

# The Manitoba Education Research Network

*Teacher research to enhance equity and engagement in education*



PHOTO: GERALD NEUFELD

**Heather Hunter,** Director of the Manitoba Education Research Network (MERN) and a sessional instructor at the University of Winnipeg, has had a varied educational career. In her role with MERN, Dr. Hunter provides leadership for local research to enhance equity and engagement in education.

## By Heather Hunter

**IN HIS WORK ON** curriculum theory, William Pinar<sup>1</sup> encourages us to think about what it means to be educated and what is worth knowing. These are big questions to struggle with, particularly when referenced by local context. Every day, teachers in Manitoba work out practical answers to these questions using inquiry methods grounded by their academic knowledge and classroom experiences. There are benefits all around.

For over a decade, the Manitoba Education Research Network (MERN) has established a range of mechanisms to support local research that is really “an extension of good teaching, of observing and responding to students and adjusting curriculum to fit the learning needs of all.”<sup>2</sup> This inter-organizational approach creates bridges between faculty, field and the department for easier crossings. Going beyond dissemination activities such as

regular forums, seminars and publishing opportunities, MERN has initiated teacher research projects that engage teacher and education partner participation at classroom, school, community and province-wide levels.

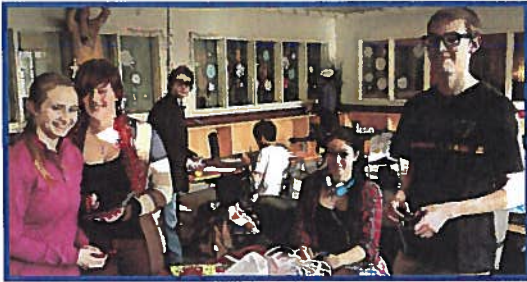
Multiple perspectives are brought to bear on local education issues, and “local ways of knowing” result from curriculum conversations about inquiry practices and literacy and numeracy processes in the Manitoba context. These local research projects depend on MERN for several things:

- Help to identify common research ground;
- Coordination for classroom teacher release time;
- Provision of space and/or technology applications for meetings;
- Opportunities for dissemination events and publishing; and



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*Growing student engagement under the midnight sun*  
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New Westminster School District Bowen Island, B.C.

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Great minds don't think alike

### EN BREF

Au Manitoba, des recherches d'enseignants fondées sur les programmes d'études ont cours dans un contexte provincial. Toutes un peu différentes, les initiatives du Réseau des recherches en éducation au Manitoba (RREM) adoptent une approche similaire d'engagement d'enseignants des cinq facultés d'éducation du Manitoba, en exercice et du ministère de l'Éducation, afin de travailler sur le perfectionnement des enseignants, l'apprentissage des élèves et l'amélioration des écoles. Tenant compte de l'important apport de la recherche locale au domaine de l'éducation, particulièrement à la base, le RREM a accru les efforts visant à consolider cette capacité. L'article présente trois projets en cours réalisés grâce au soutien des recherches locales assuré par des partenaires en éducation reliés par ce réseau provincial.

- Networked leadership to coordinate and sustain momentum.

The informality of the MERN network serves it well. Finding easy, honest and open ways to work together is vital. MERN regularly holds forums and seminars as face-to-face events for sharing locally produced research. These presentations reflect a variety of methodologies - case study, narrative inquiry, mixed method design - showing meaningful connections between research and practice. These dissemination events have produced opportunities to create collaborative discipline-based teacher research groups, to date, in the areas of Indigenous education, mathematics and social studies education.

### The Indigenous Education Group

The MERN Indigenous Education Research Group emerged from the lived experiences of faculty who met with challenges when teaching a newly mandated Aboriginal Education course to pre-service teachers. Their questions about how to do this for pre-service, in-service and classroom teaching were supported by the Manitoba Treaty Relations Commission of Manitoba, Manitoba First Nations Education Resource Centre and the Manitoba Métis Federation. A series of education research seminars on treaties and reconciliation engaged education partners in ongoing critical dialogue. Writing projects on Indigenous education perspectives in Manitoba are in process for MERN publications.

### The Mathematics Group

The MERN Mathematics Education Research Group started from a suggestion made by faculty that featuring mathematics education at a MERN forum would provide a useful space for teachers, faculty and the department to share their work and that this could improve our understanding of mathematics education in Manitoba. The group took shape while planning a MERN special forum on mathematics education. Articles generated from forum presentations are compiled in a special issue of *The MERN Journal* on mathematics education (Volume 7, 2013).<sup>3</sup> The Mathematics Teacher Inquiry Project (MTIP) continues, with education faculty, consultants and classroom teachers from rural and urban areas, and will highlight their work at a MERN forum in May 2015.

### The Social Studies Group

The MERN Grade Twelve Inquiry Project (GTIP) came together in response to the challenges of implementing the new Grade 12 Social Studies course, "Global Issues: Citizenship and Sustainability." Initially focused on social studies education, the group evolved to work more broadly on the theory and practice of inquiry-based learning. This collaborative teacher research initiative presented its

findings at a MERN forum on social studies education held in March 2014. Participants contributed articles published in *The MERN Journal*, Volume 9, 2014, Special Issue: Social Studies Education.<sup>4</sup>

A GTIP facilitator described his experience this way:

“The GTIP research project asked a group of nine teachers over a period of eight months to reflect on their Global Issues teaching experiences, and to collectively share their impressions, observations and insights with a view to making recommendations for curriculum, curriculum implementation, and teaching practice. Through discussions held, stories told, and revelations shared, important aspects of teaching social studies, teacher research, the GI curriculum and about the GTIP itself were revealed. [I] took special note of three. First, one of the most valued aspects of the research project for participants, was the occasion for them to get together to talk about their teaching lives, to participate in a professional community of fellow GI teachers – sharing stories, discussing philosophy, debating pedagogy, and feeling supported. Second, there was much discussion about the pedagogical dilemma at the core of inquiry-based learning, an issue that has been around since Plato introduced Meno. In the end all participants assertively, but eloquently, and with one voice embraced inquiry over instructor-based teaching. And finally, to do action research well and for practitioners to access, recall and represent their understandings, the research facilitator needs to be open, attentive, and adaptive to the chaotic fluidity of the research group.”<sup>5</sup>

Teachers are researchers. “Any educator who has explored new cur-


riculum, evaluated teaching practice, chosen one new idea over another, or re-evaluated a daily teaching choice based on evidence and a guiding question, has engaged in research.”<sup>6</sup> When teachers recount stories of faculty and classroom experiences, they share ways of knowing that illuminate the complexities of their work and support their professionalism. They bring voice to policy decisions, especially regarding school organization, classroom practices and subject-based curriculum questions contained within the broader issues of social justice, equity and sustainability.

MERN builds capacity for education partners to re-point teacher development and school improvement efforts in order to tackle questions of education policy and practice at the local level. In the same way that students engage in deeper learning through inquiry processes, teacher research invigorates Manitoba’s education community, helping to develop and advance the thinking within that community.

For more information about the Manitoba Education Research Network, visit [www.mern.ca](http://www.mern.ca) **EC**

#### NOTES

- 1 W. F. Pinar, *What is Curriculum Theory?* Second edition (New York: Routledge, 2012).
- 2 P. McRae and J. Parsons, “Teachers as Researchers: (Re)searching within Alberta’s schools,” *ATA Magazine* 87 (2006-07). [www.teachers.ab.ca/Publications/ATA%20Magazine/Volume%2087/Number%203/Articles/Pages/Teachers%20as%20Researchers.aspx](http://www.teachers.ab.ca/Publications/ATA%20Magazine/Volume%2087/Number%203/Articles/Pages/Teachers%20as%20Researchers.aspx)
- 3 [www.mern.ca/journal/Journal-V7.pdf](http://www.mern.ca/journal/Journal-V7.pdf)
- 4 [www.mern.ca/journal/Journal-V9.pdf](http://www.mern.ca/journal/Journal-V9.pdf)
- 5 L. Kornelsen, “The Grade 12 Inquiry Project: A facilitator’s impressions,” *MERN Journal* 9 (2014).
- 6 McRae and Parsons, “Teachers as Researchers.”




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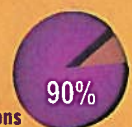
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