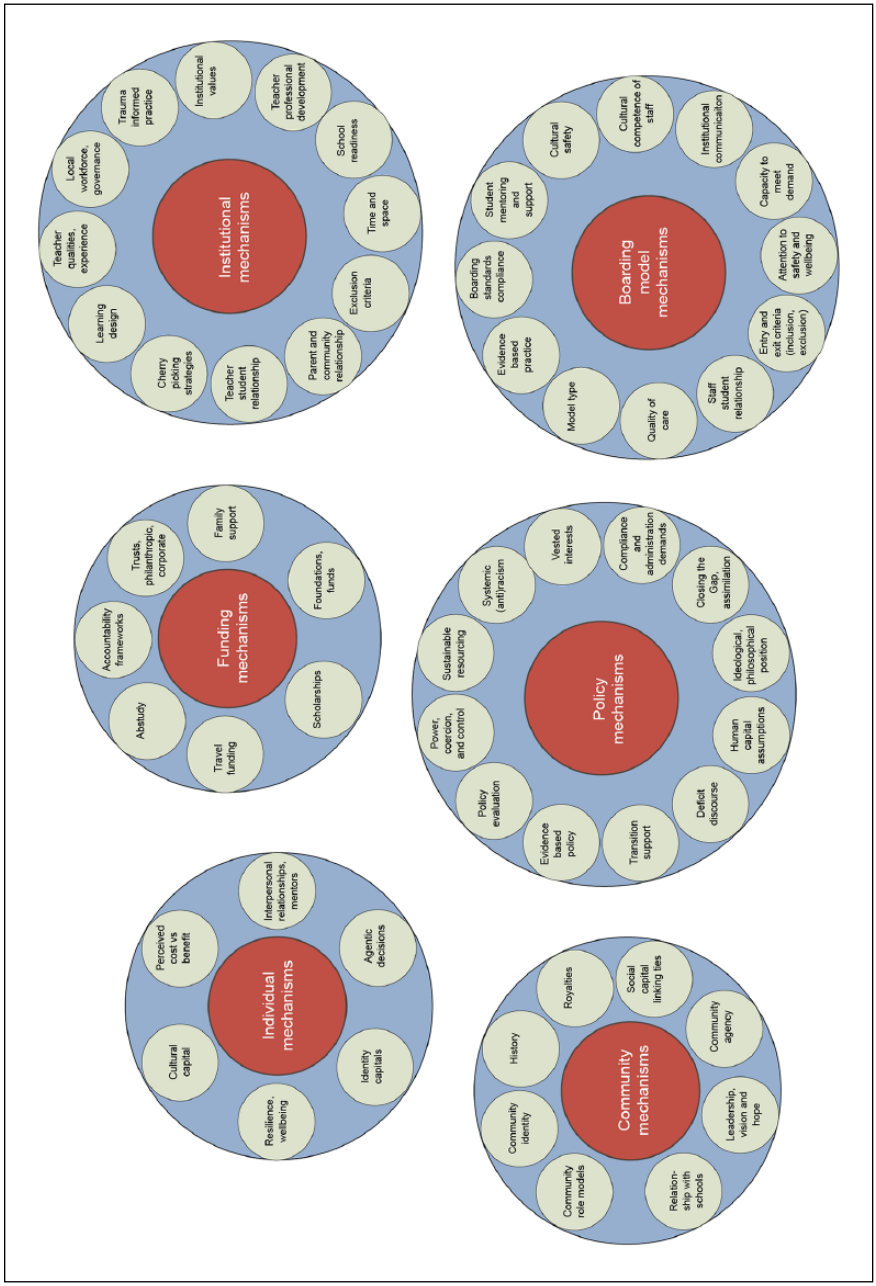

Figure 2. Mechanisms contributing to the boarding intervention.

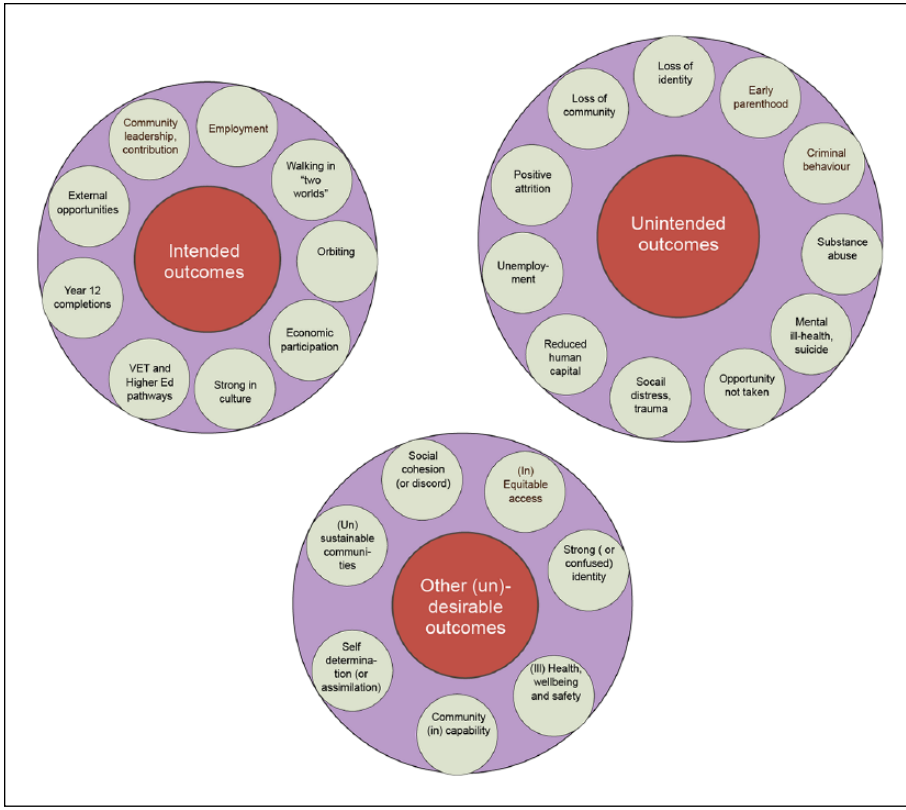

Figure 3. Possible outcomes from boarding interventions.

actors), which in turn leads to community dysfunction (as the community comes to grips with who should be held to account for this result). These undesirable outcomes in turn cause another problem for policy and political actors who must find ways of addressing these additional problems. Another possible product of successful completion might be the depletion of human capital in the community – if the successful student does not return.

Causal pathway diagrams

Our first attempts in synthesising the above findings into a causal pathway diagram and accompanying Theory of Change resulted in something of a confused mess as shown in Figure 4. It attempted to deconstruct the various contextual factors, mechanisms and outcomes towards a kind of linear logic (from left to right) and in doing so, failed to recognise the complexity of the system and the inter-relatedness of the elements. However, Figure 4 does demonstrate the messiness of the system and the

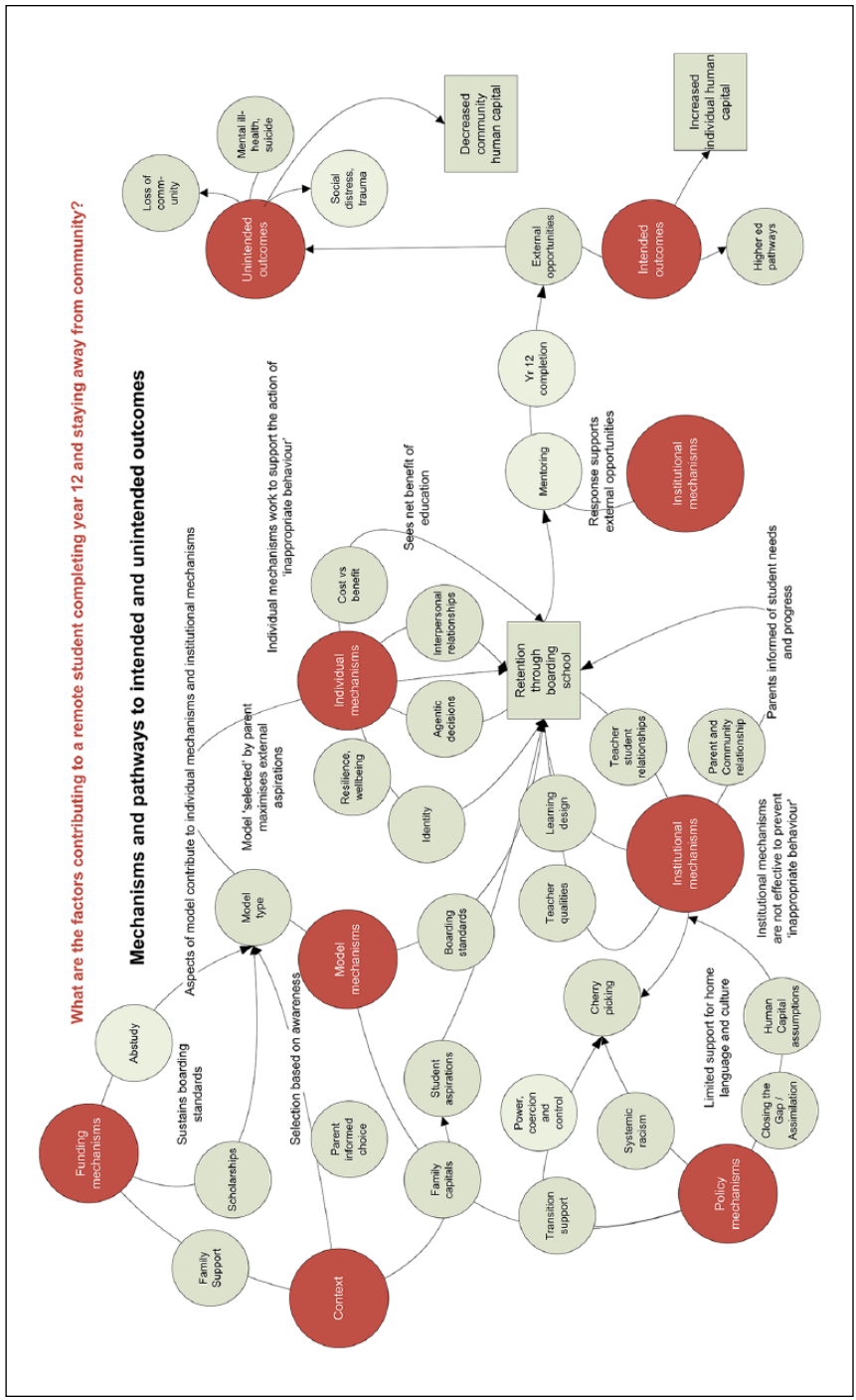

Figure 4. First attempt at a causal pathway model towards theory of change.

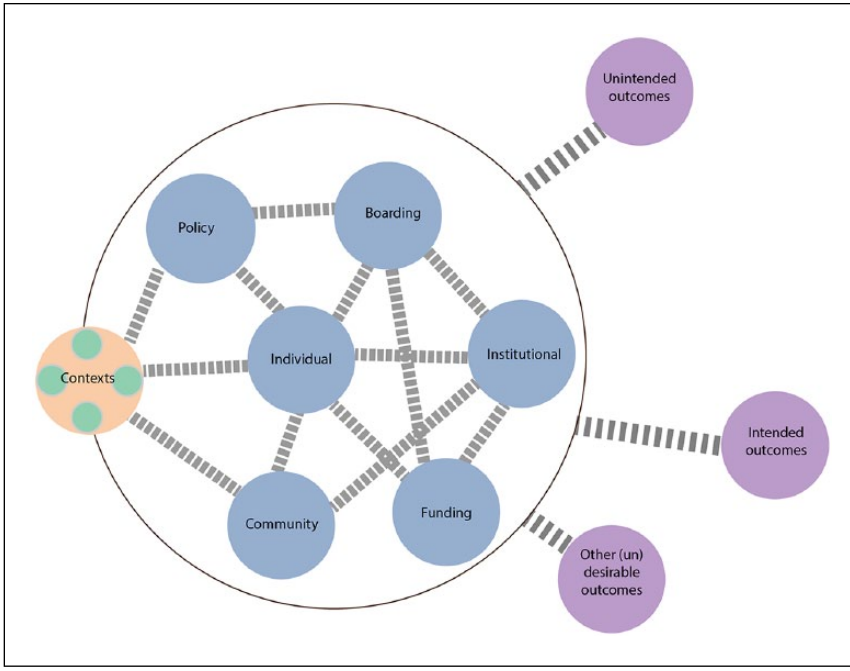

Figure 5. Revised synthesis of key mechanisms and relationships towards a theory of change.

number of elements that are required to make it work (in this case, the option that a student might complete year 12 and not return to community).

Our revised attempt, shown in Figure 5, represents the system as the collection of inter-related mechanisms interfacing with the contexts. Note that the context is not part of the system but rather engages with the system. The possible outcomes loosely hang off the system, but again, are not part of the system, which is the 'intervention'. They are connected to the system with dotted lines to show not only their connection but also the uncertainty of their achievement or not. As noted in the literature (Meadows, 2008; Snowden, 2011), this is the nature of a complex system: it is nonlinear, its outcomes are uncertain and the relationships between the elements are unpredictable. The other important feature of a complex system is that to effect change, the system must be treated as a whole, not as sequentially connected elements which is what we tried to describe in Figure 4.

Discussion

Articulating the theory

In arriving at Figure 5, we are suggesting that the system and all its elements need to be better understood before any intervention is introduced, and particularly where new

policies are implemented in response to a perceived problem. The risks of harm along with the potential benefits must be considered, taking account of the competing and complementary demands of all the system actors.

Informed by our findings, we summarise the Theory of Change in the following terms as Normative Truth Statements: (1) The intended and desirable outcomes of boarding school education for remote-dwelling First Nations students will be more likely when the system mechanisms work together in mutually supportive ways; (2) Unintended and undesirable outcomes will be more likely when the system mechanisms work independently of each other; and (3) Improving the likelihood of desirable and intended outcomes will happen when the actors working within the context and within the mechanisms work together to negotiate and agree on the required processes and agree on the intended outcomes.

The theory depends on a shared understanding of what the problem to be addressed is, what the intended outcomes are, and what the risks of particular courses of action are, particularly for students and their families.

Towards an evaluative tool for policy and practice

The articulation of our Theory of Change can be applied in several ways as an evaluative tool. First, for those involved with policy design and implementation, our analysis highlights the multifaceted nature of the boarding system, such that consideration should be given to all the potential enablers and disablers within the system. Consistent with a post-structural analysis of policies, we should be particularly concerned about those at the margins of the system. How does the boarding system work for those who drop out of school? How does it work for parents and grandparents with limited understanding about contemporary Western education and those who do not have the requisite capitals to navigate the system? How does it work for remote schools who are part of the educational context, but left with falling enrolments and diminished physical, economic and human resources to meet the needs of some of the most educationally vulnerable young people in our nation?

Second, identifying complex interrelated mechanisms should prompt policy designers and implementers to ask themselves what the impact a particular change in the system is likely to have on other elements of the system. For example, increasing the level of transition support may increase demand for boarding school education, which might be considered a good thing, but what if there is insufficient capacity in the system to match the demand? And will that increase in demand tighten the entry requirements of boarding schools thereby building inequitable structures into the system to exclude potential beneficiaries? Or will increased transition simply increase the 'churn' of students to boarding school and back to community? Again, consistent with post-structural analysis, this laying out of mechanisms allows us to question who has the power (and who does not) in the various influences of change towards outcomes.

Third, for all those involved in the system, the proposition that boarding produces both beneficial and potentially harmful outcomes for students and communities should prompt a discussion about the ethics of a particular action. For example, if a change in the system

results in half of the young people leaving, what happens to the viability and quality of existing secondary programmes in remote communities? Does the loss of funding for secondary programmes limit the opportunities for those who remain in the community? Is an unintended class system being created that might divide the community?

Fourth, returning to our theoretical position of policy analysis, if we apply Bacchi and Goodwin's (2016) post-structural WPR approach, we could begin to challenge the assumptions and premises behind the 'problem' of remote education. For example, we could ask whether the money spent to send a young First Nations person away from home (which may be conservatively in the order of $70,000 per year) might be better spent in the community (where schools currently receive about $35,000 per year). If the problem is represented to be poor attendance in remote schools, then we could, for example, ask whose problem this is. And what is the impact of taking out those who have high attendance (those who meet boarding entry requirements) on those who have low attendance, who remain? Does a policy change just create another problem in place of the one that the change hopes to address?

Finally, the outcome possibilities should prompt questions for all involved in the system to consider performance indicators beyond a narrow set of indicators related to retention and completion or transition to higher education. For example, how can we assess the net economic gain (or loss) from increased completions or increased churn, or both? How can we assess the impact on well-being of students, not just in transition from community to boarding school but from boarding to post-school pathways?

Beyond boarding, we could envisage our thinking with theory approach being applied to other problematic areas of policy. For example, in Indigenous Affairs, we could see application for issues of justice, employment, suicide prevention and health for First Nations people, moving away from evaluation of programme effectiveness, but to the intersecting goals of multiple initiatives driven by multiple stakeholders (e.g. governments, communities, enterprises), all of who see different problems to be solved, with different solutions. Thinking with theory allows us to look beyond a narrow focus on causation towards positive outcomes of individual interventions to expected and unexpected outcomes, positive and negative.

We acknowledge that our approach has limitations: there is little evidence to support how the various mechanisms may or may not work together to achieve outcomes. We did not intentionally intend to evaluate boarding as a 'system' and with the benefit of hindsight, we may have better positioned our attempt to understand boarding as an 'intervention' through a system evaluation theory lens (Renger, 2015). Researchers and practitioners cannot see the full picture of what is happening in the entire system. Indeed, our positions potentially create bias – a more thorough approach in our community of practice would have included a range of stakeholders including parents, students, teachers and policy bureaucrats.

Conclusion

In this article, we have attempted to articulate a Theory of Change for boarding interventions for remote First Nations students. We have mapped out dozens of potentially

competing mechanisms that should be considered from a policy design and implementation perspective. Informed by this experience, we went on to develop a theory of change that can be used as an evaluative tool in First Nations boarding school policy contexts.

In broad terms, our Theory of Change can be summarised in three normative statements: (1) Intended and desirable outcomes will be more likely when the system mechanisms work together in mutually supportive ways; (2) Unintended and undesirable outcomes will be more likely when the system mechanisms work independently of each other and (3) Improving the likelihood of desirable and intended outcomes will happen when the actors in the context and within the mechanisms work together to negotiate and agree on the required processes and agree on the intended outcomes.

Nevertheless, the complexity of the Theory of Change within the system of boarding school education suggests that, 'what works' is at best an elusive hope without substance (Biesta, 2007). Our work provides a valuable evaluative framework for all stakeholders involved in this particular complex system of boarding interventions. The more than 50 identified mechanisms can inform policy designers, policy implementers and practitioners to carefully consider 'what the [policy] problem is represented to be' (Bacchi & Goodwin, 2016), how new initiatives will change the dynamics of power relations, how they will potentially expose other stakeholders to risks and most importantly, how those at the margins of policy are affected. Furthermore, the approach of thinking with theory to generate a new Theory of Change could be more broadly applied to other systems or policy interventions and for understanding policy problems for improved design. The approach can be used to challenge norms and focus more intentionally on the potential array of impacts, as an alternative to using causal linear logic models that shows what works.

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Note

1. Note that in Australia, the reference to 'boarding school' is common language. The authors appreciate that in some countries around the world that the use of this wording may seem offensive. In the Australian context, the term is not offensive and simply refers to the place where students from all cultures and backgrounds, Australian First Nations or non-Indigenous, stay or lodge at to facilitate their schooling away from their home communities. The families that send their children to boarding schools generally do so to give their children better educational opportunities than would otherwise be available. In Australia, most boarding schools are located in cities and large towns some distance away from the family home during the school term.

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