# BCTF Research Report

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## Renaissance Delayed: Supporting Early Career Teacher-Librarians in British Columbia

**B**etween 2017–18, the British Columbia Teachers' Federation (BCTF) Research Department, in collaboration with the British Columbia Teacher Librarians' Association (BCTLA), carried out a critical action research project to gather early-career Teacher-Librarians' working and learning experiences, guided by the following research question:

> *What opportunities and barriers do beginning Teacher-Librarians encounter regarding continuing education, professional development, and teacher-led mentorship related to their specialist educator role?*

This report mobilizes the study's teacher-generated research findings by proposing key recommendations regarding future education policies and practices impacting BC Teacher-Librarians' working and learning conditions. In doing so, the project addresses research gaps regarding specialist teacher recruitment, retention and professional development while highlighting beginning Teacher-Librarians' perspectives and experiences.
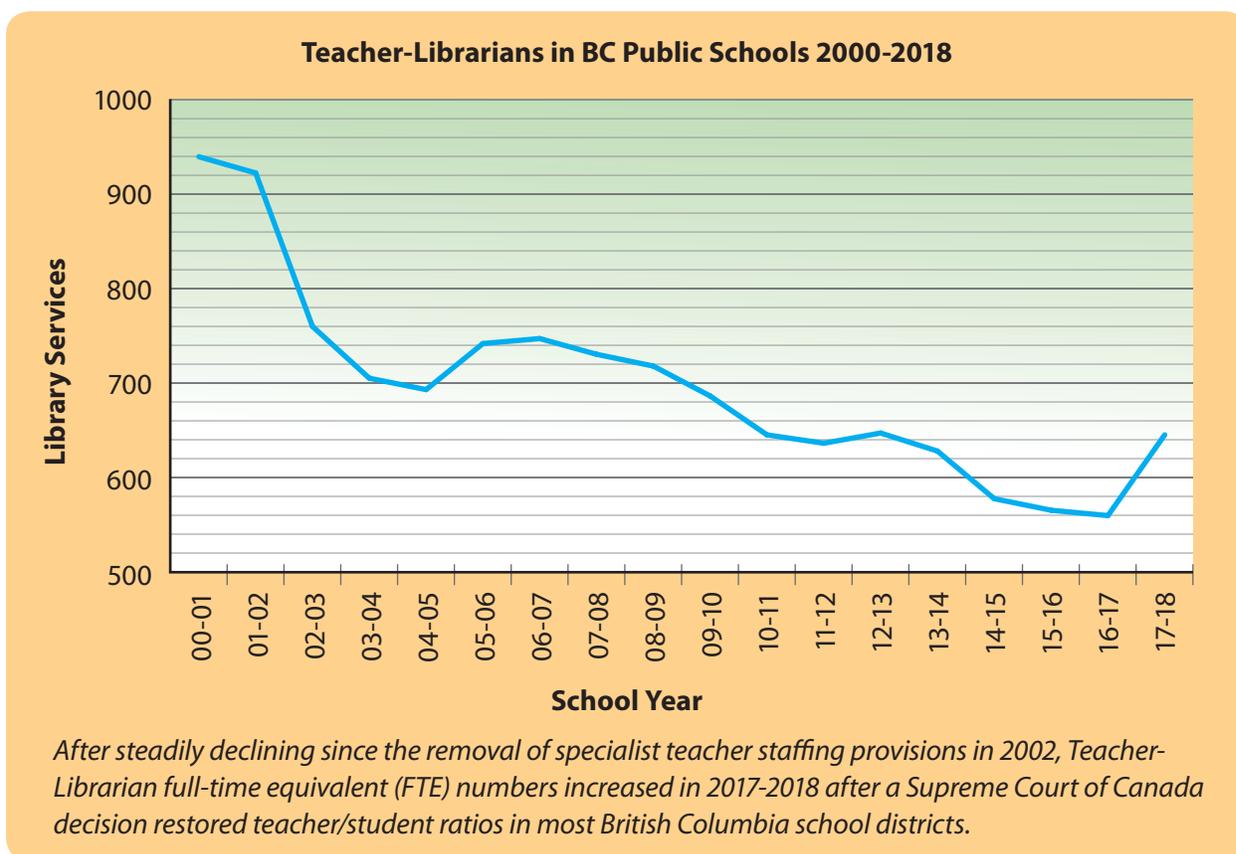
# Acknowledgements

# Background

British Columbia's public school system is currently experiencing a widespread teacher shortage (Dyck, 2017; Canadian Press, 2018). Various demographic, judicial, economic and governance factors have contributed to labour scarcity in the BC education sector. After declining for over a decade, provincial K-12 student enrolment is now increasing (BC Ministry of Education, 2017b). In addition, a ruling by the Supreme Court of Canada (SCC) in November 2016 resulted in the restoration of class size and minimum staffing provisions absent from collective agreements since 2002. To enact the SCC ruling, a Memorandum of Agreement (BCPSEA et al., 2017) between the British Columbia Public Employers' Association (BCPSEA) and the British Columbia Teachers' Federation (BCTF) necessitated intensified recruitment of additional teachers, including specialist teachers such as Teacher-Librarians (TLs).

Economic factors such as housing affordability, high cost-of-living and lagging public sector salaries in comparison to other Canadian provinces (Statistics Canada, 2016; Cheung, 2017) have further exacerbated province-wide teacher recruitment challenges. As a result, some school districts have hired TLs with limited specialist training, certification or experience. A recently published BC Ministry of Education taskforce report (BC Ministry of Education, 2017a) on teacher recruitment and retention pressures offers several recommendations

including enhancement of post-secondary teacher education funding, as well as expansion of professional learning and mentorship options. However, the report acknowledges "data on demand for and supply of specialty positions is not comprehensive or robust" (p. 19), leaving significant questions about how effective systemic incentives and supports for new TLs might be envisioned, funded and implemented.

**Teacher-Librarians in BC Public Schools 2000-2018**



*After steadily declining since the removal of specialist teacher staffing provisions in 2002, Teacher-Librarian full-time equivalent (FTE) numbers increased in 2017-2018 after a Supreme Court of Canada decision restored teacher/student ratios in most British Columbia school districts.*

Source: BC Ministry of Education. (2018). Staff by Year, 1997/1998 - 2017/18 (source: Form 1530). Victoria: Government of British Columbia.

# Why Do Action Research?

As Ewbank (2015) writes, the BCTF has a history of providing "the structure and megaphone for advocacy" (p. 1) regarding the work of BC's public-school Teacher-Librarians, while the BCTLA[1] is responsible for "boots on the ground" advocacy (p. 1). That collaborative relationship was invoked in this action research project. BCTLA executive committee members and local 'chapter leaders' volunteered to participate in a focus group and conduct semi-structured interviews with new Teacher-Librarians throughout BC, while BCTF research staff coordinated research framework design, funding, data gathering, analysis and reporting.

Action research (AR) is teacher-driven education inquiry that acknowledges the practitioner as "knower and agent for educational and social change" (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2009, p. 8)—in this case, participating BCTLA and BCTF union members. AR acknowledges teachers' unique vantage point and specialized educational knowledge for inquiring into research issues relevant to teachers' professional and working lives. Professional practice and local contexts (e.g. schools, school libraries and learning commons) are the main sites for inquiry. AR generates local knowledge that can be shared publicly to promote dialogue about educational practice. Further, it empowers 'scholar teachers' to effect systemic change through their roles as workers and advocacy-based researchers.

As critical action research advocates have argued (Carr & Kemmis,1986; Kincheloe, 1991), AR has the potential to enhance the authority of teachers by making their practice and perspectives the central location for research, and by democratizing public education policy making through the assertion of practitioner-generated research evidence into prevailing policy discourses. AR interrupts 'top-down' professional learning and 'improvement' strategies with practitioner-driven inquiry—reclaiming teachers' professional accountability as a collective, internally focused process, rather than an eternally imposed 'managerial' governance strategy (Furlong, 2008).

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[1] Founded in 1939 as the BC School Librarians' Association, the BCTLA is one of 33 provincial specialist associations (PSAs) within the BCTF. PSAs are self-organized groups representing a diverse range of teaching areas and interests. PSAs are funded by BCTF operating grants and voluntary membership fees. PSAs foster and provide professional development and advocacy through such activities as: organization and hosting of conferences, institutes, workshops, websites and publications; development of curriculum policy and position statements; and, advocating for teachers' working and learning conditions through bargaining and engagement in BCTF committees. See *https://bctla.ca/ for more information about the BCTLA*.

Within a neoliberal climate of de-professionalization (Ball, 2003; Furlong, 2008; Symeonidis, 2015), the "bottom-up orientation" (Bottery, 1997, p. 278) of action research subverts the governance order that places teachers last in the line of stakeholder authority, reasserting the primacy of schools and teacher work as the impetus for generating educational policy and system reform. Bottery argues that AR can provide "a critical underpinning for a heightened teacher status, and for raising the level of impact of the profession upon educational policy-making" (p. 273). As a teacher-driven, localized and advocacy-oriented framework, therefore, action research is a suitable methodological strategy for the BCTF's union-based research.

## Research Methods

In Spring 2017, a BCTF Senior Researcher, Anne Hales, co-designed focus group (Barbour, 2007; Krueger & Casey, 2000) and semi-structured interview (Kvale, 1996) materials and protocols in consultation with BCTLA executive committee members.

Volunteer BCTLA members recruited new TLs in their school districts to participate in the study via email and word-of-mouth. Participants were given an informed consent form (Appendix B) outlining the purpose and privacy protocols of the project. Eight in-person interviews lasting between 30-60 minutes were conducted by BCTLA volunteer interviewers across BC between May-December 2017, while Anne Hales conducted a ninth by telephone. Interview questions explored beginning TLs' teacher education and initial work experiences, professional development and mentorship, and their perspectives on organizational communications and support systems (see Appendix A for interview questions). In addition, a focus group involving 28 local "chapter leaders" from across the province were conducted during a BCTLA provincial meeting in Vancouver, Canada.

The BCTF provided funding to conduct field interviews and cover research-related expenses. In some cases, interviewees and interviewers accessed release time from regular teaching duties. Otherwise, BCTLA interviewers submitted expense claims for interviews that occurred outside of instructional time/work hours (e.g. dinner meetings). In Spring 2018, BCTF staff transcribed all interview recordings and transcripts were uploaded into MAXQDA software for thematic analysis. Pseudonyms were assigned to preserve participant anonymity and confidentiality, and are used throughout this report. Constant comparison method (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) was used to produce general categories, which were then organized into three key themes discussed below.

# Findings

## Diversity of TL credentials and experience

Interviewees possessed a broad range of teaching experience and credentials related to the TL role in their current assignments. Of the nine early-career TLs interviewed, one possessed formal preparation in the form of a Teacher-Librarian diploma. The remainder had limited specialist training, general classroom teaching experience and some limited experience in short term TL contracts, or as Teachers Teaching On Call (TTOCs) in school libraries. Preet, for example, who was beginning her second year as a TL, had a Masters in Educational Practice with a focus on literacy, as well as "quite a few years" of classroom experience, but "no formal Librarian certification." Carissa had not taken any TL courses and "did not have a lot of skill or experience with the job" besides working with the TL at her former school helping with "cataloguing," "buddies" and "grade groupings" that came into the library. Janet had taken the school district's "one day program" for TLs and spent "a lot of time" in school libraries during her five years as a TTOC and covering "vacation leaves."

Some TLs commented that their lack of previous formal training and experience contributed to varying levels of "uncertainty" and "surprise" about the distinctive managerial and technological aspects of TL work, resulting in feeling "overwhelmed" navigating initial responsibilities and tasks. "Learning the system, the cataloguing…it's been a bit of a learning curve," Carissa explained, "but it's coming along." Angela, who had some informal training shadowing the outgoing TL at her school described how, "at that point I didn't really know what things meant in the bigger picture…I didn't know what I didn't know." Janet described feeling "a bit alone" and "just, kind of, thrown into the position." However, having "a strong background in technology" in a library with a "really strong technological focus" seemed to "fit the position nicely."

New TLs with previous classroom teaching experience initially found direct instructional interactions with colleagues and students as the most familiar and rewarding aspect of their work. "Bringing kids and books together" and supporting student literacy and inquiry provided a pedagogical anchor while navigating an otherwise "head spinning" array of new administrative tasks such as managing resources and information technology, and supporting school-wide learning initiatives.

## Variable professional learning and mentorship knowledge and opportunities

Participants spoke to the benefits and enjoyment of engaging in professional learning and connecting with experienced colleagues to gain knowledge and guidance about both the "big picture" and "nuts and bolts" of running a school library or learning commons. "I do work with a Library clerk," Preet described. "It's been fantastic…it is very helpful to have someone skilled…" Participants described a range of professional development activities ranging from daily collaboration with colleagues, to district-level TL network meetings to provincial workshops which provided practical information and resources, as well as networking opportunities. Nancy found that attending a BCTLA Annual General Meeting "helped me, sort of, connect the dots on the bigger picture of my job…I connected with a whole bunch of skilled teacher-librarians."

Some interviewees reported accessing formal mentorship through district-based programs, ranging between one-half to three days per year to visit other school libraries, or job shadow and work alongside a TL mentor. However, most of the mentorship experiences that interviewees described happened informally—for various reasons. Angela was uncertain whether she qualified for the district's mentorship program because "I do have teaching experience from another district" and "every district does things a little bit differently." Preet was uncertain about whether new TLs could participate in her school district's program: "I would say it is not really for Teacher-Librarians…it is more for classroom teachers that are new to positions…it's basically left with the Teacher-Librarians to help mentor one another."

Overall, despite limited formal mentorship provisions, interviewees indicated that some form of informal or formal mentorship interaction with experienced TLs led to increased confidence, enjoyment and understanding of the TL role. "Our TLs meet once a month as a group," Nancy explained. "So that's where I get a lot of informal training and tips…it's been very helpful."

Interviewees indicated they would like to participate in more professional learning and mentorship than they had as yet been able and expressed various challenges associated with accessing further opportunities. Such barriers included:

### 1) challenges accessing information about professional development and mentorship funding

Janet indicated she was "definitely considering and looking into programs" but, for the moment, "financial" issues were a barrier. Angela stated "it had not even occurred to me [to] ask for release time to train" with a colleague, until a fellow TL suggested it. She had also "not yet looked into TL programs. Similarly, Carissa indicated she was not "knowledgeable" about PD funding or courses, "but only because I am so new to the job."

### 2) workload and personal commitments that prohibit investigating and attending degree programs and workshops

Some new TLs expressed interest in pursuing additional education or training related to their work, but had been unable to undertake such activities. Nancy, the parent of young children, indicated she was aware of a TL degree program, but stated "I just know I can't cope with any load larger than that [parenting] at this point." She had also not investigated professional development funding opportunities "because I simply don't have the time."

### 3) unpredictable staffing coverage to release TLs for professional learning opportunities

The province's widespread teacher shortage has made it even more challenging for TLs to access TTOC coverage to be released from their classrooms for professional development or mentorship. When asked what type of support her district could provide to make it easier to access TL training, Carissa replied "I think just maybe making sure that I have a TOC." Preet reported her mentor insisted "we need this time, we're going to take an afternoon a couple of times a year to get together."

### 4) accessing relevant professional learning for early-career TLs' specific needs

Nancy described how, while some workshops she had attended were "valuable," she found those "focused on procedural stuff" less clearly applicable to her immediate work. Her comment points to how beginning TLs with both limited work experience and specialized procedural knowledge might benefit from more professional development opportunities to critically examine the underlying issues and procedures inherent in library management. Meanwhile, Janet, who was only in her TL position for a five-month contract, commented she "didn't actually have the chance to go to the meetings" because "they didn't put one up" during the duration of her contract. This example points to how a school district's professional development offerings may not always align with beginning TLs' temporary or short-term contracts.

### 5) geographic isolation, for those in rural regions, resulting in increased time commitment and travel costs to access relevant PD

For Angela, a new TL in a continuing position, access to both district and provincial professional development was limited by a school location "far away from easily accessed teacher workshop type things." Angela further described how "being in a rural area, and winter weather, may create interesting challenges to accessing mentorship opportunities." In addition, Angela indicated that obtaining TTOC coverage for release time is "the biggest challenge" in her small, rural district where "physically leaving the town and the school to come to learn things…is feeling like learning Disneyland."  Nancy also described the challenges associated with accessing professional development from a rural area, such as "driving great distances" and returning to work "exhausted" after weekend PD sessions. She suggested that "funding for both TOC time coverage and travel would be helpful."

## Promising practices of professional recognition and support

TLs identified various elements of *school* and *district-based culture* that contributed to a sense of efficacy and validation in their specialist TL role. At the school level, recognition of the importance of the school library for students' learning was evidenced by securing proper library budgeting and resources and being consulted on decision-making. "I was very lucky to be in that school," stated Janet, "where [administrators] were supportive in trying to get whatever the learning commons needed," and "they really wanted the input of the TL."

Having opportunities to collaborate with classroom teachers and students on instructional activities also signaled a culture of respect and value for the TL role. Angela described feeling "really respected and appreciated in a way that I wasn't expecting" after collaborating on literacy initiatives with a fellow teacher.

A supportive *district-based culture* includes staffing provisions such as Teacher Librarian Helping Teachers and learning resource staff who are easily accessed and respond to TL inquiries in timely and effective ways. Participants also described district initiatives that promote awareness about the importance of the TL role and "trying to bring Librarians back to the forefront" of instructional and literacy practices.

# Safeguarding the role of Teacher-Librarians

The intensified hiring of specialist teachers with limited experience and professional training across many BC school districts has raised questions about how to effectively support new TLs in roles they may not be fully prepared to assume. "I think, with our new court ruling," Janet observed, "there might be a lot more people, who are in my situation, who don't have formal TL training."

Despite initial promising signals from the BC Ministry of Education (BC Ministry of Education, 2017) proffering the possibility of enhanced mentorship opportunities for specialist teachers, the Ministry subsequently confirmed it would not be renewing a provincial mentorship pilot program, the New Teacher Mentorship Project,

which ran from 2012-2017. Consequently, beginning Teacher-Librarian mentorship remains subject to highly variable local eligibility, funding and delivery models, as several study participants described.

Further, the BCTLA has expressed concerns about TLs being required to carry out teaching duties outside of "work generally expected of teacher-librarians" (Daly, 2017, p. 1) as a consequence of continuing widespread staffing shortages. As 'non-enrolling' teachers (i.e. teachers without classroom rosters), TL work responsibilities may be perceived as more pliable and less essential than regular 'enrolling' teachers' classroom duties. Where less experienced TLs have not had the opportunity to deeply envision and inhabit their pedagogical place in a school community, they may be more prone to managerial imperatives that compromise the integrity of their position.

A recently arbitrated settlement regarding staffing level provisions of Teacher-Librarians (Glougie, 2018) reveals how the integrity of the TL role is sometimes compromised by commonplace managerial practices. Using one school district as its example, the BCTF successfully argued that the Employer breached both collective agreement and 2017 Memorandum of Agreement staffing provisions when it failed to hire sufficient TTOCs, required "Teacher Librarians to cover classroom teacher absences," (p. 4) and failed to cover TL absences themselves. The BCTF demonstrated that 86.7 school days of Teacher-Librarian time were lost in the 2017-18 school year due to the District's practice of reassigning TLs—or, as the Employer described them "those who were not already actively involved in providing instruction" (p. 32)—to cover for absent "classroom teachers" (p. 32). Further, another 86.6 days were lost when TL absences went uncovered, and school libraries were monitored by administration, placed on reduced hours, and/or closed entirely.

Interestingly, the ruling also states that, despite demonstrably relying on non-enrolling TLs to mitigate the effects of a broader district TTOC shortage, there was "no real dispute between the parties about the role of the Teacher Librarian and the importance of that position within the school broadly" (p. 16). This contradiction between the Employer's apparent acknowledgement of the importance of TLs and its suggestion that TL staffing was not significantly affected by "brief, temporary assignment of duties" (p. 30) demonstrates the continued need for vigilance, advocacy and member engagement—particularly for and with early career TLs—regarding the roles and working conditions of non-enrolling specialist teachers.

# Towards a Renaissance for BC's Teacher-Librarians

This study's teacher-researchers and school-based participants illuminate both promising practices and cautions for approaching the professional roles, aspirations and needs of new Teacher-Librarians. Our analysis points towards four enabling conditions:

1) **Cultivating district and school cultures and management practices that acknowledge highly-qualified Teacher-Librarians as integral yet distinctive members of the teaching profession and school staffs.**

   One of the organizational aims of the BCTLA is "affirming the essential role of the teacher-librarian in learning and educational change."[2] Such affirmative actions include advocating for adequate staffing and funding of school libraries and learning commons, and the inclusion of TLs' perspectives and expertise in curriculum and learning design, development and instructional processes. School districts could further reaffirm the specialized role of TLs by incentivizing new teachers with no formal Teacher-Librarian qualifications—and who wish to occupy continuing TL assignments—to pursue specialist training and credentials.

2) **Enhancing adequate provision and effective communication of relevant and timely professional development and networking opportunities.**

   Some newer TLs are not always aware of where and how to access professional development funding and opportunities. Others, because they are in part-time or temporary TL assignments, may not access or become aware of TL-specific PD during their limited contracts. The BCTLA strives to provide a rich array of professional development opportunities and networking opportunities for Teacher Librarians. Study participants positively described their engagement in BCTLA sponsored provincial conferences, and in local workshops addressing their areas of interest. Provincial and school district/local organizers of professional development might consider how to further engage new TLs in connecting with and participating in existing professional learning opportunities.

[2] See: *https://bctla.ca/about/*

### 3) Developing provincial and local strategies for reducing existing financial, geographic and workload impediments to beginning TLs' further professional development and learning.

Increasing professional development and travel allowances, and ensuring adequate and reliable release time and coverage, may enable TLs to more effectively investigate, plan for and engage in professional learning opportunities. Such strategies require advocacy at various systems levels, including provincial and local collective bargaining processes (in the case of PD provisions) and through school district administrative practices (in the case of staffing for adequate TTOC coverage).

### 4) Providing beginning TLs with accessible and sustainably-funded orientation, induction and mentorship into their specialized TL roles.

Study participants highly valued opportunities to connect with their TL colleagues through formal and informal mentorship. However, limited school district funding and release time, unreliable TTOC coverage, and varied collective agreement provisions and program structures have resulted in inconsistent and limited mentorship opportunities for some early career TLs. While the TL community is resourceful and generous about connecting its members informally and voluntarily, addressing such identified organizational barriers would enable TLs to engage in sustained teacher-led mentorship more often and more easily.

British Columbia Teacher-Librarians' long-standing engagement with inquiry-based learning, literacy instruction and information and communication technologies (ICT) potentially positions them to effectively assist classroom teachers and students navigate ongoing shifts in curriculum aims, literacy approaches and technological applications within changing school settings (Robinson, 2011; Ekdahl & Zubke, 2014). As one BCTLA executive member states optimistically, with the judicial restoration of contractual staffing guarantees, "a teacher-librarian renaissance is now possible" (Daly, 2017, p. 1). However, such a "renaissance" will be fully realized only where "teachers who fill the positions are supported" (Daly, 2017, p. 1) and where administrative practices affirm that qualified Teacher-Librarians occupy an essential and valued educational position in BC schools.

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# Appendix A: Interview Prompts

## A. Biography/Background

1. How long have you been a TL? Describe your assignment(s) e.g. school(s), level(s)--elementary/secondary, FTE, etc.

2. Is teacher-librarian work what you expected? What has been the most surprising? Rewarding? Challenging?

3. What brought you to the TL role?

4. What skills and/or certification did you already have for the teacher-librarian job when you started?

5. Did you have classroom experience before becoming a TL? How did this experience influence your TL work?

6. Is the TL role something you hope to continue with in the future? Why or why not?

## B. Mentorship

7. Does your school/district have a teacher mentorship program? If yes, describe it as best you can. If not, what type of mentorship program support would you like to see in your local/district?

8. Have you had formal mentorship in your TL position through a local/district mentorship program? If yes, who has provided mentorship, and what type of activities did you do? What time investment was involved? Was release or other time/funding provided by the program? Has the mentorship continued since the formal program ended?

9. Have you had informal mentorship from other TLs? Describe what that looked like (e.g. how often were you able to meet and when? What was most helpful about receiving informal mentorship?)

10. Do you work with a library clerk or library tech? What does that look like? What benefits have you experienced? What, if any, challenges have you experienced?

11. Do you contact the public library in your community/region for ideas, advice or programs? Describe.

12. Do you know if your district has a TL librarian association or meetings? Have you attended any of the meetings? Were they useful?

13. Do you have online support for some of the TL activities, like cataloguing?

14. Have you faced any barriers to accessing formal or informal mentorship? What would make it easier? More effective?

## C. Communication

15. Within your district, what TL communication systems have you accessed to share information and questions?  If yes, how does it work?

16. Describe any social networking tools you accessed for ideas and inspiration for your TL position (e.g. Twitter, Pinterest, etc)?

17. What communication options work best for you when seeking TL information and support?

## D. Professional Development and Certification

18. Have you had the opportunity to attend workshops about teacher-librarianship? What did you find? Most helpful takeaways? Least helpful?

19. Have you taken any TL courses/degree programs?  If yes, what did you find helpful/ difficult about completing the course? If no, have you been made aware of any TL courses, certificates or degrees? Are there any courses, certificates or degrees you would like to undertake in the future? What are some of the reasons why you have not undertaken courses to date?

20. Do you know if there is any pro-D or course funding by your school, school district, the BCTF or BCTLA?  If yes, have you been able to access this funding?  If no, what are the barriers to accessing funding for TL professional development and post-secondary studies?

21. What types of support from your school, district or union would make it easier for you to attend training?

22. Are there any other factors (e.g. family commitments, geography) that might deter you from pursuing further TL training and certification?

## E. General Support and Advocacy

23. Do you feel supported in your role as TL in your school? At the district level?

24. Describe a situation/scenario that illustrates how your TL role is valued and respected.

25. Describe a situation/scenario that illustrates how your TL role is not valued and respected.

26. Are there any further comments you would like to make about your needs as a new TL, or TL who wishes to increase their knowledge and expertise in the TL role?

# Appendix B: Informed Consent Form

**Thank you for participating in this BCTLA research project! Please read the information below and, if you consent to being interviewed according to these guidelines, sign your name, local and date below.**

**Purpose of the research:** The BCTF Research Department is carrying out an action research project, in collaboration with the BC Teacher Librarians' Provincial Specialists Association (BCTLA), to gather teachers' perspectives on professional development and learning supports for teacher librarians. The project will document the professional development needs and challenges of new teacher librarians, and those with limited specialist training, and to identify the provisions and gaps for supporting them in their roles.

**Participant Selection:** Volunteer BCTLA Chapter Councillors will identify and interview new TLs and TLs with limited specialist experience and/or training.

**Voluntary Participation:** Your participation in this research is entirely voluntary. It is your choice whether to participate or not. The choice that you make will have no bearing on your work or involvement with the BC Teachers' Federation. You may change your mind later and stop participating even if you agreed earlier.

**Procedures:** Interviewers will send a list of question prompts to the participant to consider and write notes, if desired, prior to the interview. The 45-60 minute interview will be recorded, and sent to the BCTF Research Department for transcription and analysis. The audio recording will be kept on a BCTF desktop housed in the Research Department with secure log in. The information recorded is confidential, and no one else except Senior Researcher Anne Hales will have access to the audio. All audio recordings will be destroyed by April 30, 2018.

**Confidentiality:** The BCTF will not be sharing information about you or your responses to anyone outside of the research team. The information that we collect from this research project will be kept private and confidential. Any information reported publicly will be generalized and anonymized, if needed. All interviewers have signed a confidentiality pledge, agreeing to keep interview participation and content private.

**Right to Refuse or Withdraw:** This is a reconfirmation that participation is voluntary and includes the right to withdraw. You do not have to take part in this research if you do not wish to do so and choosing to participate will not affect your work in any way. You may stop participating in the discussion/interview at any time.

**\*\*I have read the above research project information, and consent to participating in the BCTLA interview discussion as described above.\*\***

Name: _____     Date: _____

Local: _____