Objective

In this paper I will discuss the difficulties I faced working as a mentor to the team of teachers from my school who were involved in the Language Minority Teacher Induction Project.

Playing (And Struggling) on the Team

The Bell Multicultural High School Induction Team consists of six researching teachers and two mentor teachers. One might say that we got off to a less-than-auspicious start at the introductory meeting at George Mason University when not all of the members of the team attended. For those who did attend, the meeting clarified some of the questions which lingered weeks later for those who didn't attend. For example, one member of our group who was not at the first meeting was intimidated by the scope of the research he was undertaking, but the orientation made it clear that action research did not need to be intimidating or excruciatingly difficult. The incomplete attendance at that orientation marked the beginning of our troubles coming together as a team.

A second difficulty emerged as we tried to set meeting times. While we set some consistent times and locations to meet, there were many meetings that not all of the teachers could attend. My own time in the afternoons, for example, was consumed by the tennis team that I was coaching. At least for myself, working with two teams took some of the enjoyment out of both. More important than our scattered attendance was our approach to the meetings. Too many times the research teachers seemed to "report" to our mentors rather than to each other. We sought guidance from our mentors when we should have been seeking it from one another. What our mentors thought of our progress and what they suggested came before the opinions and advice of our team members. While the mentor teachers stressed the need for us to take ownership of the project, we never did so to a full extent and our project suffered as a result.

Having discussed some of the problems that our team experienced with the project, I'd like to offer some recommendations for induction teams of the future, especially ones at Bell.

Making It Better

Establishing consistent and effective team meetings is a tall task at any school, including ours, however it can be done. The key to improving Bell's team was to de-emphasize the role of the George Mason coordinator and the mentor teachers and have the research teachers take over total ownership of the process. One way to achieve that goal is to minimize the whole-team meetings in
favor of pairings of research teachers. While it seems counter-intuitive to build an overall team by breaking it up into smaller teams, the pairings seemed to foster whole-group cohesion.

The first advantage that pairings offer was the relative ease of getting two rather than eight people together. In addition, the team members would build connections with one another, one person at a time. Each pair could set the agenda for their meetings and hold each other accountable to their expectations. I never got a good feeling for the other teachers' projects in my group within the team meetings. Had I sat down with each of my team members individually, however, I would have understood and supported their projects more.

The pairings would strengthen the whole-team meetings by allowing for my next suggestion—individuals reporting to the whole group what they learned about another team member's research. For example, the whole team could decide that within the next week, each researcher would meet with one of the other researchers to discuss their work. At the next team meeting, each member of each pair would report on his/her partner's work: "From my meeting with Suzie, I learned that her research focuses on....so far she has found that. ...I think she would do well to try..." Having to report back what one has learned ensures better listening from the start and increases the investment that each researcher has in his/her colleagues' work.

Another tactic that might increase the investment in others' research is classroom observations. As individuals or in small groups, the research teachers should watch their colleagues in action at least once in order to better understand that colleague's challenges, progress, and successes with the research. I know that having one of the mentor teachers in my room at the beginning of my research project and hearing his suggestions helped me progress in my work.

As I finish this section of my project, I am seeing all the opportunities for future induction team success. The key to that success is for research teachers to take ownership of their work. Ownership would come from a combination of teacher pairings, reports on colleagues' work to the whole team, and classroom observations. In a school that already does a decent job of fostering community, these suggestions should fit right in and help Bell's induction researchers have more success meeting their individual school challenges in the future.