Making Connections to Research Opportunities

In the province of Manitoba, the field of education provides many rich research opportunities with a multitude of educational partners. The purpose of this paper is to provide an overview of potential opportunities that graduate students may choose to pursue within Manitoba and beyond.

You as the Researcher

As a student who is seeking a research opportunity, your first task is to define where your own research interests lie. The key is to find areas of research for which you have a curiosity or passion that will foster and support within you a desire to discover more about that particular topic. Once you have a topic in mind, begin by seeking out professional organizations or partners who might be interested in your research topic. By being aware of your connections and networks with colleagues, professors, and mentors, to name a few, you will be open up pathways to research areas of interest you may have in common.

Building a credible research portfolio of areas that you are interested in exploring as well as your past research areas is valuable. Demonstrate your research abilities by seeking opportunities to present at conferences such as the University of Manitoba’s Education Graduate Student’s Symposium or other local, national or international conferences. It is recommended that you seek multiple opportunities to showcase your research findings. If your research topic interests a particular group at the local level, there may be additional opportunities at the national and international level as well. Writing and reviewing for journals is also another way to expand your research portfolio. Journals are always looking for submissions and showcasing your research in a written
format provides you with an additional opportunity to demonstrate your research skills while building your research portfolio.

Where to find opportunities

Once you have defined your research interest, seek out other organizations that may be interested in your research topic. The Internet provides a rich source of potential partners that may share your interest in specific research topics. Using your personal and professional networks provides a rich forum for discussing your research with others and discovering where other researchers with similar interests may be found.

Universities

Universities are centers of research. There are always professors and graduate students interested in various research topics that they do not have ‘enough time’ to develop. Seek out possibilities within your discipline and also beyond. It is important to ASK! OFFER! BE PROACTIVE! Some sample university research projects that we are currently aware of are:

- Evaluation of the curriculum for a particular education focus i.e. Undergraduate Education
- Critique of staff development practices that enhance staff professional learning
- Pilot projects
- Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council (SSHRC) grants

There are a myriad of other grants and scholarships that are available to graduate students while they are completing their studies to encourage the development of a rich field of dialogue and research on educationally diverse topics.
School divisions

School divisions are rich in opportunities for research at the divisional level, the local school, and the classroom level. Similar to universities, they have lots of research ideas that they would like to explore but not enough human and financial resources to do so. By becoming aware of the programs and pilot projects that school divisions or schools currently offer as well as others they might be interested in offering in the future, researchers looking for opportunities can offer to conduct research projects. This can provide school divisions and schools with the rationale for their program choices or for the projects that they are interested in exploring. Some sample school division and school research projects that we are currently aware of are:

- Full day Kindergarten versus half-day Kindergarten
- Mentoring program
- Program evaluation
- School planning/school improvement
- Subject area investigations
- Early Years/Middle Years/Senior Years

Manitoba Education, Citizenship and Youth

The provincial government’s education department, Manitoba Education, Citizenship and Youth, provides multiple opportunities to explore their various programs and departments. Opportunities exist through the parent organization, Manitoba Education, Citizenship and Youth, and the French support section, Bureau de l’Éducation Française, to explore areas of research based on the six priorities for education. Manitoba Education Research Network (MERN), sponsored by the provincial
government, is an established network designed to promote and highlight current research topics of interest to the field of education in Manitoba. Manitoba Education, Citizenship and Youth research projects are related to the following education priorities:

1) Improving learning outcomes

2) School/community connections

3) School planning

4) Professional learning opportunities for educators

5) Pathways among secondary schools, post-secondary education and work

6) Linking policy and practice to research and evidence

Research forums have already occurred in the first three areas with MERN planning to establish forums in the remaining three priorities in the upcoming year.

**Manitoba Teachers Society**

The Manitoba Teachers Society is currently interested in joint funding of school based projects through a number of grants that they make available to support grassroots initiatives. The following are the grants currently available to public schools and teacher associations to support their professional learning.

- Professional Development (PD) Grants
- Equality in Education (EIE) Grants
- Special Area Groups (SAG)
- Educatrices et éducateurs francophones du Manitoba (EFM) – Professional Development (PD) and Public Relations (PR) grants

The national teachers’ organization, the Canadian Teachers Federation (CTF/FCE), has recently established a “Research Roundup” program. It reviews what
provincial jurisdictions are conducting in the way of research and provides a forum to share these research projects nationally. Some sample Manitoba Teachers Society research projects that are currently being funded are as follows:

- Mentoring for Beginning Teachers
- Homophobia
- Aboriginal Education
- Special Education
- Prior Learning Assessment and Recognition (PLAR)
- Educational Assistant’s Roles
- Legal Issues

Other School Related Organizations

In Manitoba, there is a myriad of other educational organizations that are interested in advancing teaching and learning in educational settings. These organizations also provide research opportunities in the areas of educational practice that their constituent group finds most relevant to the education of their members and its’ learning community. The following organizations explore educational issues from their specific stakeholder’s point of view: for school trustees – The Manitoba Association of School Trustees (MAST); for school superintendents – The Manitoba Association of School Superintendents (MASS) and for parent councils - The Manitoba Association of Parent Councils (MAPC). Some of the topics that these groups are most interested in exploring the following:

- Aboriginal Education (MASS)
- The Parent/School Connection (MAPC)
And of course, school funding issues are of interest to all of these constituent groups.

**Non-governmental Organizations**

In the province of Manitoba, there are many Non-governmental Organizations (NGO) that support educational research endeavors. In addition to various community organizations such as the Association for Community Living and the Social Planning Council, the following are other NGO’s with specific constituent interests who offer presentation and publishing opportunities through their various program initiatives:

- **Manitoba Council for Leadership in Education (MCLE)**
- **Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development (ASCD) Manitoba**
- **Manitoba School Improvement Program (MSIP)**
- **Council for Exceptional Children (CEC)**
- **Safe Schools Manitoba**

By making connections with the organization’s Executive Director, graduate students can discuss how their research skills could be of value to the organization in accomplishing their mandate while linking your research interests with their specific focus areas. Organizational websites also provide insights into the research topics that would be of interest to a particular non-governmental organization.

In Manitoba, we are very fortunate, particularly in the field of education, to have many rich research opportunities. We hope that the overview of potential opportunities
that we have provided will inspire you as a graduate student to pursue these connections within Manitoba and beyond.

**A study of year one of a three year mentoring project with Mountain View School Division in Manitoba**

Having discussed the many varied connections which can lead to research possibilities, we will now move on to discuss the research that we are currently in the midst of conducting.

The purpose of our research is to analyze the first year of a three year mentoring pilot program in the Mountain View School Division to determine the effectiveness of the program in year one relative to meeting the needs of new teachers as adult learners.

**The Role of the Researchers: Our Connection**

This project originated as a result of the connection of one of the primary researchers with the school division. In April 2003, the Professional Issues Team of the Manitoba Teachers’ Society had established its operational plan, including a desire to explore the feasibility of supporting mentoring programs for beginning teachers. A letter was sent to all teacher association Presidents in May 2003, outlining the Society’s desire to support a pilot mentoring program, with certain criteria which had to be met in order to qualify for support. Mountain View Teachers’ Association responded to the letter, indicating their interest in working with the Society in piloting a new mentoring program for their beginning teachers.

Mountain View School Division had already conducted a focus group to develop a direction for their pilot project. The Superintendent and the Project Coordinator had recognized a need for a mentoring program in order to recruit and retain good quality
teachers within this rural division. They believed that a quality mentoring program would ease new teachers into a supportive professional environment. It was also believed that a positive side effect of the program would be to reduce the stress of the new teachers while increasing their feelings of success within the teaching profession. They identified the following four desired outcomes for their pilot mentoring program:

1. To provide emotional and professional support;
2. To assist beginning teachers with their transitions into their new positions with regards to policy and procedures of the school division, the school and the classroom;
3. To assist in understanding culture (norms, values and beliefs) within the division and the school; and
4. To provide opportunities for professional development and learning.

In September 2003, two Manitoba Teachers’ Society staff officers met with the Superintendent of the School Division and the Project Coordinator to discuss the progress of the pilot. At that time, the division’s desire for an evaluation of the program was discussed. The Superintendent indicated that he would contact Brandon University to provide a research opportunity for a graduate student. Joan Martin, one of the Staff Officers, proposed that she could undertake the evaluation as part of her course work for 129.784 “Qualitative Research in Education”. The Superintendent and the Project Coordinator were excited with the proposal that a doctoral student would undertake this.

When Joan was talking with her colleague, Debra Radi, who was also enrolled in the research course and who had studied mentoring as an effective means of professional
development for adults, it was decided that they would jointly conduct the research study. Permission was gained from the course instructor and the plans were underway.

A meeting was held on January 20, 2004 with the Superintendent, the Project Coordinator and the two principal researchers to discuss the research study to be undertaken. We discussed the use of their outcomes as the framework for the interviews and the use of the data to provide recommendations to improve the effectiveness of Year Two. The meeting ended with the letters of invitation being distributed through the divisional school mail system that afternoon.

*The Research Study*

Our study is of a qualitative nature, with in-depth interviews currently being conducted with twelve mentors and mentees, as well as the project coordinator. The goal of the interviews is to establish whether or not the first year of the pilot project has met the desired outcomes as established by the school division prior to the start of the project.

*The Sample*

There was a pool of twenty-five mentors and twenty-five mentees from which to choose our study subjects. The informants taught in rural locations as well as the urban center of Dauphin. They taught at a variety of instructional levels, including early years, middle years and senior years.

The mentors had all taught with Mountain View School Division for a number of years and were respected, competent teachers. They were selected by requesting recommendations from the principals of the school division as well as through self-nomination.
The mentees were teachers new to the profession, new to the division or new to Canada and the Canadian educational system. Mentee participants were only selected for our study if they were new to the teaching profession. We defined new as being within their first five years of teaching.

The project coordinator was an experienced teacher-leader within the school division whom was selected by the Superintendent to lead the project. After holding a focus group session with teachers new to the division in 2002-2003, the direction and focus of the divisional mentoring pilot program was determined. The outcomes established by the project coordinator resulting from this focus group session became the framework used in the in-depth interviews. The project coordinator received one-sixth release time to facilitate the program operation.

As was established in our approved ethics proposal, we planned to interview six mentors and six mentees as well as the project coordinator. Once our project received the first ethics approval, letters were sent to the fifty participants and the project coordinator inviting their voluntary participation in the study. The letters were sent via the internal school mailing system which originates twice weekly from the school division board office in Dauphin. The initial letters were mailed on January 20, 2004. The informants were selected on a first offer basis in each instructional level.

After waiting for our required response at each instructional level and finding that we were missing informants at some levels, we submitted an amendment to our ethics approval. This amendment, approved on February 13, 2004, allowed us to mail out a second letter to those mentors and mentees who had not initially responded to once again seek their participation. As of February 27, 2004, we had only received one response
from the early years mentees. So at this time, we added an elementary guidance teacher mentor to our complement to complete our desired number of interviews.

**Data Collection**

As the primary researchers, we have spent one day to date in the Mountain View School Division interviewing informants. On March 1, 2004, seven subjects were interviewed, all teaching within the town of Dauphin. We have made plans to return on the evening of March 7, 2004, to interview the project coordinator. On March 8, 2004, we will spend the day interviewing the last six informants. We began our interviews in Dauphin and will branch out into rural areas across the school division on March 8, 2004. All interviews are being audio-taped and later transcribed by the principal researchers.

**Ethics**

When we first approached the course instructor in October 2003 with our intention to do this study, the first step was to develop an ethics proposal for the Education and Nursing Research Ethics Board (ENREB). After intense preparation and planning following the formats required, the first ethics review proposal was submitted to Margaret Bowman on November 12, 2003, one of the Application Deadline Dates listed for 2003/2004.

We started our qualitative research course (129.784) on January 6, 2004 and had not heard anything from ENREB at that time. Our course instructors encouraged us to contact Margaret Bowman and request an update as to the status of the proposal. It
appeared that they had misplaced our proposal and so, it was January 16, 2004, when we received our first approval. The application was well written with no changes required.

As time went on, we experienced a delay in receiving the signed letters of invitation which met our subject criteria. We submitted an amendment to ENREB requesting permission to send out a reminder letter to those informants who had not responded at that time. We received our amendment approval on February 12, 2004.

**Next Steps**

The Superintendent and the project coordinator were very excited to have such a formal evaluation occur. The school division was very supportive of the study by providing two substitute teachers who traveled with the researchers from school to school to cover classes while the interviews were conducted. Financial support is being provided for incurred costs resulting from conducting the interviews (i.e. postage, mileage, accommodations, meals, etc.).

On completion of this year’s review, year one of the three year project, a formal report will be shared with the School Division and those informants who requested a copy of the report. A presentation of the results will be made at the upcoming CSSE – CASEA conference to be held here in Winnipeg in late May and early June 2004. Opportunities will be sought with various education research journals for publication of the results in the near future.

**Post-script**

On March 6, 2004 we presented a seminar for the Graduate Students Symposium, entitled “Making Connections to Educational Opportunities”. In our seminar we described our
study using the name of the school division, Mountain View, having received permission from the Superintendent to do so. As a result of this presentation, while we had received permission from the school division superintendent, a participant identified that we had not requested permission from the informants to use the name of the school division in such presentations. Thus, being made aware of this anomaly, on March 24, 2004 we submitted another amendment to our original application, with revised letters of consent for the informants to sign. In these new letters, we indicated in the “Confidentiality” section that we would be using the name of the school division when we report findings. We received our amendment approval on March 26, 2004.