

# PROVINCIAL POLICIES AND RURAL REALITIES: A CASE STUDY OF PUBLIC EDUCATION NEEDS IN RURAL ONTARIO

**HAMZA ARSBI, PHD IN EDUCATION**

*Hamza Arsbi (he/him) is a social entrepreneur and PhD candidate in the Faculty of Education at York University. He is the founder, director and project manager of the Mind Lab, a youth hub that focuses on advancing education through scientific experiential learning. His work has been recognized by several international awards and fellowships, such as the Laureate Global Fellowship, the Dalai Lama Fellowship, and the Obama Foundation.*

## **Tell us about your field and your professional experiences before starting your current studies.**

My main area of work is in access to education. In 2012, I founded a nonprofit organization, named the Mind Lab, dedicated to increasing access to learning opportunities for rural and refugee populations in Jordan through after-school hands-on programs. Our team would develop content based on our experiential learning philosophy and then we would visit local schools and community centres to conduct after-school workshops with K-12 children. The participants would work on a project over multiple sessions developing their own ideas as they learned new concepts to apply. Over ten years, the organization grew to work in seven cities across Jordan and developed content covering STEM, arts, and leadership training.

For my work, I received recognition and fellowships such as the Obama Foundation Scholars program, the Dalai Lama Fellowship, the Laureate Global Fellowship, among others.

Academically, I completed an undergraduate degree in Psychology from the University of Jordan in 2013. I also completed a degree in International Development from the University of Manchester as a Chevening-Said Foundation Scholar in 2017.

## **Tell us about your dissertation work and how it relates to the study of Canada.**

As a PhD Student at the Faculty of Education, I am continuing to explore my passion for access to education in rural communities. My research aims to explore Ontario provincial policies addressing issues in rural schools and examine their impact on rural communities. The goal is to explore the difference between policy intention and the reality of implementation. This research considers rural community needs and urban-centric policy design approaches in areas such as the Durham and York regions.

## **How did you come to choose this research topic? What inspired you to do this work?**

Growing up in a small town in the north of Jordan, education was my tool to support my family and gain the power to choose where I wanted to live and how I wanted to live. As the founder of an educational non-profit working with children in rural and refugee communities, I saw firsthand the power of education to give young people agency to build their own futures. As a newcomer to Canada, I feel a responsibility to utilize my experience in supporting youth across rural Ontario to reach their full potential. I choose to work with rural communities because they are often addressed with a 'deficit' view that

attempts to fix what is perceived as backward or underdeveloped. I want to counter this view by highlighting the value of rural communities to build on the strengths of the people and places. I also see rural places as a microcosm of larger global challenges that have to do with equity and access. Co-creating solutions with the communities can provide a framework that has an impact beyond those rural spaces.

### **What are 3-5 main takeaways you want others to come away with?**

**1.** Access to public education is a right and a way to build communities. Schools can be more than places of learning core curriculum; they can be places of gathering, learning from others, and connecting to the community, as well as nature.

**2.** Good-intentioned policies do not always advance community building and might instead hinder growth. Working with communities to understand their local context and providing them with support to develop their own solutions can address those challenges.

**3.** Focusing on rural community needs and rural voices should be at the centre of policy design. Using human-centred design approaches and allowing the community to lead the design process is key to centering rural voices. This comes with a willingness to test ideas and expect some failures as the community learns how to best address their needs.

### **Tell us what you enjoy the most about the work you do.**

Being humbled by how much I need to learn from people and their lived experiences. I also

love exploring ways to turn theory into practice and new ways to make my research have a real-world impact.

I remember an experience I had in a small village south of Jordan. I had gone in with my team to teach fourth-grade girls at the local school about coding. Both my team and the teachers were skeptical that these girls, who had never interacted with a coding program before, would learn anything. There were bemused looks and disparaging comments as we explained what we would be working on to the administrator, but the girls defied every expectation. They took charge of the sessions, stayed longer to work on their projects, and produced amazing results.

My team and I felt humbled at how much young people want to learn if given the right tools and a supportive environment. It was a transformative experience that defined our philosophy moving forward. I started designing all my programs to have the participants lead the process as I provide support, listen, and learn.

### **Tell us about the challenges that you are experiencing or had to overcome to do this work.**

My main challenge has been understanding and connecting with rural communities. As an outsider, I am aware of the elements that impact my view of rural experiences. Some approaches I have been adopting to better connect with the communities are to acknowledge my biases and listen to the participants. This research comes with the understanding that it is difficult to be fully embraced by the communities, but humility, listening, and taking time to connect are great steps on that path.

**What advice/lessons/tips do you have for those starting their academic journey?**

I learned to take things slow, enjoy the learning experience, and listen more than speak.

**What are the next steps in your research?**

I am currently connecting with communities in the York and Durham regions and hoping to earn their trust so we can work together. I am excited to start the data collection phase in the coming year.

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