

Educating as Professional Inquiry

By Dr. Wayne Serebrin

Because teaching is such a complex and uncertain vocation, teachers must be professional learners who critically inquire into their teaching lives throughout their careers. My colleague Renate Schulz describes teaching as “a place where design and circumstance collide” and where teachers “must constantly learn, adapt, and stay attuned to the multiple relationships and interactions affecting their work in the classroom.”

Ironically, after several years of teaching at the University of Manitoba’s Faculty of Education, it was the complex and uncertain nature of teaching that I found missing from the model of teacher education in which I was involved—a model that separated educational philosophy and practice. As a result, the question of how to bring educational theory, research, and practice together through critical

reflection, dialogue, and moral action became the central inquiry of my scholarship from the mid-1990s to the present.

Initially, I devised a partial on-site B.Ed. teacher education model, in which I taught half my B.Ed. classes at the Faculty and the other half in collaboration with Denise Murphy and Lisa Palmer, two classroom teachers from General Byng School in the Pembina Trails School Division. After several years, this highly successful partnership expanded to include arts educators Professor Liz Coffman and Dr. Francine Morin and early years teachers Cora Campbell, Tracey Douglas, and Chris Wigglesworth. Together, in a new and fuller partnership—comprised of the Faculty of Education, the Pembina Trails School Division, and Manitoba Education, Citizenship and Youth—an innovative, onsite model of teacher education came into being. This inquiry-based teacher education model was housed at the Centre for Inquiry School (a public Kindergarten to Grade 4 school within-a-school, where children, families, teachers, teacher candidates, and professors collaboratively pursued questions of most significance to them).

Over the next two years, I met weekly with the co-founding five teachers and the first principal of the Centre for Inquiry School. Together, we purposefully and systematically studied

our literacy and inquiry education practices, through a combination of professional readings, sustained and critical dialogue, and individual and shared teacher self-studies aimed at co-constructing “connected and worthwhile” educational experiences with and for children and for teacher candidates. The literacy and inquiry curriculum that emerged from this research has been widely shared at local and provincial symposia, national and international conferences, through articles and book chapters, and as one of a series of Manitoba Education Research Network (MERN) monographs—exploring questions about professional cultures of educational inquiry.

Recently, my work in the scholarship of early literacy, inquiry curriculum, and inquiry-based teacher education has developed into a new, collaborative partnership between the Faculty of Education and the Seven Oaks School Division. Over the past three years, working in close collaboration with my Faculty colleague Liz Coffman, and inspired by the vision and leadership of my colleague Lydia Hedrich (Assistant Superintendent of the Seven Oaks School Division), I have had the privilege of building educational relationships with a strong Faculty of Education early years teaching team and a generous and insightful group of administrative and teacher leaders at École Constable Edward Finney School, École James Nisbet Community School, École Riverbend Community School, and West St. Paul School. As partners, we have co-designed early years education and teacher education that create space and time for all participants to ponder and actively explore what it means to live “good and worthwhile” lives.

For me, educational theory, research, and practice are about making a worthwhile difference in learners’ lives and about creating opportunities for learners to meaningfully contribute to the lives of others.

I can think of no better place than Manitoba to be a collaborative learner and educator.

profile

Dr. Wayne Serebrin is a caring and passionate educator who has been recognized seven times by the University of Manitoba’s “outstanding graduating B.Ed. student of the year” for contributions he has made to students’ professional education. He has also received both the University of Manitoba’s Dr. and Mrs. H.H. Saunderson award and the Olive Beatrice Stanton award for excellence in university teaching. Serebrin is quick to credit his students, his early years teaching colleagues and children in the field, as well as his colleague Professor Joan Irvine (with whom he team-taught for several years after joining the University of Manitoba Faculty of Education in 1990, following his first career as an early years teacher) for his passion for teaching. For Serebrin, teaching is about listening closely to learners and collaborating with them in the design of focused studies that draw upon individual and shared experiences and all learners’ significant questions. He is grateful for the wisdom local educators have shared with him and for the writings of educational scholars who make it possible to imagine what education might be.

