

Keynote Address to the Principals' Institute 1'st Annual Conference
“Professional Learning Communities in Action: Collaboration with Impact”
Alma Harris and Michelle Jones

3 December 2013

Review

My sincere thanks to the organizers of the Principal's Institute second annual conference for bringing Professor Alma Harris and Dr Michelle Jones to the centre stage. The Principal's Institute Conference was on the 3rd December, a time when being a principal means being immersed in examinations, preparations for school promotions and Open Days, End of Term preparations, and the release of the School Value Added data; it was therefore a refreshing and timely reminder that we are first and foremost instructional leaders. As I learnt from Prof Harris; the main point of any professional collaboration is 'to connect to learn', but often little thought is given to the establishment of those connections and scant attention is paid to the fact that to be most productive and effective, some professionals need to 'learn to connect'. The establishment of the Principals' Institute and principal conferences such as these serve this purpose. Prof Harris also said – perhaps with tongue in cheek at the onset of her address – that the keynote address is the *least* meaningful way to learn, but certainly the Principal's Institute as a connecting body offers real possibilities for professional learning.

Despite whether you are one of the many Hong Kong school principals who have already established *professional learning communities* in their schools, or a new comer to the concept, the Harris and Jones keynote was, nevertheless, both inspiring and challenging. In particular the keynote was engaging because there were two presenters; Prof Harris the academic and theoretical and Dr Jones the experienced school principal. Like the other principals with whom I 'connected' during the morning of the conference, I much appreciated the recognition that sometimes academic presenters need to be grounded in the 'reality' of school leadership practice in order for their message to be meaningful.

The imprimatur for professional learning communities (PLCs) is based on the simple but powerful idea that if schools are to meet learner needs, they must provide opportunities for teachers to innovate, develop and learn together. Successful professional learning communities work together to enquire and to generate new professional knowledge. The focus is not just on individual teachers' learning but on professional learning within the context of a cohesive group that focuses on collective knowledge and which also occurs within the context of mutual trust and learning.

While on the face of it, interest groups, working parties and PLCs may look similar; a PLC is delineated by the fact that it is enquiry-driven process that focuses primarily upon addressing an issue, problem or need identified through its own analysis of data. By contrast an interest group or working party may not have enquiry at its core; it may comprise individuals working cooperatively rather than

collaboratively and often is asked to address a need or an issue that has been delegated or dictated by someone else.

Prof Harris was keen to stress that the important word is *new* as without research into new knowledge, the PLC or any other approach to collaborative learning will have done little more than re-circulate or share what is already known. The whole point of collaborative learning is to generate new ideas and knowledge and to engage in focused innovation that will ultimately push the boundaries of professional learning. Recycled or reconstituted knowledge may be comforting and reassuring but is not going to significantly change or transform practice.

In the time allowed, Dr Jones explored the 7-Phrase Framework that they have detailed in their book, *Professional Learning Communities in Action* (2010), which is a highly regarded work that has gained wide acceptance in a number of countries.



Harris and Jones did not have the time in a one-hour keynote to go into much detail, but their sharing was strongly encouraging and whets my appetite to reread their book once again. It is not appropriate to describe each phase here in this Review, but it is of value to mention the three stages of the Framework that were highlighted by Harris and Jones. These were:

Implementation - as a team they agree on an enquiry question or focus derived from an analysis of student data or needs. Agree on group protocols and the shared enquiry/research approach. Develop a plan of action that outlines clear roles and responsibilities. Identify what evidence/ data will be used to determine impact.

Innovation - as a team they undertake research directly related to the question or focus. Introduce new strategies based on the findings and trial new strategies or approaches in the classroom. Reflect in order to refine, change or reject strategies or approaches based on team feedback.

Impact - as a team they share and analyze the findings; ascertain impact on student and professional learning and agree on recommendations. Disseminate the outcomes more widely with other colleagues and where applicable with other schools outside the network. This phase is critical as the outcomes reflect the success of the entire process and the recommendations about changes in classroom practice will effectively address specific learner needs. These outcomes could highlight future whole school priorities and thus could contribute to significant change, development or innovation.

As a review it is beholden that I should briefly mention the downsides of this keynote, and there were only a few, but to be fair, as Prof Harris pointed out there is not much that can be covered in just one hour. Regardless, it would have been perhaps useful if Dr Jones had been able to very briefly describe some of the arguments against PLCs from the school practitioners' perspective (or should I say the problems with PLCs); or for Prof Harris to have briefly noted some of the difficulties associated with PLCs from a broader theoretical or system perspective. After all experience will tell us that despite the fact that the paradigm of PLCs has been around for quite a long time (back in the 1980s), their adoption as a methodology of school effectiveness or school improvement has blossomed at times but waned at others. Just as an aside, I remember a time in my early years as a principal visiting a school in which they had 38 PLCs in operation; an unwieldy and teacher-unfriendly strategy that simple could not endure.

Overall the keynote was highly informative, stimulating and challenging, and I am sure that most principals left the session keen to revisit Professional Learning Communities as a stratagem for enhancing school outcomes. Such presentations provide the stimulus for principals to frame professional collaboration and 'to connect to learn'.

Terry Quong PhD
Principal
Jockey Club Ti-I College
5 December 2013