



Mentoring partners: Lori Nelson, Kamloops and Bianca Mirabelli, Clearwater

Learning flows both ways

By Susan Croll

Wikipedia defines mentorship as a personal relationship in which a more experienced or more knowledgeable person helps to guide a less experienced or less knowledgeable person. It describes true mentoring as more than just answering occasional questions or providing ad hoc help.

Mentoring is an ongoing relationship of learning, dialogue, and challenge. And that is how Lori Nelson and Bianca Mirabelli describe their mentoring relationship.

They met three years ago when Mirabelli became Nelson's student teacher in Kamloops. After her practicum, Mirabelli secured a teaching position in Clearwater and when the Kamloops and District Teachers' Association, along with SD73, joined the mentoring pilot project supported by the BCTF, UBC, and the BC School Superintendents' Association (BCSSA), Mirabelli and Nelson signed up, reigniting their former relationship.

They are both secondary teachers and their subject areas include English, Creative Writing, and French as a Second Language. Nelson, an experienced

teacher with 26 years in the classroom has mentored informally for many years but never in a formal mentoring program like this one. In this program, the key difference is time. Both the mentor and the mentee are given time to observe each other teaching and then time to discuss and debrief their observations.

Nelson says that being in a mentoring relationship with someone new to teaching is invigorating. "One of the greatest personal benefits is all of the professional reading I'm doing." She likes that her relationship with Mirabelli has turned itself on its head. "I am the supposed mentor, but while observing Bianca teach a lesson on the narrative, I learned something totally new. I found her lesson so helpful. I always wanted to teach the novel, *Indian Horse*, but did not have any resources. Now I have ideas and a plan, thanks to my mentee."

Mirabelli disagrees with the unfortunate, but common attitude, that a teacher who becomes a mentee is a poor or not good enough teacher. She comments that a 13-week

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practicum is simply not long enough to truly learn how to become a good teacher. "Mentoring is an awesome opportunity. I love learning and this is a good way for me to keep learning." She adds that mentoring has helped her adjust to having her own classroom and to maintain work-life balance. "I get to ask questions that were never discussed in university, like what to expect from students, what's typical, what's not. These are questions that Lori and I can talk about openly and freely."

No relationship comes without its challenges and the geographic distance between Kamloops and Clearwater is their greatest hurdle. "It is about an hour-and-a-half drive between our schools so even though the project gives us time to meet, it still is a long way to drive both ways in one day," Nelson says. "Because Bianca lives in Kamloops and comes home on weekends, we meet for coffee every Saturday morning and debrief the week. It's a good time to talk, to listen. That is what a good mentor does, she listens. You have to give the person you're mentoring the space to talk, to vent, to ask questions. The mentee needs to feel safe and respected, not judged. You want to build a collaborative relationship."

Mirabelli says that mentoring is working for her because she and Lori share similar values and suspend their egos when they meet making it safe to ask questions. She suggests that any teacher looking for a mentor needs to be clear why they want a mentor. "Know what you want and need from the relationship. Think about your goals before you enter into a mentoring relationship."

"Ideally, however," Nelson interjects, "for practical and logistical reasons, your mentoring partner should work at the

same school you do. And you should both love the same or similar subjects. You will have more in common then."

Nelson wishes that mentoring was available for all new teachers, especially those who tend to be shy or find themselves in an unfamiliar situation.

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"Sometimes people who are shy don't feel comfortable asking questions or new teachers find themselves working in a rural school when they've lived in a city their whole lives. Mentoring can be tremendously useful in these situations." She also points out that the role of teachers has changed so dramatically that new teachers may need some help navigating such complex roles. Mirabelli suggests that mentoring isn't just for new teachers but can be useful for teachers teaching new subjects or age or grade levels.

Regardless of why one chooses to opt for mentoring, both teachers state that in the end it is students who benefit. They

say that school districts need to understand and embrace this concept. Mentorship works for students because the result of a good mentoring relationship means that teachers become better at what they love to do.

To get more information about mentoring or on how your local/district can apply to the New Teacher Mentoring Project, call Alison Davies at 604-871-1823 or visit the BCTF website at bctf.ca and follow the links to the New Teacher Mentoring Project.

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