

Mentoring/professional conversation for Resource Teachers: Project concept and details

2004–05

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The information in this document is provided so that any local and/or school district might consider the utility and logistics of the project, and adapt our approach, if useful, to local needs and circumstances. Some of the material below is from documents such as those used to share information about the BCTF commitment, or agendas for planning and training. Please feel free to use or adapt any information you find in this document. If you have similar materials and would like to share them with a wider audience, please contact Charlie Naylor in BCTF Research (cnaylor@bctf.ca).



Teachers from Prince George, Nanaimo, and Coquitlam with BCTF staff and Mentor-trainers at their BCTF training day.

1. Context/background

“Teaching to Diversity” pilot project in Coquitlam, Nanaimo, and Prince George

Why is BCTF Research doing a pilot project in three school districts? Based on findings from the BCTF Research project in Nanaimo and Coquitlam, there exists considerable evidence that many teachers are struggling to meet the diverse needs of students in their classrooms and caseloads. Some of the factors contributing to this include:

- removal of high-incidence targeted funding (\$230m), resulting in fewer students being identified in such categories, with supports reduced or removed
- increased class size, making meeting individual student needs more difficult
- removal of class composition limits, resulting in high numbers of students with special needs in some classes, particularly secondary elective classes
- reduction in teacher numbers at levels disproportionate to declines in student numbers
- removal of teacher ratios in some areas such as Learning Assistance, ESL, etc., resulting in reductions in the number of specialist support teachers
- reduced time allocated to specialist support roles, and specialist roles being combined into single positions¹
- exodus of experienced teachers from specialist support roles
- limited pre-service and in-service training linked to diversity
- the dismantling of the Ministry’s Special Programs Branch, which developed resources and supports linked to inclusion and diversity.

The findings from the BCTF Research project resulted in both increased BCTF advocacy (for more resources and improved systemic support for teachers) and in the BCTF considering how to offer increased professional support to its members. This document focuses on the area of professional support through the “Teaching to Diversity” project.

The BCTF “Teaching to Diversity” project aims to:

- offer improved access to information in areas such as learner profiles, identification/assessment, teaching strategies, etc., through a new web page which has been developed by the BCTF and three Provincial Specialist Associations (PSAs)².
- support approaches to professional development linked to diversity, some of which will utilize or report on the web page.
- initiate dialogue with teacher associations and school districts in three B.C. locations (Coquitlam, Nanaimo, Prince George) with a view to collaboratively developing professional development focusing on diversity.
- offer information about the project to post-secondary institutions with teacher training programs (UNBC, UBC, SFU, UVic, Malaspina, etc.) so that teachers in training can access teacher union professional support and resources.
- pilot and better understand collaboration which includes the BCTF, local teacher associations, universities, and school districts.

¹ This issue was explored in “The challenge of specialist support teachers in multiple roles,” online at www.bctf.ca/education/InclusiveEd/challenge/

² www.bctf.ca/TeachingToDiversity/

The pilot project has added Prince George to the pilot sites to make the sites more reflective of school districts in B.C. - one from the metropolitan area (Coquitlam), one from Vancouver Island (Nanaimo), and one from the Interior (Prince George).

2. Project concept

The project is action based on findings from the BCTF Research project which examined the current status of inclusive education in two school districts during the 2002–03 school year³. Our intention is to provide better and quicker access to information through the “Teaching to Diversity” web page,⁴ while also piloting and documenting professional development projects to provide examples of some approaches which may have utility for other locals and districts.

There are three school districts involved: Nanaimo, Coquitlam, and Prince George. The project is a BCTF/local teacher association/school district collaboration. The collaborative nature of this project is crucial. In each district, the local teacher association and school district staff are supporting this project with funds, endorsement, and participation in planning and ongoing dialogue to support and manage the projects. One key element is that each initiative fits within local priorities as agreed by the local teacher association and the school district. Thus each project becomes less of an “add-on” than a part of what each district might be addressing in the school year. The BCTF also provides some funds and staff time to support planning, implementing, and documenting the projects.

We believe there is evidence that a three-way collaboration of this kind has the potential to build more sustainable projects because each partner offers supports which complement the efforts of the other partners. It also helps that each partner has identified the focus as a priority, and that there exists agreement between parties on such priorities. For a more detailed exploration of this kind of collaboration, read the paper *“A teacher union’s collaborative research agenda and strategies: One way forward for Canadian teacher unions in supporting teachers’ Professional Development.”*⁵

3. Project support

The following section provides an overview of the mentoring/professional conversation project with a statement of expected commitment from partners:

Mentoring and engaging in professional conversations: Support from the BCTF, locals, and school districts

Representatives from teacher associations in three local teacher associations (Prince George, Nanaimo, and Coquitlam), and from three school districts (Prince George, Nanaimo-Ladysmith, and Coquitlam) have identified a need for mentoring/support for new resource teachers in Special Education/Learning Assistance/ESL during the 2004–05 school year. This document outlines a proposal jointly offered by BCTF Research and Professional and Social Issues Division Training Departments, stating what the BCTF can offer, and what is requested from participating districts.

³ www.bctf.ca/education/InclusiveEd/ResearchProject/

⁴ www.bctf.ca/TeachingToDiversity/

⁵ www.bctf.ca/ResearchReports/2005tr01

Six professional conversation/mentoring forums (three hours for each forum) will be held during the 2004–05 school year, in each of the participating districts. These forums would primarily be focused on developing role capacity in new resource teachers. Up to 15 people might be involved: one BCTF facilitator, two experienced resource teachers, and up to 12 new resource teachers. The forums will be based on one (or a combination) of three programs which are outlined in the document “Engaging conversations on teaching and learning workshops” (Appendix 1). The exact nature of each local/district approach will be decided at pre-planning meetings early in the school year involving BCTF staff, local teacher association PD reps, and district staff.

What the BCTF will provide:

1. A skilled and trained facilitator who has received training from Laura Lipton, an internationally-known trainer of mentors, and author of *Mentoring Matters*. These facilitators will attend each of the six sessions in the districts (at no charge to the local or the district).
2. BCTF staff time (Nancy Hinds and Charlie Naylor) for pre-planning in the districts, and ongoing co-ordination and evaluation.
3. Two one-day training/evaluation meetings in Vancouver for two experienced resource teachers from each of the three districts, in order to build local capacity for mentoring and support.
4. Resources on supporting mentoring/professional conversations, and research resources linked to the roles of the resource teachers involved.

What is expected from the districts:

1. TOC time, if applicable. Districts may choose to release teachers for six half days, or hold three forums in school time and three after school. Lunch or dinner would be provided by the district.
2. A commitment to fund the expenses incurred by bringing the two experienced resource teachers to two training/planning and evaluation meetings in Vancouver, likely in November, 2004 and May, 2005.

For further information, or to check any details, please contact:

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Nancy Hinds: Tel: 604-871-1840, or e-mail nhinds@bctf.ca

Other project support

Support from local teacher associations

The support of PD Chairs in each of the three locals has been crucial to the success of this project. In some cases they facilitated accessing PD funds, participated in planning, and communicated information to members in the local and to the local Executive. They and the local teacher associations generously provided meeting space and ordered food when needed. We strongly recommend the participation of the local PD Chair or his/her representative during both the planning and operational stages of projects such as this.

School district support

In most cases, the school district or professional development funds allocated by the local teacher association pays for the bulk of release time and for travel and other costs for the training and evaluation sessions at the BCTF. There have been varying levels of school district involvement, with some district staff participating in regular discussions about the project, in meetings with BCTF staff, and in the videoconference. In other cases, district support is primarily the supply of funding.

BCTF support

The BCTF provided initial training in mentoring, some release time, staff time and support, videoconference facilities and discussion, end-of-year evaluation, and online publication of project reports.

a. Initial training

A one-day training session was held at the BCTF in the fall of 2004 to provide training to teachers who were to facilitate the mentoring/professional conversation groups. See Appendix 2 for the information that was sent to participants attending the initial training day.

b. Release time

A variety of approaches to release time were used by the districts, who supplied the bulk of the release time. Six sessions were the norm. In some cases, participants held some sessions in school time and some after school. In other locations, all sessions were in school time. When after-school meetings were held, dinners were usually provided.

c. BCTF staff time and support, meetings in the districts

Charlie Naylor (Research) and Nancy Hinds (Professional and Social Issues Division) were the BCTF staff supporting this project. Nancy provided initial training in mentorship/professional conversation approaches, while Charlie initiated the project, liaised with each district's facilitators, and visited sites during the year.

d. Videoconference facilities and discussion

Videoconferencing facilities have been established by the BCTF in Vancouver, Prince George, and Nanaimo. All three sites (with Coquitlam mentors participating at the BCTF offices) were connected for a videoconference in April, 2005. This enabled each site to share their approach and to discuss issues. The discussion provided data for evaluation, and content for this report.

e. End-of-year evaluation

Features of the mentoring project were the initial training and the end-of-year evaluation. Participating districts were asked to support the evaluation process by committing to sending the facilitators to Vancouver for the meeting.

Key areas of discussion included:

- Meeting structures/processes
- Roles/skills of facilitators
- Moving from “venting” to constructive discussion
- Typical areas of focus
- Learnings to date
- Use of videoconferencing to share ideas and reflections.

f. Publication

The BCTF web page, Teaching to Diversity, hosts this document and other project publications, to share information with other teacher locals and districts that may be interested in offering mentoring/professional conversation groups.

4. Our learnings from the project to date

These notes describe some of the general processes that participants believe worked well, with some comments unique to each site. In some cases, the words are directly quoted from participants' comments during the May 2005 videoconference linking Coquitlam, Nanaimo, and Prince George.

a. General observations

▪ Structure of groups (mentor, “job knowledge” people, participants)

The district groups usually consist of two experienced teachers who are mentors/facilitators, and up to nine participants in resource-role positions. The two facilitators are experienced in the facilitation role and are also highly knowledgeable in terms of the resource role. In some cases, facilitators reported that they found complementary knowledge most useful – for instance, when one had a knowledge of ESL while the other knew more about Special Education or Learning Assistance.

▪ Recruitment of facilitators and participants

Teachers were approached and recruited to be facilitators based on local knowledge of teachers with appropriate skills; the facilitator “positions” were not advertised. In terms of participants, some districts offered the opportunity to a number of teachers, and others identified those new to the resource-teacher role. Either way, teacher participation was voluntary.

▪ Number in groups, expected dropouts

Reflections within the groups indicated that 5–8 participants was an ideal group size to enable maximum participation in discussions. All groups experienced some dropping out, but this was early in the process, and largely because of factors external to the groups, such as other commitments. All groups reported high commitment and enthusiasm for the project, which was sustained throughout the year. No participants dropped out of the Nanaimo group.

▪ Expectations and commitment

All groups stressed that once participating, there was an expectation of committing to the group. Obviously, there are events that could make this impossible, but the hope was that participants would not fail to attend, arrive late, or prioritize other events. Dates were set early in the year so that other meetings could be fitted around the mentorship group.

▪ Location and duration of meetings

In one district, the group members very much appreciated being offered the option of meeting on their own time and then banking release time to be used at a future date. (Three meetings had meals provided after school, the other three meetings could have taken place during school time. However, one group unanimously chose to have those meetings occur outside of school hours, allowing each member to bank 1.5 days.) “Three hours appeared to be a good duration for meetings, as people knew that we had to remain on task to cover all that we had outlined for a meeting during that period, yet not so long that people became tired. We held four of our meetings in an elementary school Learning Assistance room, which allowed us to have a wide

variety of materials and technology at our disposal. Two of our meetings were held at the local teacher association conference room, which I found to be a little more work as a presenter, i.e., carting in chart paper, learning-assistance materials to share, etc.”

- **Timelines and phases of meetings**

“Our group chose to hold the meetings over a condensed period of time to maintain continuity. Having the meetings close together definitely enabled us to maintain focus (six meetings over a four-month period). However, I believe that having the meetings a little further apart might have allowed for a little more reflection, especially if we were to include journaling as a part of our process.”

- **Moving beyond venting and into constructive discourse**

“We were very clear at the first meeting that venting would only be an agenda item at that meeting, and that from there on all of our work was to be proactive. We highlighted the fact that the group was to move ahead using the information that came up at the venting session as a tool to address change required to make the “New role” of the School Support Teacher a workable one.”

- **Training for facilitators**

“The initial session was both informative and very helpful in providing the opportunity to develop a sense of how we were going to frame our meetings, and some strategies that we could use with our group. Facilitators’ skills included areas such as: time management; knowledge of group dynamics/processes and facilitation of discussion; subject/job knowledge; where to find reference and resource materials.”

- **In-district and inter-district communication**

“All of the people who attended the videoconference found it to be a valuable activity. I would like to see this opportunity offered at least three times during the year, to allow districts to share what worked, challenges encountered, commonalities among the districts. Having the district vice-principal from Student Support Services attend our second meeting allowed us to clarify some misconceptions that people had about the many changes that had occurred in our district.”

- **BCTF/local teacher association/school district support**

“The fact that these groups were devised to help address concerns highlighted through both provincial and district Special Education reviews, showed many seasoned teachers that our concerns really were being listened-to at all levels, and that there are productive outcomes from reviews. The sharing of funding responsibilities again highlighted that all groups can work together as a team.”

“It was very refreshing to have the BCTF involved in activities that are specifically related to professional issues.”

- **Approaches/activities during meetings**

“At our first meeting our group identified key areas of concern/importance/interest, and we set up an outline as to when these would be addressed, i.e., two per meeting. This gave us a frame to work from, and allowed people to prepare for each meeting. This by no means meant that we would allow only those topics to be discussed, however.”

“We used a variety of approaches during the meetings, e.g., breaking into small groups, carouseling, brainstorming, presentations, etc. While we worked to maintain an informal and accepting environment, we did set up timelines for each meeting to help keep us on track.”

b. Facilitation skills and approaches unique to each site

Each group established a structured process for the group sessions through pre-planning, and then consistently organized each session around this structure (key components and a sequence). Each site's approach was unique, as noted below:

COQUITLAM

Set-up: release time during school day, food provided, informal setting.

Process for sessions:

- Journaling: issues/celebrations from the past week noted in a personal journal (10 minutes, 1-minute warning).
- Round-Robin Circle Conversation (drawing on personal journal reflections): Each participant had “uninterrupted time” to speak, with other group members honouring their contribution through active listening, jotting down any questions for follow-up, i.e., similar to a “talking circle” process; can be emotional.
- Question/comments: probing into earlier comments, using an open-forum approach.
- Meeting “Focus Session”: Focussed discussion of a pre-assigned reading, resource, or other new piece of material.
- Closure: A final circle round, to share anything at all prior to closing the session.
- Logistics: any ongoing support needs.

PRINCE GEORGE

Set-up Session: Lead team of three facilitators met in a pre-planning session and determined shared roles and responsibilities of their job, and set up the process and agenda topics for the group sessions based on needs identified by resource teachers in the mentor group.

Process for sessions:

- Round-Robin Circle Conversation: Each participant had an opportunity to comment on their personal journal reflections, “What had they noticed/observed about their practice in the past month?”
- Discussion on an article/reading, assigned for homework, aimed at providing new information; guided conversation about ideas and insights arising from the article.
- Mini-workshop led by one of the lead facilitators on a key topic of interest.
- Closure: Reflection on the content and process of the session, and homework assignment.

NANAIMO

Set-up: used an informal approach, co-ordinated by the two lead facilitators; initial planning was supported by Sue Elliott, BCTF Mentor Associate, at the fall orientation session held by the BCTF.

Process for sessions was informal; each session agenda flowed out of the preceding one and was highly experiential, with a focus on two goals: creating a workable role description that would

end in some specific recommendations to the district/local union, and acting as a self-help support group to each other.

– Initial Session: Group participated in an assessment and vision-setting process, by brainstorming around the following two questions:

1. What are all of the things that are currently wrong with the job? (acted as a purging and venting session, i.e., sometimes called the “Groan Zone” in groups.)
2. What would the “ideal” job look like? (attributes were identified, e.g., collaborative, opportunities for change, etc.)

– An agenda of topics that needed addressing in the sessions was created – all wanted something proactive and constructive to be the end result.

– All subsequent sessions flowed out of each other, and produced some recommendations for action, and Survival Tips! (products as a result of the deliberation were extremely important to the group).

Participant and facilitator feedback

All participants completed both a BCTF evaluation and answered a stem, “This experience has been...” The comments from the stem were very positive.

- Both facilitators also found the experience to be a very positive one, and a very good way to participate in professional development.

- The provision of release for facilitators to prepare for each meeting helped to ensure that the meetings would flow in an effective fashion.

Sharing with wider audiences (district reporting, writing for BCTF web site, etc.)

- Minutes of our meetings were posted on the school district Student Support Services website.

- We developed a Year-at-a-Glance document⁶ to be used by School-Based Teams to assist with delineating the role of the School Support Teacher.

- We have created a handbook for School Support Teachers providing sample forms and information considered to be valuable by our group.

- Trish McKay composed a document outlining the experience of the group, which is accessible on the BCTF website⁷.

- The group will be making a presentation to teachers, district staff, BCTF, and administrators on May 24, 2005, to describe their experiences and outcomes and to promote the notion of using discussion groups as a means of professional development.

Capacity building

- Several of our group members indicated that they would be interested in becoming involved in the mentoring process to some degree next year.

Supporting collaborations and networking

⁶ www.bctf.ca/TeachingToDiversity/BC-projects/YearAtAGlance/nanaimo.pdf

⁷ www.bctf.ca/TeachingToDiversity/BC-projects/MentoringNanaimoLadysmith.pdf

- It was great to have the BCTF support and involvement.
- The district's support helped to bridge that feeling of "them" and "us" that appears to have developed over the past few years.
- This process helped to facilitate a feeling a regrowth as opposed to the disintegration of the systems in Special Education.

Next steps - Supporting collaboration and networking

- The district has made a commitment to providing six District Student Support Teacher meetings, three with release time and three after school with dinner provided, throughout the next school year.
- It appears that there will be a mentoring teacher/information meeting set up very early in the new school year for teachers new to Learning Assistance.
- A mentoring teachers group will be offered in our district again next year.

5. Final thoughts from participants

- The three-way collaboration (BCTF, local teacher association, school district) offers good and complementary support for the project.
- Participants and facilitators have found this a stimulating and useful professional development experience. Renewing and re-energizing for career teachers.
- This is a good foundation, which requires documentation in a number of areas so that we can build capacity within the three districts and provide information for other locals/districts interested in developing similar groups. Sustainability is crucial.
- Conversation conditions that work best include: a relaxed atmosphere (off-site?); district support: release time and leadership; unpressured time to think and talk together; facilitation support and teaming approach.

6. Research-base and resource list

As we progress with this work we are conducting our own research and also accessing a range of literature. References and extracts will be provided where appropriate and when known. If you have suggestions for additional references, please e-mail them to cnaylor@bctf.ca.

Lipton, L. & Wellman, B. (2003). *Mentoring Matters: A Practical Guide to Learning-Focused Relationships*. Sherman, CT: MiraVia.

Clark, C. (ed.). (2001). *Talking Shop: Authentic Conversation and Teacher Learning*. New York: Teachers' College Press. (See the *Educational Researcher* review of this book at: http://www.aera.net/uploadedFiles/Journals_and_Publications/Journals/Educational_Researcher/3109/3109_BookRev.pdf.)

Appendix 1

Engaging conversations on teaching and learning workshops

“Teachers mentoring teachers”

When teachers talk about their practice and implement new ideas in a trusting, respectful environment, they increase their expertise and grow as professionals. That growth is both renewing and re-energizing; it allows teachers to provide the best learning opportunities for their students.

This BCTF associate cadre provides support to locals/schools/members aiming to create or renew mentorship or other such collegial support initiatives.

1. Renewing teaching: Collegial conversations

Staffs, departments, or groups of teachers wishing to revitalize their teaching benefit from this initiative. Trained facilitators help teachers clarify concerns, set goals, and create plans using a collegial learning conversation model. Use PD days or professional learning time in this new format led by a BCTF associate.

Associates in this option act as role models and facilitators of this process.

2. Enhancing professional conversations: A verbal toolbox

Understanding the value of professional, learning-focussed conversations is a cornerstone of professionalism. Collegial conversations are essential as teachers identify issues, set goals, and pursue professional growth.

Collegial conversations provide support, focus on challenge and growth, and facilitate the creation of a vision for education. This option provides specific verbal skills and techniques teachers can use in their professional conversations.

Associates in this option build understanding and provide practice in verbal communication skills.

3. Supporting new teachers or teachers with new responsibilities: Planning a district-wide mentorship program

New teachers or teachers new to a school or an assignment sometimes feel vulnerable, anxious, or alienated. The best measure of the integrity of any profession is how well its newest members are invited and welcomed.

Locals wishing to develop or extend their mentorship programs may benefit from this option.

Associates in this option act as planners, facilitators, and/or resource persons.

Appendix 2

Mentoring and Professional Conversation Planning Day Prior Boardroom, 2nd Floor, BCTF, 550 West 6th Avenue, Vancouver, 9:30 a.m. – 4:00 p.m.

Thank you for participating in the professional conversations/mentoring planning day on November 4. We are sending you the Goals and an Agenda – see below. We will be providing you with a binder and a range of documents and resources on the 4th, which will be added to during the span of this project.

GOALS

There are three goals for the meeting:

1. Develop clarity about roles
2. Understand and experience some aspects of professional conversations and mentoring
3. Initiate planning for each district's project.

AGENDA

1. Welcome/overview
2. Introductions/warm-up exercise
3. Provincial context and web page
4. Overview of professional conversations initiative
5. Roles: provincial and local
6. Planning in local teams
7. Closure

ACTION ITEMS

1. Bring your calendars with possible times and dates for the meetings of the group in your district. We would suggest holding five or six meetings (one a month) with the final one being on or before May 5, 2005. Please come with some possible dates and times that work for you.
2. Please note in your calendar that we are planning a reflection/evaluation day for Friday, May 6, 2005, also at the BCTF office. Your district has agreed to release you for that day and to pay associated expenses.

We look forward to meeting you on November 4.

Please contact Nancy Hinds (604-871-1840, nhinds@bctf.ca) or Charlie Naylor (604-871-2254, cnaylor@bctf.ca) if you have any further queries regarding the November 4 planning day.