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Choice-less Choice for Rural Boarding Students and their Families

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Abstract

The term ‘choice-less choice’ in education arises from the ethical dilemma where parents are left with no option other than one they do not want to choose. In this article, we draw particularly from David Mander’s (2012) use of the term, where he applied it to First Nations students from Western Australia. In Australia, choice-less choice applies to many rural parents where the local school does not offer secondary education options. They must ‘choose’ a boarding option for their child, or another option such as moving their family to a location where there is a secondary school, or perhaps distance schooling. Other parents have a local secondary option, but this option may not result in Year 12 completion. Based on My School data, this paper uses Google Maps to spatially represent where, in very remote parts of Australia, parents have limited access to local secondary schools or secondary schools that rarely produce completions. The data from My School shows that in very remote areas, this choice-less choice applies to about 6500 students and their families. A further 13000 First Nations students and their families face choice-less choice because even though there is a secondary school in their community, the chances of completing are slim. To explain the latter phenomenon, we draw on Appadurai’s (2004) theory of ‘capacity to aspire’, which suggests that choices are culturally pre-determined and dependent on access to power. Finally, we consider the implications of choice-less choice and suggest how choice-less choice can be removed.

Key words: *boarding schools, rural education, school choice, Indigenous education, choice-less choice.*

Introduction

Market-oriented reforms in education have been designed to generate ‘quasi-markets in education’ (Wilson, 2018) where students and parents can choose among educational options. In the United States, ‘Free’ or ‘Charter’ schools are designed for greater autonomy and greater accountability. School choice reforms “are grounded in economic theories that see competition and choice as potential levers of school improvement” (Wilson, 2018, p. 1282) particularly for disadvantaged children. Choice is seen as a value in itself “grounded in the rights of parents to choose and direct their children’s education” (p. 1283). Similarly, ‘autonomy’ can be a goal of these reforms, based on the rights of individuals to make choices that meet their own needs. Whether the outcomes of school choice reforms are just and equitable is not so clear cut (Betts &

Loveless, 2005). There is also mixed evidence about the efficacy of school choice as a means of increasing learning opportunities and outcomes (Austin & Berends, 2018). From a philosophical perspective, these critiques of school choice draw into focus the issue of whether education is a public or private good (Sockett, 2010). If it is a private good, then those who have capacity to choose will almost certainly derive a benefit. The market then is a market for Human Capital with economic purposes where efficiency and production drive choices of “*educational consumers*” (Labaree, 2011, p. 390). While a market driven educational system may or may not work in densely populated areas, in rural spaces the local markets are thin—there is limited choice even where parents have resources to access schools at the higher end of the market.

One of the key barriers to parent engagement in school choice is distance. That is, most parents prefer a secondary school that is nearby, regardless of the apparent quality of the school. Windle (2015), in a study of parent choice in Melbourne, Australia found that most parents do not consider alternative options for secondary education and most would prefer to engage in the nearest public school. For those who do engage in the pursuit of choice, he suggests that “*School choice offers the illusion of entering more privileged locations by attending private schools...*” (Windle, 2015, p. 93). The illusion of upward social mobility is an important selling point for those who argue that choice is an equity issue. So the attractiveness of boarding for some rural and remote parents lies in its ability to iron out inequities, but as Guenther (2020) has shown for First Nations students from remote communities, the hope of Year 12 completion does not necessarily translate into economic participation or improved income. There is a hope, but it is an illusion often unrealised when remote students return from boarding schools.

Marketisation in school choice assumes the presence of a market, but as we shall see, educational markets in rural and remote areas rarely exist—or are at best ‘mixed markets’ (Lovell et al., 2016)—even though the language of ‘choice’ is sometimes used to suggest that parents have choice. For example, in the Australian context, the Northern Territory Department of Education describes ‘remote secondary choices’ in these terms:

When your child reaches Year 8 any of the following options are available:

- *stay in their community and continue their schooling*
- *move to a regional high school with access to regional residential facilities*
- *move to a boarding facility in Darwin or Alice Springs*
- *move to an interstate boarding school. (Northern Territory Department of Education, 2019)*

Three of these options involve some kind of ‘move’. We will argue that these ‘choices’ are to a large extent illusory, and for many parents living in ‘remote’ communities, they are really “*choice-less*” (Mander, 2012) and certainly do not mirror the advantages of choice that the proponents of school choice suggest exist.

School Choice and Rural Education

While choices may be available for urban parents and their children, “*Many rural families have only one primary school to choose from in the community, and many secondary students need to commute on a daily basis, or may need to attend a boarding school*” (Echazarra & Radinger, 2019, p. 32). In this case, the choices parents have may not be about which school to send their children to, but where to position their families to maximise educational opportunities for their children. In a study of parent choices in Karratha, a regional town in Western Australia, Forsey (2015) identifies that educational choices or judgments that parents make are somewhere between the imaginary and the real. “*Decisions about where to be and how to be caused parents to weigh up imaginings and realities regarding the future of their children, the ‘shape’ of their immediate and extended family, and the ways they want to live*” (Forsey, 2015, p. 780).

Assuming for a moment that boarding is a choice for rural and remote students and their parents, what are the choices that different groups of rural and remote ‘choosers’ make? McCarthy (2013) differentiates between Australian First Nations parents as ‘enfranchised choosers’ and non-Indigenous parents as ‘Rural/Remote Choosers’. He suggests that the two groups make choices for different reasons. The former group choose because they want their children to be socially mobile, while the latter choose to prepare their children for the post-school world. He suggests that both groups make choices with racialized thinking, such that for non-Indigenous parents there is a “*tipping point of Indigenous enrolment*” (McCarthy, 2016, p. 38) that would cause them to deselect a boarding school. Indigenous parents also deselected high Indigenous enrolment schools because of perceived quality and safety concerns. Note however, that in McCarthy’s study, the research participants had already made a choice to send their children to a particular rural boarding school. Mander (2012) argues that this choice is actually ‘choice-less’, due to the lack of resources in the local school, and which leads parents to ‘circumvent’ being caught up in the local secondary education pathway:

Many informants described how their local schools did not have adequate facilities such as classrooms, computers, desks and chairs, ovals, sporting equipment, access to course options in Year 11 and 12 and in turn access to post-school courses and career choices. A firm perception held by most informants was that to experience a sense of achievement and success at the secondary school level, they had to deliberately circumvent being caught up in their local secondary education pathway, which they believed offered no guarantee of delivering the learning experience they desired. (Mander 2012, p. 144)

The move to boarding school may be daunting, but for several of those in Mander’s (2012) study, the challenge of remaining in community was even more daunting: “*For several, the prospect of contending with problematic social issues that they perceived pervaded their local secondary school context — such as alcoholism, drug use, family feuding and gang membership—was more daunting than studying away from home*” (Mander et al., 2015, p. 28).

In that case, there was a choice between local provision and boarding but the perception of having ‘no other choice’ is pervasive. The issues Mander (2012) raises about resources and facilities are important for all rural and remote students, particularly when access that might otherwise be available through online learning opportunities does not exist because of limitations in infrastructure and access to bandwidth (Halsey, 2018; Park et al. 2019). Sending children to boarding schools does not overcome the fundamental access issues that limit equitable education opportunities that exist in rural and remote communities. Nor does sending children away address the needs of children who stay in their communities.

What Choice Means and the Capacity to Aspire

Choice is often constructed as a psychological and individual cognitive decision associated with aspiration (Gore et al., 2017) and psychological wellbeing (Martin et al., 2014). While social factors are sometimes recognised as covariate influences in studies about motivations, “*from a sociocultural perspective, psycho-educational factors are very much framed by the perspective and orientation of the individual student*” (Martin et al., 2016, p. 774). The unit of analysis then becomes the individual rather than the social. But to what extent do individual cognitive choices determine secondary school destinations?

As Appadurai (2004) argues, the ‘capacity to aspire’ is to a large extent culturally determined and depends on the relative poverty and wealth associated with class and social position. Some would argue that choice is largely ‘illusory’ (Schwarz, 2018, pp. 850-851), a result of ‘dispositional’ sociological influences. “*Culture shapes choice not only by restricting choice (as in sociologies of modernization), shaping the set of alternatives (as in pragmatist repertoire theories) or producing cultured subjects and pulling their strings (as in dispositional sociologies)*” (Schwarz,

2018, p. 859). Beyond culture, the capacity to aspire may well be structurally constrained, requiring ‘capacitation’ in order to emerge (Zipin, Sellar, Brennan & Gale, 2015).

In very remote parts of Australia, the different dispositional and structural influences are represented by diverse historical trajectories, diverse experiences of colonisation and assimilation and diverse cultural axiologies. These differences have resulted in varying patterns of education, training and employment, which in turn impact on the uptake of education and employment opportunities that children aspire to (Guenther, Disbray & Osborne, 2014). Drawing on Bourdieu’s theories of social and cultural capital Andres (2009), in an attempt to quantify the impact of dispositions suggests that: *“Power governs aspirations and the greater one’s level of power over their world, the more likely is it that one’s aspirations and the chances of realizing them are aligned”* (Andres, 2009, p. 77).

In the context of decisions about boarding school for remote students, Osborne, Rigney, Benveniste, Guenther, & Disbray (2018) argue that the choices families have available to them are based on their access to ‘both ways capital’. The families in their study all stated that both ways capital was the desired outcome for education choices but it was almost exclusively those with access to Western/mainstream capitals (through family or advocacy brokers) that were able to access scholarships to fee paying schools. In other words, those families with greater access to this type of social capital (and mobility) have more choices than those who do not. However, we should not interpret this limited both ways capital as an inherent failing of people in remote communities. After all, non-Indigenous and non-remote people would have the same limited ‘both ways capital’ if they wanted to engage in remote communities. What is important to recognise is that aspiration and success in remote First Nations communities often looks different to what for them is an ‘externally imagined’ definition of success (Osborne, 2016; Osborne & Guenther, 2013).

The influence or control of others may result in conflicted choices being expressed by individuals. Further, those expressed aspirations may be more apparent than actual. Drawing on Bourdieu and Sen, Hart suggests: *“Expressed aspirations may not reflect the individual’s aspirations but rather may reflect the expectations and aspirations of significant others...”* (Hart, 2012, p. 92). Burton & Osborne (2014), discussing the dynamics of aspiration and the roles of teachers and parents, provide some insights from an Anangu perspective: *“The parents hold the future for the children. Piranpa teachers hold “keys” to the future, but they don’t understand Anangu ways, so it’s Anangu that give the future to their children”* (Burton & Osborne, 2014, p. 36).

In Osborne et al.’s (2018) terms, it is possible that teachers and brokers (advocates) can assist in enabling access the ‘both ways capital’ working closely with families to more confidently negotiate the spaces between and across ‘Anangu ways’ and (Western) ‘Piranpa ways’. In the context of rural and remote ‘choice-less choice’ we can see that school choice is not as simple as an individual or family making a decision in the best interests of their children. Even where apparent options do exist, those choices may be illusory.

While in this study, the data we use from My School does not tell us why (or not) people make choices (or not) to send their children to boarding schools, the qualitative evidence we have presented above, forms an important backdrop to the quantitative measures we present later in the article.

Methodology

The data reported here are drawn from the My School website (ACARA, 2020). We use 2018 data for both enrolments and completions. At the time of writing, secondary completion data was not available for 2019. My School is a publicly accessible database with information about most schools in Australia. For each school information is provided about total enrolments, First Nations enrolments, the year level range, attendance rates, teacher and staff numbers, funding and

academic achievement information. In the analysis presented here, schools are divided into two groups: those with more than 80 per cent First Nations enrolment and those with up to 80 per cent enrolment. Previous research shows that at 80 per cent First Nations enrolment, patterns of attendance and achievement (using NAPLAN) change markedly (Guenther, 2015, 2013).

Sample and Analysis

The schools we used in our analysis were all classified as 'Very Remote' according to My School. A total of 287 such schools were found in Northern Territory, Western Australia, Queensland, South Australia and Tasmania. Victoria and the Australian Capital Territory do not have schools classified as 'Very Remote' on My School.

Very Remote schools and communities are less likely to have access to the range of services and facilities that are available in places that are located closer to urban centres (see Halsey 2018). We caution against using 'disadvantage' to describe Very Remote schools and communities, partly because of the many advantages associated with life in rural and remote regions and partly because the word ascribes deficit to people and places that is not justified (Guenther, Bat & Osborne, 2014).

Data for this study were compiled into a spreadsheet that includes most of the data available on the My School website. Our analysis used information about total enrolments, First Nations enrolments, Year 12 completion data and Year 12 certificate data, filtered by the remoteness indicator 'Very Remote', which corresponds to the Australian Bureau of Statistics Remoteness Structure (ABS 2018b). We generated summary statistics using pivot tables. Each school was assigned a latitude/longitude geo-tag and this information was used to compile customised Google maps.

We also used ABS Census data using the online Tablebuilder tool (ABS 2018a). Tablebuilder allows users to select variables by statistical geographic regions. In this case we used the Very Remote remoteness area from the ABS remoteness structure (ABS 2018b). In this case we identified all 17 year-olds from the 2011 and 2016 Census and counted those who self-reported as attending a school or tertiary institution. To determine the rate of increase in Year 12 completions we counted all those who stated they had completed Year 12 at the 2011 and 2016 Censuses and then calculated a yearly increase based on the difference.

Limitations

The data presented here draw from two datasets, the Census collection and data collated by Departments of Education and presented on the My School website. Matching these two datasets may be problematic, partly because of the different data collection methods: Census is self-reported, school data is collected by schools. Census data does not tell us where qualifications are attained, and while My School tells us how many students graduate from Year 12 it does not tell us how many students attained Year 12 completion or certificates at boarding school or elsewhere, for example, through distance education. Nevertheless, bringing the datasets together provides an opportunity to test assumptions and make reasonable estimates of non-participation in senior secondary schooling and non-completion rates. The differences between Census and My School data allow us to make a reasonable estimate of how many students are completing Year 12 outside of community schools.

A further limitation arises from a breakdown of schools into those with up to 80 per cent First Nations student enrolment and those with greater than 80 per cent. An assumption is made that those schools with above 80 per cent First Nations enrolment are 'First Nations' schools, but in fact over the 11 years of data collected on My School, these schools have an average of 97 per cent First Nations enrolments, while the other group includes on average 25 per cent First Nations enrolments.

The data presented on Year 12 completions in My School does not show how many completions are First Nations students. However, using the 80 per cent divider, it would be fair to say that about 97 per cent of Year 12 completions (if not more) in this group are First Nations students.

Results

Table 1 and Table 2 show very remote schools and students affected by choice-less choice. The communities of schools that offer only primary or middle years provision are here categorised as having choice-less choice. A total of 138 schools fall into this category, representing 48 per cent of all very remote schools. Just over 6500 students are affected by this (22 per cent of all very remote students). My School figures suggest that predominantly non-Indigenous schools (those with up to 80 per cent First Nations enrolment) are more affected by choice-less choice (54 per cent of these schools and 24 per cent of students) than schools with more than 80 per cent First Nations enrolments. By contrast, 44 per cent of the mainly First Nations enrolment schools, and 21 per cent of students in schools of this type, face a choice-less choice.

Table 1: Schools with and Without Access to Secondary Years Provision in Very Remote Locations, 2018

School category	Highest level of schooling available in local community			Total	Proportion of schools with no Year 11/12 provision
	Middle years local provision (up to Year 10)	Primary years local provision (up to Year 6)	Secondary years provision (Year 11/12)		
Schools with up to 80% First Nations enrolment	15	51	57	123	53.7%
Schools with more than 80% First Nations enrolment	41	31	92	164	43.9%
Total	56	82	149	287	48.1%
Schools with more than 80% First Nations enrolment, per cent of total	73.2	37.8%	61.7%	57.1%	

Source: (ACARA, 2020)

Table 2: Students Affected by Choice-less Choice in Very Remote Locations, 2018

School category	Highest level of schooling available in local community			Total	Proportion of students with no Year 11/12 provision
	Middle years local provision (up to Year 10)	Primary years local provision (up to Year 6)	Secondary years provision (Year 11/12)		
Enrolments in schools with up to 80% First Nations enrolment	1027	2063	10001	13091	23.6%
Enrolments in schools with more than 80% First Nations enrolment	2367	1077	13064	16508	20.9%
Total	3394	3140	23065	29599	22.1%
Schools with more than 80% First Nations enrolment, per cent of total	69.7%	34.3%	56.6%	55.8%	

Source: (ACARA, 2020)

The schools shown in Table 1 are represented on a map at Figure 1¹. The online version of the map is interactive and allows users to zoom in to a particular region. The map makes it easy to see where choice-less choice exists, at least as much as choice-less choice is defined in terms of access to local secondary (Years 11 and 12) provision. It also shows where regional residential facilities exist in the jurisdictions that have Very Remote schools. These regional boarding facilities are mostly located outside Very Remote parts of Australia, and with a few exceptions, are too far from communities to allow students to return home for weekends.

It should be noted that the quality of secondary provision in the senior years is not indicated in My School. For example in the Northern Territory, many Very Remote schools give students the option of staying in the community through an alternate program where the “focus will be on post primary literacy and numeracy and an employment pathways program... [providing] skills... to gain employment” (Northern Territory Department of Education, 2019). This is not an equivalent to mainstream secondary provision. Most of the more than 13000 First Nations students represented on the map as having secondary access, face a choice-less choice due to the modified curriculum that does not lead to a Year 12 Certificate or an ATAR for university entrance.

¹ Note that the static map shown here does not show all very remote schools. Some communities have several schools. The online version allows the viewer to see all schools by zooming in to a region or community, see https://www.google.com.au/maps/d/embed?mid=19rsugc2_7HGTRP7Uk2HEs1AqO_bM3y64.

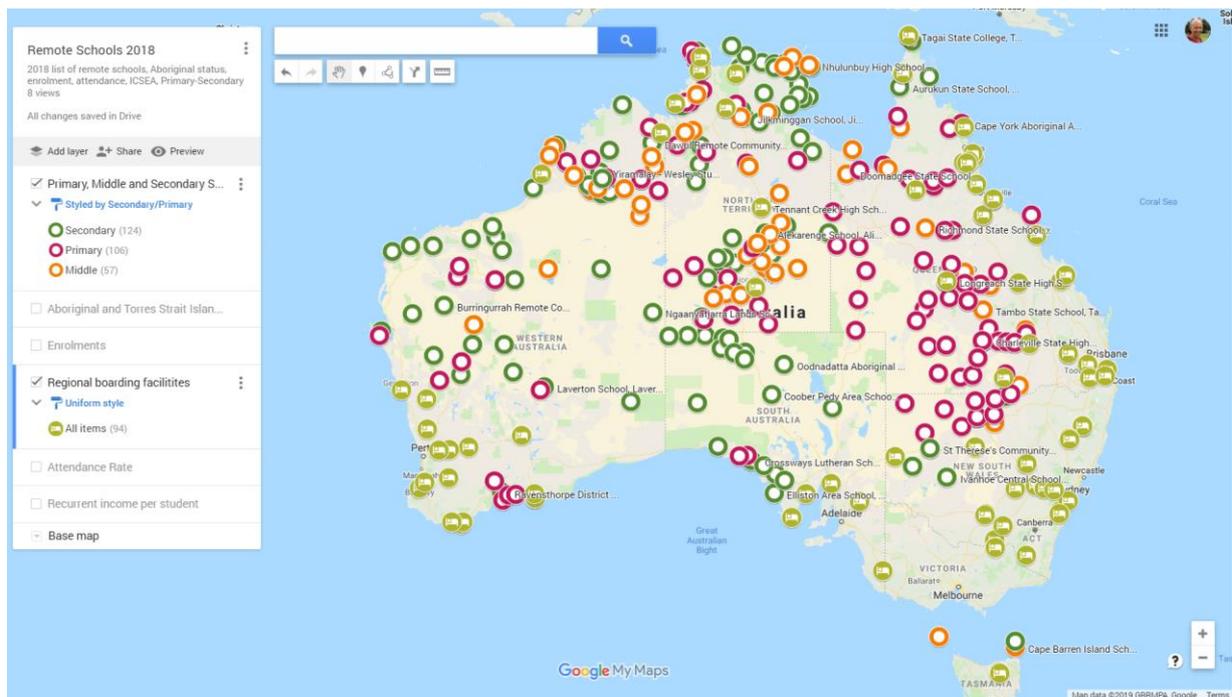


Figure 1. Spatial representation of choice-less choice and regional boarding facilities (excluding ACT and Victoria). Source: Google MyMaps adapted collated from My School (ACARA, 2019), Australian Boarding School Association, Aboriginal Hostels Limited, Indigenous Education and Boarding Australia, Australian Education Network websites

Table 3 shows Year 12 completions in the period 2010 to 2018 for Very Remote schools. In that period the total number of completers has remained fairly constant at an average of 480 per year (range 431-517). Meanwhile, as shown in Table 4, the total number of students gaining a completion certificate has increased from 289 in 2010 to 386 in 2018. This increase means that the percentage of completers receiving a certificate has increased from about 61 per cent (in 2010) to about 78 per cent (in 2018). Worth noting also, is that while Year 11/12 students in the >80% First Nations enrolment category make up 57 per cent of all very remote students (see Table 2) they comprise just 27 per cent of 2018 Year 12 completions (Table 3) and 22 per cent of the 2018 Year 12 Certificate recipients (Table 4). So while more non-Indigenous students are affected by choice-less choice, the impact of differentiated senior secondary delivery options for First Nations students has a disproportionate impact on completion outcomes.

Table 3. Year 12 completions for very remote schools, reported on the My School website, 2010-2018*

	Year 12 completions								
	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018
Very Remote Schools									
In schools with up to 80% First Nations enrolment	351	330	284	340	325	366	322	359	363
In schools with more than 80% First Nations enrolment	124	135	147	155	121	146	160	158	131
Total	475	465	431	495	446	512	482	517	494
Per cent of enrolments in >80% First Nations schools	26%	29%	34%	31%	27%	29%	33%	31%	27%

Source: My School (ACARA, 2020) *Students who complete Year 12 by distance (who are enrolled in a non-remote distance education school) are not included here.

Table 4. Year 12 Certificates for very remote schools, reported on the My School website, 2010-2018

Very Remote Schools	Senior Secondary certificates								2018
	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	
Schools with up to 80% First Nations enrolment	216	242	191	245	263	323	271	300	300
Schools with more than 80% First Nations enrolment	73	79	86	106	86	99	104	107	86
Total certificates	289	321	277	351	349	422	375	407	386
Per cent of Year 12 completers (shown in Table 3)	61%	69%	64%	71%	78%	82%	77%	79%	78%

Source: My School (ACARA, 2020)

Table 5 provides an analysis of First Nations Year 12 completers, based on Census data. The 2011 and 2016 figures include completers from earlier years, but the growth rate of 571 per year represents new Year 12 completers, some of whom completed Year 12 in local schools (approximately 140 per year based on My School data, Table 2) and some who completed Year 12 elsewhere (for example by distance education or at boarding schools). Our assumption is that apart from a small migratory component, the majority of the growth comes from boarding schools. The Study Away Review (Commonwealth of Australia & Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet, 2017) suggests that in 2016 there were 5700 Abstudy recipients, about three-quarters (4275) were from remote or very remote areas. Assuming an equal distribution across years 7 to 12, this would mean about 700 of these students were studying at the Year 12 level.

The figure of 431 shown at Table 5 (Row 6) is for Very Remote students only so is consistent with the Remote and Very Remote estimate of 700. Apart from the 140 who complete (Row 5), of the 420 17 year-olds who self-reported as attending school in 2016 (Row 3), these figures suggest that 280 did not complete (Row 3-Row 5). About 1000 First Nations 17 year-olds (Row 2-Row 3) of the 1416 total resident population in 2016 (Row 3) are not attending school at all according to the Census figures. So while choice-less choice is taking 431 young people to complete Year 12 at boarding, only 10 per cent of those who remain in (or return to) community complete Year 12 in their community and of the 140 who complete only 100 gain a Year 12 Certificate. So, for the majority of young First Nations young people, school choice is one of whether to engage or not, and most are disengaging.

Table 5. Year 12 completers according to the Census, Very Remote areas, 2011 and 2016

	2011	2016
1) First Nations Year 12 completers counted on Census night	8202	11055
2) First Nations 17 year olds counted on Census night	1469	1416
3) First Nations 17 year olds who report attending school, TAFE or university based on place of enumeration	423	420
4) Annual intercensal growth of Year 12 completers (Row 1 [2016]-[2011])/5		571
5) Growth from local >80% First Nations enrolment schools (average from 2012 to 2016 from Table 3)		140
6) Balance of average annual growth from boarding schools, migration or other sources, including schools with up to 80% First Nations enrolment		431

Source: ABS Census 2011, 2016 and My School (ABS, 2018a; ACARA, 2018)

Figure 2 shows schools that offer senior years educational options (Years 11 and 12). The crosses indicate no Year 12 completions in 2018 (87 schools). The light grey shaded tick symbols, representing four schools, indicate one Year 12 completion. Another 17 schools produced between two and 10 completions (light green tick). The darker green ticks represent the 16 schools that had more than 10 year 12 completions. As might be expected, these schools are mostly located in large regional centres or in schools that cater for large numbers of students.

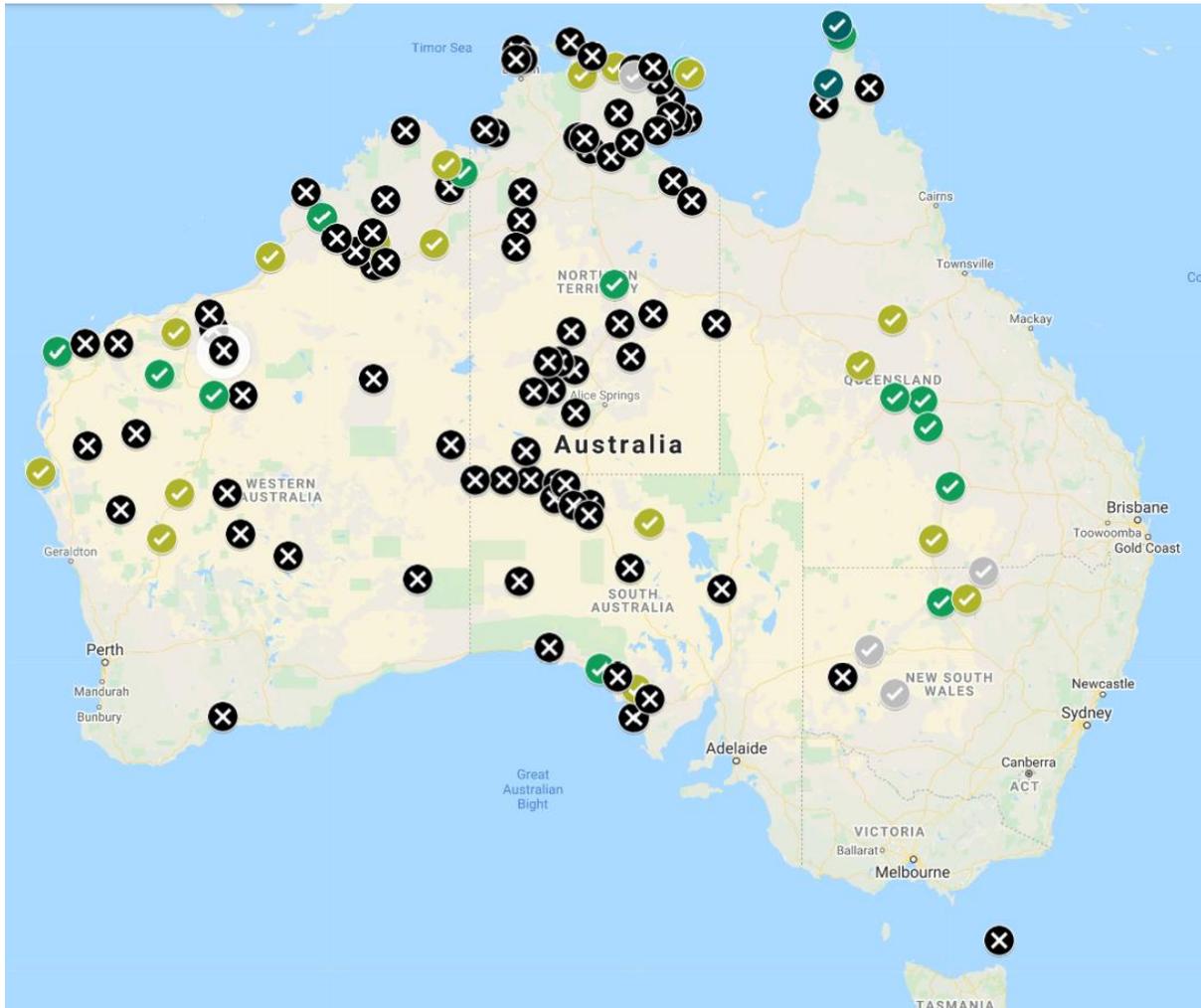


Figure 2. Spatial representation of 2018 Year 12 completions in very remote schools which offer Year 11 and/or 12. Source
https://drive.google.com/open?id=19rsugc2_7HGTRP7Uk2HEs1AqO_bM3y64&usp=sharing, based on data from My School (ACARA, 2019)

Discussion

It could be tempting to see the crosses in Figure 2 as aspirational failure. But an alternative explanation may lie in the differential (as opposed to deficit) aspirations, particularly of First Nations students in remote communities (Osborne & Guenther, 2013)—that is the real choices that young people and their parents make are not based on the ‘externally imagined’ (Osborne, 2016, p. 57) choices, but on the ‘red dirt’ opportunities that families see in education (Guenther, Disbray & Osborne et al., 2015). However, these alternatives do not take away from the possibility that choice-less choice, based on fundamentally limited access to ‘capacity to aspire’, or what Zipin, Sellar, Brennan and Gale (2015) call ‘funds of aspiration’, is responsible for the inequities we could see being perpetuated intergenerationally in Figure 2.

The Prevalence of Choice-less Choice in Very Remote Australia

Coming back to the data presented earlier, there are several factors to consider when assessing how widespread choice-less choice is in Very Remote Australia. Firstly, the data (see

Table 2) shows about 6500 students and their parents face choice-less choice by virtue of there being no secondary school in their communities. For many of these parents (see for example

Forsey, 2015 discussed earlier), their ‘choice’ is not where to send their children to school, but where they should move to, in order for their children to access a quality secondary education.

Secondly, a high proportion of the First Nations students are in Very Remote schools where no or very few students have completed Year 12 or obtained a Year 12 Certificate. Of the more than 13000 First Nations students enrolled in schools that report Year 11/12 provision (see Table 2), on average, just 140 complete Year 12 (Table 3) and even fewer—about 100—gain a Year 12 Certificate (Table 4). Parents in these communities would soon realise that their local school is not a reasonable choice if they want them to gain a Year 12 Certificate, as indicated in Mander et al’s (2015) study.

Thirdly, the alternative choice-less choice in Very Remote schools is for those parents whose choice-less choice is to not send their children to boarding school. For these parents, Appadurai (2004) describes their options in terms of limited ‘capacity to aspire’ and Osborne et al. (2018) describe their decisions being limited by low levels of ‘both-ways capital’.

Are There Solutions to the Choice-less Choice Dilemma?

How then can choice-less choice for rural and remote students be countered? One possibility would be to invest more resources in Very Remote schools so that senior secondary offerings match more closely those offerings in urban areas. The challenge here is that while this might be more practicable through online learning opportunities, digital access in rural and remote communities often limits what is possible (Park et al. 2019). However, schooling as a construct of education, is as much a sociological experience as it is an epistemological one; the networks associated with interactions influence the outcomes of education, and arguably with larger networks come greater opportunities for increased social capital, and increased equity in education (Frank et al., 2018). For the many primary and middle schools represented in Figure 1, where there is no secondary option within the community, expanding the range of offerings in the primary school will not necessarily produce equitable outcomes. But as noted also in that first map, regional boarding facilities are located quite some distance from the students’ home communities. Halsey’s (2018) *Independent Review of Regional, Rural and Remote Education* suggested actions that would allow for the development of boarding facilities “closer to the source of need” (p. 79). This may offer a more meaningful choice to some parents and students.

However, the greater challenge is in the communities where there is the ‘illusion of choice’ (Schwarz, 2018), most notably in the many remote First Nations communities where some secondary options are available. The challenge here is to work with students and families to develop a greater ‘capacity to aspire’ (Appadurai, 2004), or in Zipin et al’s (2015) terms, ‘capacitation’ of their latent funds of aspiration. In remote communities, aspiration is generated through following those who have gone before and paved a way for children (Osborne, 2013). To foster development of that capacity or both ways capital requires time and careful work with parents and communities. There are several examples in remote parts of the Northern Territory, Western Australia and South Australia where community action is leading to aspirational changes (Osborne et al., 2017; Nawarddeken Academy Limited, 2017; Disbray & Guenther, 2017; Osborne, Lester, Minutjukur & Tjitayi, 2014, Drennan & McCord, 2015). This kind of aspirational work led by families and communities ultimately leads to the pursuit of more meaningful choices for many families in remote communities. It will take time both to develop schooling models that strengthen senior schooling in the local context and also for those remote students choosing to pursue boarding options, to adjust.

Conclusions

The lessons from the analysis of data presented in this paper suggest that ‘choice-less choice’ is not simply a product of geographic isolation, though the maps we presented certainly point to many remote communities where secondary options are not provided. We have seen that choice-

less choice arises also out of the nature of secondary provision in many remote community schools—particularly those with high proportions of First Nations students. The ‘choice’ to keep a student in a remote school (where the desired outcome is Year 12 completion) is not a reasonable choice where drop-out rates are high and completions are either non-existent, or can be counted on one hand. Further, the restricted offerings of those schools also make the choice to stay a second rate one. We have also seen that the choices provided by the Northern Territory Department of Education, are weighted three to one towards ‘moving’ as noted in the Introduction. We have also noted from the literature that for some parents the ‘choice’ about secondary education is often not an axiological one (about the value of education) but rather an ontological one (about who parents and their children want to become). For First Nations parents, this ontological question is difficult. Do they want their child to be strong in their first language and culture, or do they want to risk losing that in favour of being stronger in the Western cultures associated with urban boarding schools. Finally, we have seen that choice-less choice is reflected in parents’ (and their children’s) capacity to aspire, and what Osborne et al (2018) describe as ‘both ways capital’. That is, for many parents (particularly those with limited personal experience of school) the choice is illusory in that their imaginings of what boarding school means are not necessarily based on first hand experience. This in turn requires a capacitation of young peoples’ funds of aspiration (Zipin et al., 2015). Even where a parent does deliberately choose to send their child to boarding school, the entry criteria (for example patterns of regular attendance in the community school) may inhibit the options available to the child.

So how then can the ‘choice-lessness’ of choice be removed? There is no single or simple solution to this. However, depending on the parents’ circumstances, there are strategies that can work to reduce ‘choice-lessness’. For example, in the larger remote First Nations schools, a combination of semi-residential block boarding programs, coupled with increased local school resourcing could be helpful. Regional residential facilities may also add to the choices parents have. Partnerships between communities and schools also offer some potential for parents to increase their awareness and access to ‘both ways capital’. Innovative models which involve alternating learning on Country and in urban contexts may be of particular benefit to some students who struggle with being away from home over extended periods. The choice to stay must be accompanied by adequate infrastructure, particularly fast, high bandwidth internet and communications technologies more generally. To provide these options, those with power and resources will need to work hard to recognise the inequities associated with education for rural and remote students, and then to address them.

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