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## Creating Systemic Design-Informed Impact Evaluation Frameworks: A case study with the Gord Downie & Chanie Wenjack Fund

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**Relating Systems Thinking and Design  
(RSD12) Symposium | October 6–20, 2023**

## **Creating Systemic Design-Informed Impact Evaluation Frameworks: A case study with the Gord Downie & Chanie Wenjack Fund**

**Lewis Muirhead and Ryan J. A. Murphy**

In this presentation, we share the development of a *theory of systemic change* (ToSC) with the Gord Downie & Chanie Wenjack Fund (DWF). The DWF works to build cultural understanding and create a path toward reconciliation between Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples. In this case, a ToSC was developed to amalgamate and synthesise the work of multiple previous approaches to evaluation at the DWF. The DWF's existing Theory of Change provided a limited appreciation of the complexity of pathways from programming to outcomes, making it difficult to describe the activities of the DWF in an evaluable fashion. Through data collection and surveys, a ToSC was created in a process that also resulted in the streamlining of objectives from 22 to 11. The resulting ToSC rendered the organisation's theory of the system and its programs in pragmatic detail, allowing evaluators to create a systemically informed impact evaluation framework in the form of specific questions and data collection to guide program design and evaluation. Moreover, the ToSC exposed the interwoven connections and logic between the DWF's programs, allowing for organisation-wide insights and strategy decisions that were previously unavailable. We end this presentation with a discussion of the benefits and limitations of this methodology and some recommendations for future evaluators interested in using ToSC.

KEYWORDS: impact evaluation frameworks, theory of systemic change, theory of change, program evaluation, leverage analysis

RSD TOPIC(S): Cases & Practice, Mapping & Modelling, Methods & Methodology

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## **Background**

Program evaluation is the theory, methodology, and practice of designing effective interventions—and evaluating their effectiveness (Funnell & Rogers, 2011). Program evaluation often involves the use of *theories of change* (ToCs). ToCs model the logic of an intervention: how the activities or actions of a program lead to the ultimate impact the intervenor aims to have (Mackinnon, 2006). However, ToCs have been criticised for being overly reductive and linear, especially when used in the context of systemic change (Wilkinson et al., 2021; Abercrombie et al., 2018; Alford, 2017). To respond to this critique, ToSCs have emerged as an alternative to the field of systemic design (Murphy & Jones, 2021). ToSCs help practitioners take advantage of the useful visualisation and logic modelling of ToCs while appreciating the complexity of systems.

A key advantage of this combination for program evaluation is that organisations can use ToSCs to understand how their programs affect systems at a level of detail useful for the generation of impact evaluation frameworks. These systemic design-informed impact evaluation frameworks help practitioners identify specific questions and collect data to evaluate the effectiveness of programs on the scale of systemic change. They also unlock the organisational capacity to recognise inter-program synergies and conflicts that are less discernible in conventional ToCs. In this way, ToSCs may be considered a tool of relational systems thinking (Goodchild, 2021): they elevate and focus on the systemic change that happens from “the space between” the elements of a conventional ToC: from activity to impact and across the actions and activities of a program.

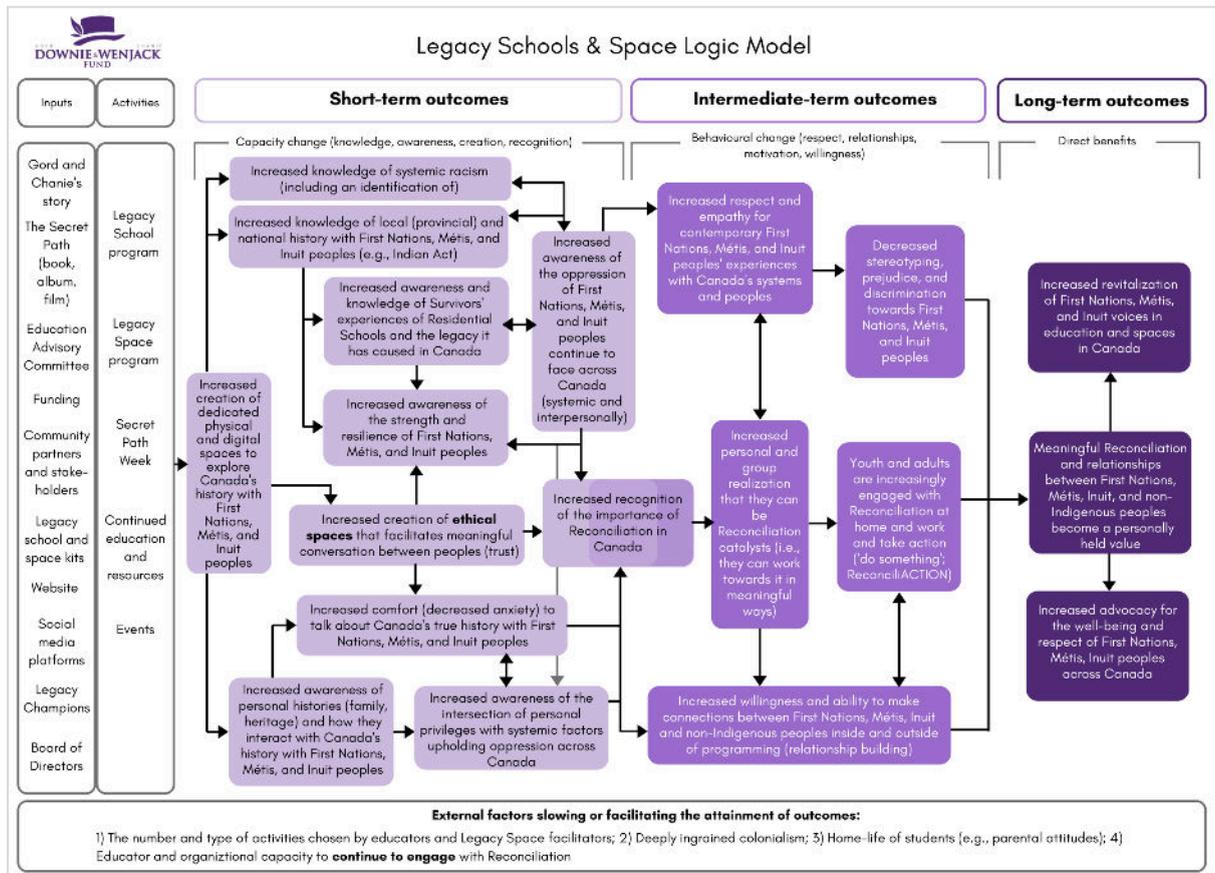


Figure 1. The Gord Downie & Chanie Wenjack Fund Theory of Change.

## DWF Project

We demonstrate the aforementioned benefits of ToSCs in a case study at the Gord Downie & Chanie Wenjack Fund (DWF; <https://downiewenjack.ca/>). The DWF had previously worked with a series of evaluation consultants before Lewis Muirhead was engaged in a coaching relationship to help the organisation develop an evaluation plan. A big part of the engagement was focused on amalgamating the work of previous consultants, especially by building on the DWF's ToC. As it was, the existing ToC jumped from program to outcome and did not outline the activities of DWF in an evaluable fashion.

Nonetheless, stepping into an organisation to support evaluation development requires an in-depth understanding of current processes, past efforts, and how decisions are

made. For this reason, Lewis sought to bring a systemic understanding to the organisation and its past work.

To capture the interconnectedness between these pieces of work, Lewis decided to adapt the DWF's previous evaluation work and its ToC into a ToSC. The aim was to create a model where the relations between actions and outcomes across the systems the DWF works within could be clearly demonstrated and tracked. Through data collection and surveys, Lewis developed a ToSC using Kumu (<https://kumu.io>) in a process that also resulted in the streamlining of objectives from 22 to 11. By creating a ToSC, the DWF was able to achieve the level of specificity required to create an effective systemically-informed impact evaluation framework, identifying questions and approaches to data collection to inform programs with an appreciation for the effects of these programs on the whole system. Additionally, the ToSC modelled connections and logic between the DWF's programs, allowing for organisation-wide insights and strategic decision-making.

## **Discussion**

The approach that Lewis took in this engagement to make the transformation from the previous ToC to the ToSC was well-received by DWF staff and had an impact on the DWF's strategic objectives. Further, The DWF ToSC was used to create an impact evaluation framework to guide future program evaluation. There are limitations and benefits of this approach to program evaluation and we welcome further contact with practitioners who seek to develop a ToSC to support program evaluation.

ToSCs are novel tools. The theory and practice of using them are just emerging. Therefore, expertise is nascent, and the best ways to create and use these complex, powerful models are still being shaped. The authors have stepped into this process with a learning stance and have been fortunate to have partners like the DWF who are also willing to learn along the way. By sharing our learning in this case study, we hope to make the most of this opportunity to learn such that others can give feedback and build upon this new approach to systemic program evaluation.



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## Land acknowledgements

Lewis honours and recognises the countless sacrifices made by our Indigenous hosts so that we may live in the privilege we do. He commits to respect the land and water around his home. The Indigenous people of the land he lives on go by the name Coast Salish and speak the languages Hul'qumi'num and SENĆOŦEN.

Ryan lives and works on the traditional territories of the Mi'kmaq on the island of Newfoundland, itself the ancestral homelands of the Mi'kmaq and the Beothuk. His province, Newfoundland and Labrador, is also the home of the Inuit of Nunatsiavut and NunatuKavut, and the Innu of Nitassinan.