

The work and responsibilities of school leaders can vary greatly from elementary to middle to secondary, from region to region, and from school to school.

*A Day in the Life* offers a snapshot of BCPVPA members in their roles, and shares their thoughts on their path, their practice and why they love what they do.

In our fifth installment of the series,  
we meet Tu Loan Trieu,  
a Vice-Principal at Ecole Glenbrook Middle School  
in New Westminster

Tu Loan Trieu always loved school, loved the library and knew she wanted to pursue education. But when she participated as a University grad in the JET (Japanese Exchange and Teaching) Programme for two years, it opened her eyes to the difference she could make as a teacher. “With this program, some people call you an ‘English tape recorder’ because you repeat and they repeat after you”, says Tu Loan, “but you were there to support the English teacher with lessons and pronunciation because – at that time – Japanese teachers were really shy about speaking English. I didn’t have a teaching degree, and I was really lucky that I had freedom with my lessons. I was teaching forty junior high school students in a class with very little English, and my first experience of being an educator was engaging them, and encouraging them to speak English.”

Tu Loan’s time in Japan presented some challenges, but not just because she was new to teaching. “For my first six months in Japan, I could not communicate. I could see, but I couldn’t understand what people were saying, and I didn’t yet have the language skills to connect with them. That experience really built my compassion for new learners and for students who have difficulty learning, because suddenly that was me! I could relate to what it feels like for some students, that sense of being uncomfortable, that struggle, and it set my foundation as an educator.

# A Day in the Life

of a  
Middle  
School  
Vice-Principal

*"I did the Middle Years program at UBC, and just fell in love with it. I remember being in that age group myself, and how formative that was ..."*

*Tu Loan Trieu*



Tu Loan having fun with supervision at Ecole Glenbrook Middle School

I'm a refugee and I came to Canada when I was little. I didn't have difficulties learning the language because at that young age, you're a sponge with learning and I was indeed a sponge! Like many teachers, I loved school and was a good student, but I'm also grateful for challenges along the way."

After her experience in Japan, Tu Loan decided to pursue teaching, first by teaching English to adults and then by attending UBC. "I did the Middle Years program at UBC, and just fell in love with it. I remember being in that age group myself, and how formative that was, how the person that I am today was developed during that time. The running, the sports, reading, all the clubs that were being offered: the world was just opening up during grades 6, 7 and 8, and students in grade 6 and 7 were just becoming leaders in school."

*"Like many teachers, I loved school and was a good student, but I'm also grateful for the challenges along the way."*

When Tu Loan applied to UBC, she understood 'middle years' to be 'intermediate', not realizing that there were middle schools right there in Coquitlam. "I love the structure set in place for collaboration. You have this big school: you arrive from an elementary school with 300 or 400 kids and you come to a massive school with 500 or 600 students, but you build this team community and identity first, this small community, and then the kids become part of the larger school community."

In her 17 years of teaching, Tu Loan worked primarily in middle schools. That experience,

and the focus on collaboration and working in teams, was a perfect fit. "We would have common prep together, and you'd have the opportunity to talk about students, and not just students in your class, but also students from your switch class. We 'platoon' in a team of four, and if you're my switch teacher I'll teach science and math for both of our classes, and you could teach the humanities for both classes. It helps get students ready to go into high school where they'll have a different teacher for each subject, moving on from the one teacher you have in elementary school. I loved that I had a partner teacher to work with and another teacher in the other platoon who would teach the same subject and we could share resources and plan together. In our team, we would plan field trips, collaborate on curriculum, and build team and school spirit — there was a lot of team building."

When Tu Loan thinks back, she did not expect her path to lead to the Vice-Principal's office. Her love for the library continued to beckon, as she had worked for the Vancouver Public Library through high school, University and her first ten years of teaching. In her fourth year of teaching, she decided to pursue a diploma in Teacher-Librarianship at UBC and landed a library job at a middle school. "I applied for the role and I'm not sure that I was really ready to do that transition — at the time, I was happy with my class, my school, my teaching partner — so it was a bit of a shock when I got the job. Now I was going from being a classroom teacher with sixty kids to being responsible for literacy in a big middle school. That really launched my journey, because when I did my degree it was about literacy and collaboration and co-teaching as a teacher-librarian. And I slowly created this position — my first teacher-librarian position, and the only one in the school. I didn't have anyone telling me 'this is what you have to do.' I was very grateful to have a supportive Principal, Ross Davidson, who essentially took a



Tu Loan with staff Audrey McMann, Tammy Dewear (front), Anli Qi, Daman Gill, Katerina Kamagianis (back)

chance on me and let me develop the role. I was also very fortunate that the teachers were open to working with me. For me it's always about engaging students, and now it was about getting kids excited about ... reading! bibliography! And research skills! Maybe not so exciting for them, but it was exciting for me: information literacy, digital literacy, those were my strengths. Quite often, when they see my enthusiasm, they also get excited about it."

Tu Loan was collaborating with many teachers, and was encouraged by her Principal to embark upon new projects. "I remember reading a wonderful book over the summer, and I thought it would be

a great school-wide read to bring the teachers together and the school together. We started with something small, and the feedback six weeks later was so positive that we decided to do another book the next year. You have all these classes of kids having the same book read aloud to them, and I now had something that connected me to all 20 classes: I had a platform. I've heard that the school-wide read has continued as a culture in some middle schools in Coquitlam where I was at that time."

"I've been fortunate to work with supportive teachers and administrators who were excited about some of

the initiatives that I brought forward, like a 'literacy day' conference at the school, organizing a school triathlon, or taking students on a Quebec exchange programme. I remember my first goal had been to collaborate with every teacher in that school by the end of the year and I did meet that goal: having that connection with the teachers made it easier when I suggested, 'let's do something different' because they've worked with me before. And, of course, when teachers collaborate, magic happens!"

Tu Loan moved on to do her masters as she could see the leadership potential of the teacher-librarian. "When I first did my diploma, that wasn't my focus: it was literacy, everything was literacy, digital literacy, information literacy, reading strategies. I love reading, and I loved being a librarian." At that

time, Coquitlam was offering education leaves; she applied, and was successful. "The big thing that I had to give up was working at this school that had been so amazing for me for four years. With an education leave, you're not guaranteed a return to that position, so I took a huge risk because I had great colleagues. But I felt that things were becoming – not easy, I don't want to use the word easy – but it was becoming comfortable, and I wanted to push myself."

Tu Loan completed the University of Alberta program online. While she did take a course at UBC, and travelled to Edmonton, it was a challenging year for a social and collaborative educator. "We did get to collaborate; they didn't have Zoom but they did have Blackboard and I was meeting with teacher-



librarians in P.E.I., Ontario and Alberta on Skype. It was lonely after all that interaction at school, but I learned so much that year. I was reading all about teacher-librarians as leaders, and I thought: 'oh my goodness, this is what I've been doing'. That was my paper, *Teacher-Librarians as Leaders in the School*."

***"It was lonely after all that interaction at school, but I learned so much that year. I was reading all about teacher-librarians as leaders, and I thought: 'oh my goodness, this is what I've been doing'."***

The pursuit of a Vice-Principal role was again a result of Tu Loan feeling that she may be too comfortable. She credits both of her Principals, Judy Robb and Nadine Tambellini, for the nudge and mentorship. "They were very supportive of my initiatives which helped build my confidence. They are great school leaders. I started thinking that maybe I could do this. I was bringing some of the success I had experienced to a new school. No-one really knew about me, and I was building relationships with everyone, doing a lot of coaching, and feeling very visible in the school. One year I was athletic director, department head, teacher-librarian, and I taught in a classroom after the strike year of 2014. I had to teach and be in the library, which was good, but it was a lot of work. I organized school-wide events and

reads, I was booking authors, organizing school and district sports events, and helping teachers with curriculum. At that time, I was doing a lot of instructional leadership, including working with my Principal to encourage teachers to embrace the revised curriculum."

At the end of 2017, Tu Loan applied for Vice-Principal positions in several districts and an opportunity presented itself at New West Schools. There was a decision that had to be made: stay in an environment that was familiar and comfortable in a district where she was thriving or go to a new district where she did not know anybody and start a new role. "It comes back – again – to getting too comfortable. Why not go somewhere where they don't know me, and I can build again. And that's how my leadership transpired."

Professional learning has been a foundation of Tu Loan's journey, and she has been involved with the BCPVPA PLD Committee for two years. "Professional learning has always been important to me. Learning is about being engaged and curious. I fundamentally feel that to be the best teacher that I can be, I have to be a learner as well. I need to know how my students are doing, how they learn and how they struggle. And I learned early on that if you're part of the ProD Committee you have a say in what that learning will be. That's why every school, every year, I was always part of the ProD committee ... and the social committee!"

The best part of the role for Tu Loan is, of course, the people. "I love it when a student approaches me with a problem, and I help them sort it out: it could be big things, it could be little things. It's really about helping kids learn how to solve problems and how to be assertive. There's that, but there's also working with teachers and staff. I've had such great Principals who have always given me room to take risks. And now I've had to shift: I'm now

creating an environment for students and teachers to take risk. And I'm trying not to be the person that's always fixing things. When teachers come and they want to do something, I can say, 'what can I do to help you to achieve that'. I love seeing teachers work together, and them asking me to be a part of it."

One of the more challenging aspects of the role has been the communication with parents. "Quite often I am the person who calls a parent to tell them that their child is having challenges at school, and it's not a phone call every parent wants to hear. The first year was hard, because relationships are key, and you need to know the kids. The kids in my school know me now, and they know I didn't send them to the office, it's just that I have to deal with *why* they were sent to the office."

"I learned a lot the first year. My Principal, Chris Evans, has been in the community for a long time, and has been able to offer background on the families which helps me to approach phone calls. I've learned so much from him in this regard, especially the piece about timing, and the power of being patient. But I've been relying too on something that I learned from a parent: he used the analogy of a sports team. When I make the phone call, I let the parents know that I'm not just reaching out to tell them their child did something wrong, but to talk about it as a team, and determine what can we do together to support this child. He framed it so well. The idea of a team solution is to work together so that the child can have a better end of the year, a better end of the week, a better end of the day. I still have challenging conversations with some parents, but I'm lucky to have a relationship with my Principal where I can say, 'hey: did I do this wrong?' This wasn't something that was taught in my teacher-librarian leadership course, but you learn along the way, and you reflect on your mistakes and successes. I also try to make 'good' phone calls,

check-in phone calls, so it's not always the difficult conversations."

Moving from the classroom to a Vice-Principal role was a shift for Tu Loan, but she was able to draw on what she had learned both as a teacher and teacher-librarian. "With my first Vice-Principal position I was in the classroom 80% of the time, teaching grade three and four for the first time. I had the reading strategies and the teaching strategies, but I had to learn about pacing. Grade 3s and 4s have a different energy level than middle schoolers! It was an opportunity for the teachers to see that I was a competent teacher, and there was curiosity about what I was doing in athletics and in digital literacy. I was in the office for only one day a week. My previous Principals were great role models in supporting teachers and giving them the time to collaborate, so I was able to offer to take a couple of their classes to give them some time to collaborate. They appreciated that because in elementary school you don't have common prep time – it was like giving people a taste of middle school! While I couldn't do it all the time, it gave me a chance to get to know the kids outside of the class I was already teaching."

Tu Loan is a huge fan of middle school, and has some words of advice for educators who may be considering a move. "Be open-minded. Be flexible. Being in middle school means collaboration and working with many different teachers. My role as a teacher-librarian prepared me for that, and removed the fear of going to different classes. Have an open mindset, and know that you could be placed in many different situations. Let it roll, and go with the flow. All my transitions, the different schools I've been to, and the different roles I've played have prepared me to take on things without having trepidation. To take them on with grace. It's demonstrating agile leadership".

*"I love it when a student approaches me with a problem,  
and I help them sort it out: it could be big things,  
it could be little things . . .*



Courtesy Holly Nathan

*. . . It's really about helping kids  
learn how to solve problems  
and how to be assertive."*

# A Day in the Life of a Middle School Vice-Principal

**Monday: my favourite day of the week!**

**5:00 am** Wake up for yoga or a run

**6:00 am** Check absences for the day

**6:45am** Arrive at school, put the kettle on, read emails

**7:30am** Open school, opening shutters, greeting community, staff and students  
Sort out teaching or Education Assistant shortages, determine coverage

**7:50am** Touch base with Principal

**8:15am** Monday Morning Meeting with all staff

**8:40am** Greet students at one of three entrances, ensure they have masks and that hands are sanitized

**9:00am** Meet with Principal to review issues of the week and formulate 'to-do' list, which could include:  
*email from parent about bullying issue, graffiti in the bathroom, rumour of physical altercation with group of students outside of school, email from parent about teacher, support for new teacher, scheduling issues*

**10:00am** Visit classroom along with youth worker and counsellor to model a class circle in response to teacher request

**10:40am** Go outside to connect with classes for their brain breaks and Daily Physical Activity (DPA)

**11:00am** Work on the 'to-do list', visit classrooms, touch base with TTOCs, chat with teachers on prep

*I'm a morning person*, so I'll get up at 5:00 a.m. and – depending on the weather – I'll go for a run or do yoga to get my body moving. This year because I'm not coaching, I'm at school just before 7:00 a.m., I put a kettle on, put the dishes away while I wait for the water to boil and sit down to catch up on my emails. I don't have Wi-Fi at home, so it makes it difficult to do work at home – it's good for balance, but sometimes I'm at school really late or really early.

I spend about a half hour catching up on emails and news, and then my secretary arrives and I leave to do the morning opening. I really enjoy this part of the morning because it's quiet and I get to greet the teachers who come early and the staff in the daycare. By now it's 7:45 a.m., and my Principal and I will sit down and touch base. Every Monday morning, we have a 15-minute meeting where the whole staff gets together – it used to be in the library, now it's on Teams – to look at the highlights of the week. It's a nice way to make sure we're all on the same page, and gives everyone a chance to add their events or reminders. It's great to start off the week like that.

I then go to the front and greet the students. In the past the kids would just come in, but because of COVID-19 we have different assigned entrances, and two start times. When that's all done, my Principal and I meet again, briefly. My first year here, I was .5 teacher and .5 admin, and our check-in times were a lot more scheduled – and longer – because I was teaching so much. Now I'm .8 VP and .2 teaching because we have more students. We have more time to connect, and it doesn't have to be as scheduled.

After our meeting, I'm walking around, making sure I'm visible in the school. I'm checking in with students who might be high needs, then I'm visiting classes. We have a class that's had a TOC (Teacher On-Call) for more than a week, so I make sure that the TOC is comfortable; today, the TOC was actually late, so I had to step in and teach.

The first year, when I didn't know the kids, my job was very focused on discipline. But now in my third year, I've known the grade eights since they were in grade six and that

makes such a huge difference. I visit classrooms as much as I can, if a student is sent to the office, I need to deal with that. Because of our new schedule during the pandemic we don't have a recess – teachers take their classes out on their own, when it suits their schedule, so I make a point to go out between 10:30 and 11:00 a.m. to offer extra supervision for the kids and to touch base with teachers.

Lunch time is when I am on supervision, and it's a good time to connect with students, watch them play and support any kids that need help. I try and give myself about 15 minutes to have lunch before lunch – I've learned that if I don't eat my lunch before lunch, I won't be eating lunch after lunch, and I won't be eating lunch until 3:00 p.m. The reality is that things happen at lunch. But this year has been going really well: because of the structure we've put in place due to the pandemic, we've had fewer office referrals. We now have our lunch breaks in two sections with half the school inside eating lunch, half the school outside playing. There's so much space now for kids to run around and play. I can't even imagine last year how we had 650 kids all outside at one time for 20 minutes. We would have, on average, eight to ten office referrals.

The rest of the day I could be connecting with my Principal, with our counsellor, our youth worker, or with teachers. After school, we are all out there to say goodbye to the kids at the two end times. From 3:00 to about 4:30 p.m., depending upon how hectic the day has been, my Principal and I are putting our heads together trying to solve problems. The last couple of weeks it has been COVID-19-related. After that meeting, I'm calling parents and meeting with teachers, so I'm usually leaving by 6:00 p.m. When I was coaching, the day could end at 7:00 or 8:00 p.m.

One of the key things in my work is that I try to have fun. It's up to me to make my workplace enjoyable. I love Mondays: Mondays are my favourite days of the week because staff and students come back well, rested and fresh – it's a fresh start. I'm fresh because I haven't worked much over the weekend and I'm ready to go. But I will say, I'm just exhausted by Friday!

## A Day in the Life of a Middle School Vice-Principal

- 11:40am** Eat lunch, before lunch! Quick check of emails
- 12:00pm** Lunch supervision, outside and inside. Scan the school and see how students are doing socially. Watch out for flying balls on the field!
- 1:00pm** Return to the office to find several students waiting: food was thrown in a classroom, and a physical altercation ensued. Talk to the students, witnesses and bystanders to get the big picture
- 1:30pm** A teacher arrives to share an email from an upset parent whose child went home in tears during lunch, engage in fact-finding and prepare for tomorrow's conversation with the student
- 2:30pm** Report of a plugged toilet in the bottom floor bathroom! Go downstairs to put up tape, photograph the scene, speak to the reporting student. Email teachers – *to be continued*
- 3:00pm** Say goodbye to students at one of three entrances
- 3:15pm** Debrief with teacher regarding today's class circle exercise. Meet with teachers, youth worker and counsellor. Meet with Principal to reflect on what went well, what was challenging, and what needs to be carried over for tomorrow
- 4:30pm** Catch up on emails, call parents, update OneNotebook on office referrals or student visits, email teachers regarding any incidents and make general notes of the day (*learned this from a retired Principal!*)
- 6:00pm** Head home for the day