



Professional Learning  
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## Collaborative Professional Learning in the Junior School

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## About the Author

**Nicky Cameron** is currently a Year 3 teacher and Stage 2 Grade Coordinator. During her time at Barker, she has been involved in the Junior School Co-curricular including Junior Sports, Junior School Swimming and Study Skills programs. Nicky has a Masters in Special Education and is involved in supporting individual needs in Education.

### About the Barker Institute:

- Provides a centre for research, reflective practice, professional learning and innovation in education
- Is a resource hub that facilitates the ongoing development of learning for teachers, allowing them to stay abreast of emerging practice, constantly striving to refine the quality of teaching and learning
- Looks to develop collaborative ventures with other institutions and providers, initiating research and innovation combined with the implementation of new projects and programs for the benefit of students, staff and the broader community
- Shares current research and issues with parents, professional bodies and educators around the globe through ongoing symposia, forums, lectures and conferences

### About the Learning in Practice Journal:

As a leader in Christian education, Barker College aims to both demonstrate and inform best practice. This journal was developed to showcase a range of initiatives and research projects from across the School. It explains the rationale behind innovations in practice and archives pivotal developments in Barker's academic, co-curricular and pastoral realms.

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# Collaborative Professional Learning in the Junior School



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## Abstract

Schools may be full of good teachers, but many have been accustomed to working alone in silos. Professional development has traditionally focused on the individual teacher seeking growth in a particular area of content or practice with little impact on the school or student learning overall. Research supports collaborative approaches to professional learning as having a significant impact on school improvement. In 2018, Collaborative Professional Learning (CPL) was developed and implemented in the context of Barker College Junior School with all class teachers participating.

## Why?

"Collaboration is the new chorus line for innovation and improvement. The OECD strongly promotes it, many teacher unions are behind it and more and more governments see the point in it. The evidence that, in general, professional collaboration benefits students and teachers alike is almost irrefutable. Professional collaboration boosts student achievement, increases teacher retention and enhances the implementation of innovation and change." (Hargreaves A & O'Connor MT, p.vi, 2017).

It is clear that the current paradigm shift in teacher professional development is no longer that of supporting the acquisition of knowledge and skills, but rather involves teachers playing an active role in the construction and co-construction of professional knowledge. Evidence clearly shows that in order to have a positive impact upon the outcomes of learners, teachers need to engage in a clear and focused process of professional change.

Essentially, teachers need to work together to identify authentic teaching or learning issues that their students face. They subsequently need to work collaboratively and interdependently to identify new ways of solving these issues or problems. Finally, they need to trial and refine new pedagogical approaches before adding them to their own teaching repertoire or suggesting these approaches to others. To enable this to happen in the Junior School, I developed a model known as Collaborative Professional Learning (CPL), drawing upon evidence about effective professional learning to inform its design. CPL contains all of the elements that the research evidence supports, reflecting components of the Lesson Study framework and underpinned by a GROWTH coaching ideology.

All Pre-Kindergarten to Stage 3 teachers were involved in the CPL process in 2018 with a clear purpose: to improve student learning outcomes and develop teaching practice, whereby we can become a community working to achieve a common goal, embedded in inquiry, responsive to feedback and always up for a good argument.

## How?

The CPL process involved class teachers working in pairs through a series of steps:

1. identify a student learning need in their class
2. consult research and their own or others' experience to hypothesise a solution
3. collaboratively develop a lesson or strategy through GROWTH coaching conversations - facilitating, clarifying and deepening each other's thinking
4. one teacher teaches their lesson while the other observes, focusing on agreed criteria and aspects of student learning
5. swap roles
6. reflect upon and evaluate the lessons
7. share, document and apply new understandings

This form of teacher professional development encourages a learning culture. The 2016 OECD paper identified that a key factor to becoming a Learning Organisation is 'learning to learn', the notion of collective responsibility; the sense that all members have a stake in all students' and each other's learning, development and success. Our practice should be open to the scrutiny and feedback of others and we should regularly reflect together on how to solve student learning problems, learning how to enhance our practice. Whilst this sounds like an achievable outcome, the OECD findings recognise that teachers need the right conditions and support to make this happen. My aim was to develop these conditions, within the constraints of our busy timetable, as well as the many and varied responsibilities of our classroom teachers.

In the design of the CPL framework, provision of time allocated by the school was essential for collaborative working, collective learning and evaluation. Through the CPL process for each group of teachers, a schedule included staff meeting time allocated to meeting in stage groups, as well as time for teachers to meet within the school day for collaboration and reflection. Teachers were required to find time to observe one another teach the lessons they had planned collaboratively.

## Challenges

The problem with collaboration is that it cannot be mandated; people either choose to cultivate their skills and attitudes, or they do not. They may be restricted by limited self-awareness. Regardless, collaboration in the form of CPL offered class teachers a way of ensuring that their professional learning makes a positive difference, where it matters most of all, in the classroom.

As with any initiative, time is indispensable. Success of the model required support from the Junior School executive to dedicate staff meetings and to allocate time within the school day. Whilst this was manageable in the short term, it posed numerous logistical challenges. It also meant that when teachers would ordinarily have been meeting to plan units of work, their focus was on the CPL, thus impacting their workload throughout that term.

## Rewards

Hargreaves and O'Connor (2017) argue that collaborative professionalism should be “a culture that permeates the whole school or system, not just a set of meetings or task-driven teams”. It should promote regular, quality feedback; involve everyone and explicitly contribute to improvement. In collaborative professionalism, there is collective responsibility for teachers’ impact on students, so that it becomes about “our” students, not just “my” students. While it is about working together in a professional way, working hard for a good cause, it brings both joy and impact. It makes teaching more engaging and builds our sense of intrinsic motivation as we inspire others and show gratitude for opportunities to work with and learn from one another. Feedback of teachers involved in CPL showed that they valued:

- opportunities to have meaningful conversations about teaching practice
- opportunities to observe and learn from other approaches
- receiving positive feedback from colleagues
- opportunities to take action; to put a thought or idea into practice as opposed to merely thinking about it
- feeling supported and valued
- observing a different year group and appreciating where our students are heading or where they have come from
- taking something unexpected away from the experience that they will apply in their own classroom
- time to stop and ask yourself ‘why?’

## Where to next?

Working closely with the College of Teachers to ensure alignment of its goals, I would like to evolve CPL into a more sustainable approach. For this to succeed, it will be essential that the Junior School executive team is involved in the design of the next iteration of collaborative professionalism and that it becomes an integral part of the professional learning strategy moving forward. We will continue to be informed by current research and practice in this area, with 2019 being an opportunity to design and implement a framework that is optimal in our context for evolving a community of expertise and service among teachers, built on collegial solidarity, open, thoughtful feedback and collective responsibility.

## References

Hargreaves, A & O'Connor M.T 2017, Collaborative Professionalism, World Innovation Summit for Education, Qatar Foundation.

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