Why Entrepreneurship Education is a Good Fit for Rural Nova Scotia Schools

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Introduction

My name is Greg Hadley. I am a Ph.D. candidate in educational studies at St. Francis Xavier University in Nova Scotia, part of the Inter-University Doctoral Program. Prior to this, I taught junior high and high school social studies for 10 years in rural schools across northeastern Nova Scotia, splitting my time between history and business education.

I would like to begin my positioning myself in this paper. I am a lifelong resident of rural Nova Scotia and enjoyed an upbringing flush with the trappings of a rural life. As I grew up, I felt a strong connection to both my community and neighbouring communities; I was active, received a top- notch education and when time came to decide on a career, it was an easy decision to stay in the rural community that had given me a wealth of positive experiences. The reality for children today in rural Nova Scotia is, however, much different. Many of those neighboring communities where I spent much of my childhood have largely dissolved. Schools have closed, young people have left and economic hardship is of an ongoing concern. In fact, as I write this, my community has just concluded the latest round of rural school closure review. It was a raucous and caustic affair—one that is becoming an annual event in Nova Scotia.

The sum total of this shift in the rural experience has been well-documented. Headlines about school closures, an aging population, out-migration, and a shrinking tax base present in a variety of mediums almost daily. Most Nova Scotians can tell you what, colloquially, the Ivany Report is and a full spate of government and non-government organizations dedicated to economic stimulation have emerged. There is a fighting spirit, but one cannot deny the angst, perhaps even a sense of foreboding, in rural Nova Scotia.

Historical Overview

While government explanations for the decline of rural Nova Scotia are plentiful, outmigration, I think, is the cog in the wheel. This is certainly not a new phenomenon as the historical record has largely been shaped by the transit of people to and fro the province. In fact, we can begin to pinpoint the origins of citizen transience to the turn of the 20th century which, it so turned out, was an important few years for Nova Scotia. Hampered by stifled trade and antiquated methods for conducting agriculture, scores of Nova Scotians left the countryside for, as Brown (1997) notes, "the lure of the United States...the attractions of the city and the promise of western lands" (p. 48).

In the post-WWII era, Nova Scotia saw a measure of population stability. As MacEwan (1976) notes, "command of resources and proficient manufacturing, particularly in steel, moved Nova Scotia toward a mini-golden age" (p. 23). This was, unfortunately, both unsustainable and disproportionate. By 1960, a good deal of steel manufacturing had left Nova Scotia while the emerging wealth gap of the Confederation era between those in Halifax and those in rural areas continued to grow substantially (Gwyn & Siddiq, 1992). By 1996, rural out-migration in Nova Scotia was fast becoming the new normal. A diminishing natural

resource sector, seasonal employment and reliance on government created a toxic economic cocktail. When the dust settled, some areas of rural Nova Scotia saw a 24% decline in population from 1996 bench line data (Statistics Canada, 1996; 2001; 2006) and began to endure the accompanying social and economic degradation. Compounding matters are public school course offerings, heavily supported vocational programs, for example, that have aided the "learning to leave" phenomenon (Corbett, 2007).

What Has Been Done?

Successive provincial governments have, to varying degrees, attempted to confront this issue. The New Democratic Party government of 2009 commissioned Acadia University's then-president Ray Ivany to formally investigate the scope of economic stagnation, with his findings spurring the creation of oneNS and later, the Nova Scotia Department of Business—both dedicated to economic development. Further organizations like the Centre for Entrepreneurship Education and Development (CEED) have seen more government support while the number of grants available for budding entrepreneurs has increased in both scope and ease of access. Despite this, Nova Scotia, Halifax aside, continues to struggle.

While education is certainly a centerpiece of the provincial economic-development strategy, I argue that rural Nova Scotia public schools are, bluntly, inadequate in terms of their business education offerings. In fact, some schools in Guysborough, Shelburne and Victoria counties offer no business programming whatsoever. It is, perhaps predictably, Halifax, that offers the lion's share of business programming. It is also worth noting that Halifax is the only part of Nova Scotia that has experienced some economic growth as of late (CEL, 2012, p. 6).

Why Education: A Theoretical Framework

While much has been done to address the economic concerns of rural Nova Scotia, there is an area that has been, in my opinion, largely neglected: entrepreneurship education in public schools. This idea is supported by a great deal of literature. Noel (2001), from entrepreneurship powerhouse Babson College, concluded that "Overall, entrepreneurship graduates have stronger intentions to open a business, and that this intention is more pronounced the longer the time horizon. Having an entrepreneurship education also appears to have resulted in more actual businesses being owned" (p. 18). Asheghi-Oskooee (2015), found that "...if youth could learn the opportunities and skills related to entrepreneurship, most probably they will become successful entrepreneurs in future" (p. 40) while Barter (2008), argues that "entrepreneurship is the best prospect for stimulating a weakened economy" (p. 238). Entrepreneurs are innovators, leaders and can serve as a genuine force for progressive development.

These ideas have profound implications for rural economic development, and I am pleased to say that there several examples of small, entrepreneurial ventures taking root in rural Nova Scotia. From craft breweries to technology hubs, there is a flicker of entrepreneurialism taking root across the province. It is this flicker that must be fanned to create something bigger by seizing on the entrepreneurial curiosity, and indeed potential, of our current students.

Assessing an Entrepreneurial Experiment

There are indications that interest in entrepreneur education in public schools is growing. Recently, the Nova Scotia Department of Education partnered with CEED to draft a new curriculum for the Entrepreneurship 12 course. The Nova Scotia

Outcomes Framework document now houses over 10 business and business-related courses approved and available for offering in classrooms, and an increasing number of entrepreneurial ventures by students have made headlines—many done without the aid of formal education channels. There has been growing penetration into Nova Scotia rural schools by external agencies like Junior Achievement and programs like Maker Space and Brilliant Lab have exciting possibilities for the prospective entrepreneur.

My interest in this area comes from my forthcoming doctoral dissertation on the intersection of entrepreneurship education and rural education. In my forthcoming dissertation, I consider the potential for entrepreneurship education to serve as a piece to solving Nova Scotia's economic and population puzzle. My research thus far has revealed some intriguing insights into effective public school entrepreneurship programming, many of which, I think, could be incorporated into the Nova Scotia Public Schools Program.

Business education can exist in many forms (e.g. inter-disciplinary; experiential; problem based) with the interdisciplinary model a natural fit for those rural schools with limited program options. By incorporating entrepreneurship principles: accounting into math, social entrepreneurship into social studies, application development in technology courses, we have the ability provide a measure of business exposure to students. Additionally, the experiential elements of entrepreneurship, the business venture, for example, could also be incorporated into a variety of courses lacking explicit business content.

Teachers must also begin to think in entrepreneurial terms. The National Business Education Association (2013) states that teachers' right across the spectrum—from primary to grade 12—can pique the entrepreneurial interests of their students. A recent study by the same organization found that elementary teachers see

entrepreneurship pedagogy as a task reserved for junior or senior high teachers when, as other studies show, there is evidence that the longer the exposure to entrepreneurship principles, the higher the likelihood of intention.

A business education also caters to a swath of valuable skills, applicable to a variety of careers: risk assessment/ management/aversion; inter-personal skill development, ethics, critical thinking, planning and management. As Blank (2013) said, "a business education isn't just for business" (p. 1).

Changing Attitudes

There seems to be an enhanced emphasis on person-centered economic development in Nova Scotia. As the Ivany Report concluded, Nova Scotians must change their attitudes about business and government and embrace change. Doing this will require the empowerment of future generations and a key part of this process must be economic self-determination. Nova Scotia is uniquely positioned to move on these ideas. My research has taken me to a most fascinating term coined by noted geographer Yi-Fu Tuan: topophilia. In basic terms, topophilia refers to a love for a certain place. Tuan argues that human beings can form intense connections to certain places: a hiking trail, a childhood home, a quiet lake and that these connections help form our worldview and values. My research has shown that Nova Scotians, and indeed East Coasters, possess a strong sense of topophilia and for those taken away by economic necessity, there is a great avidity to return home. If we armed those very students, before their departure, with the knowledge and skills that accompany an entrepreneurship education, I have no doubt that those brow raising statistics about youth out-migration could be less startling.

Entrepreneurship is certainly not a cure all to the economic and population challenges facing Nova Scotia, and I would not be so bold to assume that all students are interested in launching a business, but, as the research supports, there is a simmering curiosity by students about taking an idea and developing it to create something of value. In a technology-driven, globalized world, the ability to take something to market has never been more accessible. In the words of Ray Ivany (2014), it is "now or never."

Thank you.

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