

WHY

Mentorship?

The learning journey of two
professionals involved in the
BCPVPA Mentorship Program

by

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SD 61

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SD 75

"It is only by being honest that we can have integrity. Actions such as being true to our spirit and accepting who we are will guide us in being honest. To be truly honest is to keep the promises one made to the Creator, to others and to oneself."

*-Excerpt from the Sacred Teaching of "Honesty" developed with Leq'a:mel artist, Ovilá Mailhot for 2020-21,
Mission Public School District, Indigenous Education Advisory Committee, September 2020*

The BCPVPA Mentorship Program has changed our practices for the better. Building professional capacity is what brought each of us to the Mentorship Program, but neither of us realized how transformative it would be. Many of our conversations were around how purposeful communication in leadership supports not only professional capacity, but also the capacity of all those in the school community. As we navigated so many unexpected situations in our school communities, the questions "What is your intention?", "What are your resources?", and "Who does it help?" broadened our capacity to identify key details when having conversations about how to support learners and staff. These questions guided us, and we are happy to share some of our experiences and perspectives, as the journey is one that we would recommend to all BCPVPA members whether it be as a mentee or a mentor.

Why did I join the BCPVPA Mentorship program?



LANI ('the mentee')

As a new school leader, I attended a presentation by BCPVPA's Jessica Antosz and Elizabeth Bell on the leadership standards at the annual leadership retreat. The workshop connected me with the opportunity for mentorship as an interactive, real-time support, and this was appealing as I considered my professional growth goals. I decided to take the leap and signed up for this opportunity, not exactly sure what it would entail. On October 18, 2019, the initial face-to-face meeting of our cohort's mentors and mentees met for the first – and last – time in Vancouver. This is where I met Aaron, an experienced middle school Vice-Principal from Vancouver Island, and we started our learning journey together. I could not have foreseen how important the mentorship experience would be in the next two years, as the unimagined unfolded in *unprecedented* ways. The dialectal approach to professional development focused on key questions that support the acquisition of learning, and practices that both developed strengths and underlined how to work through areas of challenge.



AARON ("the mentor")

As an 'experienced' school leader, I knew how important it was for me to surround myself with professional mentorship; when the opportunity to join a provincial mentorship community presented itself, I was keen to see if I could find a role within the community. I signed up for the role of 'mentor' and was excited at the potential to be involved in a BCPVPA program, as they had been very influential in my professional growth. I went to the first meeting uncertain as to what to expect, but was eagerly welcomed to the community made up of active and retired educators from all over the province. I was introduced to Lani, the person I would be paired with, and we were guided through the initial plan for our journey. We did work with other mentors, and were provided with resources and a suggested framework for the work that we would be doing. As mentors, we also spent time getting to know our mentee and sharing some of the professional goals that encouraged us to take on this opportunity.

What is the intention and purpose of our work?

LANI

The conversations were rooted in something we each held as key – accessible learning for all, and belonging for all students. The initial conversations began as an exploration of the BCPVPA Leadership Standards as they related to the core of my leadership practice. These ideas drove the early conversations: the Leadership Standards were critical to the daily work and relationships we have as leaders. Time and again, we would discuss how to make the core of my focus – supporting student learning and engagement – visible to others through strengthening my daily conversations with colleagues, students, families, and community stakeholders.

AARON

From a mentor's perspective, the intention was to help the mentee explore their practice and 'shine a light' on where they were developing capacity in their practice. One of the really interesting aspects of these conversations was that they allowed me to be reflective, not only on the mentee's work but on my own work as a school-based administrator. They helped me to process the incredible challenges that I was facing on a daily basis.

What resources are available through this journey?

LANI

Mentorship *is* a resource. Often, Aaron's questions – with the vantage point of experience and distance – could help identify where steps towards resolution could begin. His urban professional setting contrasted with my school's rural context. Ultimately, these differences offered me perspective to see the contrasts, and the strengths of our distinct settings.

As a beginning administrator, the pressures around acquiring the knowledge and skills related to processes, procedures, and documentation, and the daily tasks of supporting students and staff, invariably led to questions about how to complete all that a day brings. The mentorship relationship itself proved to be a model for how to 'do it all'. Often, as Aaron would carefully ask where I thought the right resources might be found, I would expand from my singular viewpoint. Naming the key supports as resources was a beginning. By extension, the vision to identify the strengths of those within the school community became clear, and I could see how district, school, and community members could collaborate, and that leadership means that growth is a communal experience.

AARON

As a mentor, I was thrilled with the resources and community that was provided by the BCPVPA. Beyond the print resources, there was the continued connection from BCPVPA staff and periodic meetings where, as mentors, we were able to question, share, and plan for our work going forward. As school-based leaders, we are all mentors in our communities; this time, information and support helped me grow not only in supporting my mentee, but in supporting the staff in the school where I work.

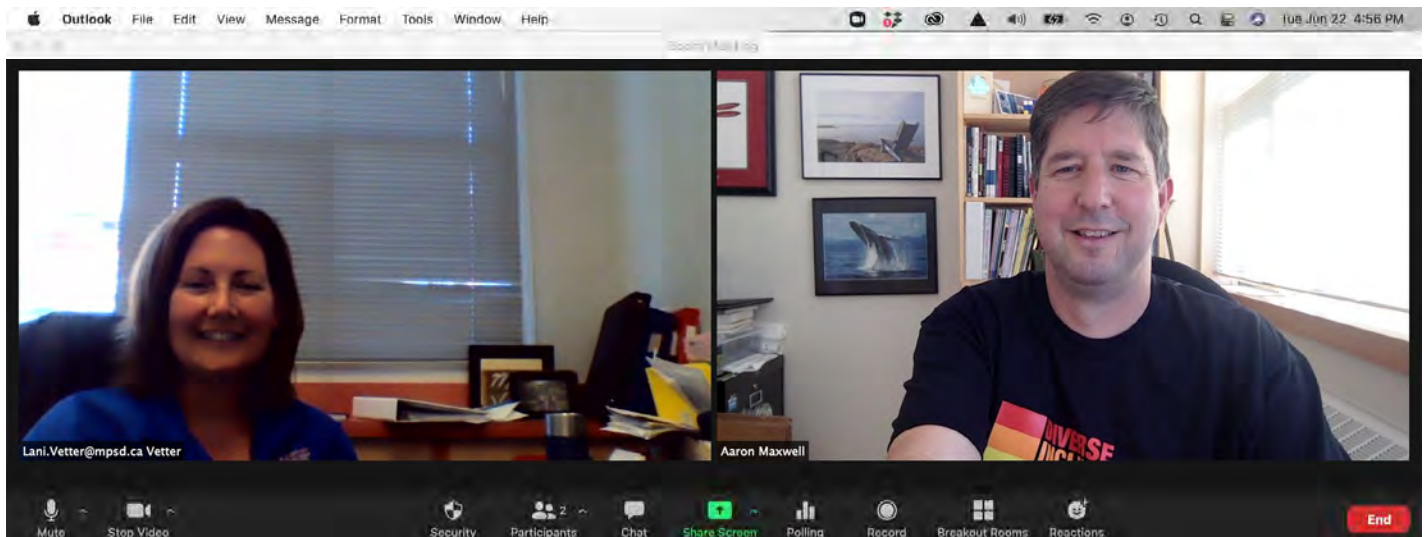
LANI

Any plan undertaken by school leaders involves the consideration of a finite resource: time. Setting aside the time to have the mentorship conversations, usually one hour a week, modelled the prioritization of tasks towards our established goal of ensuring that learning and belonging, and a culture of growth, was at the forefront. An hour a week may seem like an incredible commitment. I would marvel at Aaron's commitment to dedicate that time to my growth. He would respond that, for him, it was a time that allowed him to simultaneously reflect on his own practice. As a result, the question of time evolved into the realization of professional learning as a social and relational experience. That elusive resource of time became more available as our conversations enriched our capacity for discernment regarding our choices, and helped us to develop focus and purpose when aligning action with the anticipated outcome.

This scheduled time was also invaluable because it was a dedicated time committed to professional growth and reflection. With the tyranny of the ‘urgent’ which often fills our days, this was a time to reflect on the shared values and professional growth that motivates us to do what is best for our communities.

MENTORSHIP: Who does it help? How do you know? What do you want to talk about next time?

The mentorship relationship in and of itself is a means to accountability around doing the work in professional development. Questions such as “How do you know?” may initially cause panic: “What if I *don’t* know?” Likely one of the more difficult pieces to the mentorship relationship was where we discussed assessment and the identification of evidence of growth. If there was no evidence, then that meant that there was no growth. The question directed reflection towards what was effectual in our communities and, in turn, helped the realization of how to support areas of key change, alongside administrative partners, staff and students. The question directed reflection towards what was effectual in our communities and, in turn, illuminated how to support areas of key change alongside administrative partners, staff, and students. The accountability of weekly conversations meant that the reflective practice shaping our leadership skills became actual practice in our schools. Through our talks, the ideas and words became tangible in the school community in the form of mental health literacy, stronger student support collaboration, and the increased frequency of key conversations.



Mentorship work is challenging work It required that we share some of the good, and some of the unexpected challenges, in the day-to-day work at school. At the outset of this article, the sacred teaching for the Mission school district identifies the centrality of honesty. Reflective leadership requires the skill to identify areas of need, which connects to a vulnerability in leadership, and accountability to oneself and others. Each week, that identification of focus helped connect us to the essential skills of effective professional leadership. We are both incredibly grateful for the time, research, and intention that was committed to this journey. Through it all, we both learned a great deal and know that going forward, the key questions will continue to inform our professional growth and work in our school communities. It is fair to say that we are both glad we joined this program, and that through this work we have each grown immensely. We look forward to the continuation of this work throughout our careers, and we would encourage others to embark on their own journey either as a mentee, or as a mentor.

Mentors

Mentees

Are you a practicing or retired Principal?

You can make a difference in the journey of a new leader, and have an amazing experience.

Join us as a Mentor for 2021 — 2022.