

# Disciplined Collaboration in Professional Learning

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2014



The Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership (AITSL) is a national body established to promote excellence in teaching and school leadership. AITSL is committed to the key principles of equity and excellence in the education of all young Australians in order to cultivate successful learners, confident and creative individuals and active and informed citizens.

AITSL works with the education community to:

- define and maintain standards for excellence in teaching and school leadership
- lead and influence excellence in teaching and school leadership
- support and recognise excellence in teaching and school leadership.

The *Disciplined Collaboration in Professional Learning* project involves eight schools working with experts Professor Alma Harris and Dr Michelle Jones and AITSL to generate knowledge about the most effective models for collaborative professional learning.

Professor Alma Harris is Professor (Leadership) at the Institute of Education, London. Her research work focuses on organisational change and development. Professor Harris has written extensively about leadership in schools and she is an expert on the theme of distributed leadership.

Dr Michelle Jones has previously worked as an Independent Education Consultant with over 28 years' experience working in education. Her most substantive position was that of Principal of a large school in one of the highest areas of deprivation in South Wales, UK.

Professor Harris and Dr Jones are currently working at the University of Malaya (Institute of Educational Leadership) to support and develop professional learning programmes within the region.

Professor Harris and Dr Jones were contracted by AITSL to work with the project schools to provide professional learning experiences, research, facilitation and advice.

'Disciplined Collaboration in Professional Learning' is based on a report by Professor Harris and Dr Jones.

The Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership (AITSL) was formed to provide national leadership for the Commonwealth, state and territory governments in promoting excellence in the profession of teaching and school leadership with funding provided by the Australian Government.

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## 1.0 Introduction

The Australian Charter for the Professional Learning of Teachers and School Leaders (PL Charter) is a key document aimed at improving teaching and learning practices in schools across Australia. High quality teachers and school leaders are essential to secure the best outcomes for all learners, as the best education systems around the world clearly demonstrate. The PL Charter outlines that in order to secure successful educational change in Australia, improving professional learning is an important and powerful component.

The PL Charter states that

**professional learning will be most effective when it takes place within a culture where teachers and school leaders expect and are expected to be active learners, to reflect on, receive feedback on and improve their pedagogical practice, and by doing so, improve student outcomes.**

The PL Charter also states that professional learning will be most effective when it is relevant, collaborative and future focused and when it supports teachers to reflect on, question and consciously improve their practice.

As part of the aspiration to improve professional practice through focused and purposeful professional collaboration, the PL Charter highlights the importance of disciplined collaboration aimed at specific and relevant goals that relate to the learning needs of students. Disciplined collaboration is predicated upon effective professional learning that is continuously changing professional practice in order to achieve better outcomes for learners.

In this respect, disciplined collaboration offers professionals a way of enacting the PL Charter and ensuring that their professional learning makes a positive difference, where it matters most of all, in the classroom.

The Disciplined Collaboration approach has drawn upon the best evidence about effective professional learning to inform its design. It is clear that the current paradigm shift in teacher professional learning is no longer that of supporting the acquisition of knowledge and skills but instead focuses upon teachers playing an active role in the construction and co-construction of professional knowledge.

The research evidence clearly shows that in order to positively impact upon learner outcomes, teachers need to engage in a clear and focused process of professional change. Essentially, they 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. The Disciplined Collaboration approach contains all the elements that the research evidence supports.

There is certainly nothing new about teachers researching their practice or working together. But it is how they work together and the conditions that support this collective engagement that determines whether this shared work has any positive impact or outcomes at all.





## 2.0 The Disciplined Collaboration Approach

Disciplined Collaboration is a departure from existing approaches to collaborative professional enquiry for three reasons. Firstly, it offers a clear theory of action embedded in a model of collaborative action (3is). Secondly, it focuses explicitly on creating the conditions for positive and collaborative learning (5ds). Thirdly, it outlines the collaborative skills necessary to support effective collaborative professional learning.

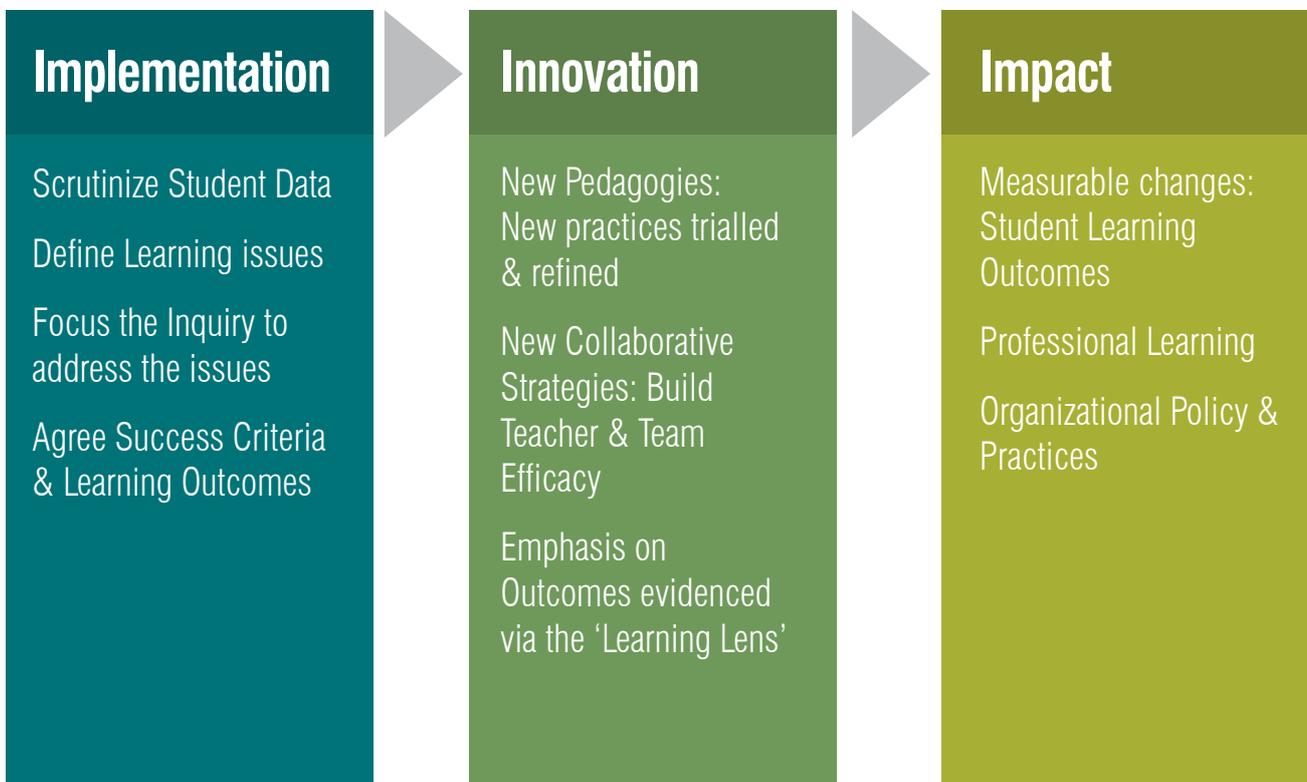
The Disciplined Collaboration approach has been designed with impact firmly in mind. The 'theory of action' that underpins Disciplined Collaboration is premised on a direct relationship between changes in teaching practice and improvement in learner outcomes.

Disciplined Collaboration starts and ends with the learner.

1. Student data is used to identify a problem, issue or barrier associated with learning.
2. Teachers work collaboratively to address the problem through collaborative action/enquiry and classroom innovation.
3. Teachers return to the student data to gauge and monitor the extent of their success

Disciplined Collaboration takes the essence of the enquiry-based approaches in the literature and condenses them into three phases (3is): *Implementation, Innovation and Impact*. The diagram below outlines the phases and their inter-relationship.

The phases provide the structure for this approach to professional learning. Users should begin with Implementation, move to Innovation and then Impact.





At each phase, it is important to ensure that the collaborative conditions that contribute to an effective professional learning environment, are in place.

No matter how good a project, model or intervention may be, if the appropriate school level conditions are not in place, then the impact and outcomes will be affected. These conditions (5ds) are summarised below.

## Data

How good is your school at using data to inform its improvements?

Does it use student level data to shape future improvements?

## Diagnosis

How good is your school at diagnosing real rather than perceived needs? How well does it self-evaluate?

## Distributed Leadership

How far is leadership really shared or extended at your school? Is the practice of leadership more important than position?

## Development

How far is your school truly innovative and able to take risks? How far is your development work focused upon incremental improvement as opposed to radical transformation?

## Drive

How much energy is being put into sustaining the collaborative work and planning long term?

Collaboration has a powerful effect in magnifying and spreading the benefits of professional learning. One or more collaborative strategies are utilised throughout this enquiry-based approach, in the design, content, practice and evaluation of learning and teaching. When choosing a collaborative strategy, participants must be able to articulate why it is the most appropriate method to address the identified need.

The overarching methodology is one of collaborative enquiry. Educators work collaboratively throughout the phases of implementation, innovation and impact in order to effect change. For example, professional learning communities may be formed to identify and address particular issues relevant to their student group.

Collaborative methods of enquiry are employed to gather information and data in order to define learning issues and/or to monitor the changes implemented. For example, learning walks may be used to conduct

an audit of current teaching strategies or to evaluate changes in teachers classroom practice.

Finally, collaborative strategies are used when trialling and refining new practices in order to address the specific learning issue identified through data analysis. For example, lesson study may be used to support clear sequencing of a lesson including making connections with prior knowledge and moving between 'telling' and 'guiding' the learning.

Collaborative strategies could include those already in place within the school or may require the introduction of new strategies. For example, instructional rounds, learning walks, lesson study, mentoring or coaching. The disciplined component of collaboration comes from applying the structure outlined in this model and, in particular, having a clear data-driven focus for using a particular strategy in order to achieve an identified goal.



### 3.0 Disciplined Collaboration in Professional Learning Project Background

The Disciplined Collaboration in Professional Learning (DCPL) project involved eight schools working with experts Professor Alma Harris and Dr Michelle Jones and AITSL to generate knowledge about the most effective models for collaborative professional learning.

During the life of the project, the project schools worked to implement a Disciplined Collaboration approach to professional learning. The project schools are continuing this approach to their professional learning in 2014 by determining a new focus for their professional learning based on data, as well as expanding the use of the Disciplined Collaboration approach to include other teams and schools.

AITSL engaged Professor Harris and Dr Jones to work with and provide expert support to the eight project schools, throughout the life of the project.

Professor Harris is Professor and Pro-Director (Leadership) at the Institute of Education, London. Her research work focuses on organisational change and development. Professor Harris has written extensively about leadership in schools and she is an expert on the theme of distributed leadership.

Dr Jones has previously worked as an Independent Education Consultant with over 28 years' experience working in education. Her most substantive position was that of Principal of a large school in one of the highest areas of deprivation in South Wales, UK.

Professor Harris and Dr Jones have recently been appointed by the University of Malaya (Institute of Educational Leadership) to support and develop professional learning programmes within the region.

### Timelines

**November 2012** - briefing with AITSL, Professor Harris and Dr Jones in Melbourne

**January 2013** - schools commence work on the project, implementing their approach to Disciplined Collaboration in professional learning

**January to December 2013** - schools participate in online discussions and provide periodic progress reports

**February 2013** – initial assessment against the maturity model

**March 2013** - school visits by Professor Harris and Dr Jones

**June 2013** - report at a face to face meeting with AITSL, Professor Harris and Dr Jones

**July 2013** – second assessment against the maturity model

**August 2013** – teleconference with Professor Harris, Dr Jones and AITSL to refine focus and plan for August to December

**September 2013** - presentation at an AITSL Symposium

**November 2013** – teleconference with Professor Harris, Dr Jones and AITSL to discuss the implementation of their Disciplined Collaboration approach, impacts being seen and plan for 2014

**November 2013** – last assessment against the maturity model



## 4.0 School Summaries

### 4.1 St Paul's School

St Paul's School took a whole school approach to Disciplined Collaboration that involved establishing professional learning communities/circles (PLCs). The timetable was restructured to allow teachers to work in their allocated PLC. The main aim of this whole school approach was to make Disciplined Collaboration an accepted and common practice right across the school.

The whole school focus of the Disciplined Collaboration work was around assessment, as an analysis of student data showed that there was variable practice across the school. Data was systematically collected in-house through interviews, questionnaires and observations, as well as consideration of teachers' blogs and learning logs.

The PLCs included a mixture of 8-10 teachers from all areas of the school. Within the PLCs, teachers shared stimulus material for consideration prior to the meetings such as journal articles, webinars or videos and engaged in discussion and reflection on key issues about student learning. In the meetings, teachers provided exemplification from their own enquiries and structured reflections on their own practice. Each staff member subsequently recorded these reflections and completed a blog.

Evidence showed that the school made progress on creating the conditions for the Disciplined Collaboration work to be most effective.

**“The benefits of Disciplined Collaboration are sharing good practice, getting to know other members of staff across the curriculum range, but most importantly raising standards amongst teaching staff that will impact on our students.”**

### 4.2 St Philip's Christian College

At St Philip's the title of the Disciplined Collaboration work was 'Cooperation to Collaboration: improving student outcomes in numeracy through disciplined collaboration'. The focus of the Disciplined Collaboration work was improving numeracy outcomes across Stage 2 students.

An initial analysis of student data showed that there were significant issues with numeracy levels of attainment in Stage 2 classes. In order to find out more about the specific barriers to learning, the team constructed and administered a questionnaire to Year 3 students. This questionnaire focused on pupils' views about learning mathematics and showed that the previous way of teaching mathematics was not engaging pupils and key mathematical concepts were not being learnt.

To explore the teaching of mathematics in more depth the Stage 2 teachers embarked upon a learning walk to look at other classes in the school. After talking about the findings from their learning walk, the Stage 2 team subsequently decided to introduce a system of peer mentoring in their shared mathematics space.

Teachers kept weekly journals and completed team-based questionnaires so that they continually focused on improving and refining their own collaborative skills. The school used the Disciplined Collaboration maturity model as a way of assessing and gauging the ongoing impact of the collective work.

In 2014, Disciplined Collaboration is being extended to two new teams within the school. In addition, the use of Disciplined Collaboration evidence based enquiry is being integrated into all aspects of school-based planning and development.

### 4.3 Glen Dhu Primary School

At Glen Dhu School, the focus of the Disciplined Collaboration work was on improving spelling. Initially, a group of staff undertook an analysis of the NAPLAN Grade 3 data. This analysis showed that fewer students were achieving the benchmark in spelling compared to other literacy areas.

Consequently, teachers wanted to investigate the reasons why some students improved their percentile ranking while others did not. The whole school was involved in the Disciplined Collaboration work and as a starting point teachers shared their inherent beliefs about teaching spelling.

In addition, teachers undertook an audit of current practice focusing on one central question – what do we explicitly teach about spelling? Based on the audit and teachers' shared beliefs, teachers then introduced five spelling strategies with an emphasis on students articulating the spelling strategies used in class.

The teachers worked as a whole school to develop a common language about spelling that all grades can use. Grade teams undertook a learning walk focused upon the impact of their new spelling strategies.

Teachers routinely collected evidence of how the school-wide spelling strategies were being taught in all classrooms. In addition, a range of data was constantly being revisited to directly inform changes in classroom practice.

There is evidence of a positive impact on teachers as they have identified and reported changes in practice that have directly affected learning outcomes. In addition, the Single Word Spelling Test that was administered to all students in the school showed significant progress in certain year groups compared with the same test administered in March 2013.



#### 4.4 Silverton Primary School

Silverton Primary School has taken a whole school approach to Disciplined Collaboration. Each teacher was part of a professional learning team and each team was expected to undertake an enquiry and report back to the whole school.

The leadership at the school is widely distributed so that many of the leaders of the professional learning teams are young and relatively new to teaching. The teachers at Silverton routinely used a range of data to identify the priorities for enquiry. The data were grouped into three key priority areas: student wellbeing, student learning and student transition. The professional learning teams used these broad areas to focus their enquiry.

Silverton used action enquiry as the main collaborative strategy linked to Disciplined Collaboration. There were different starting points for each professional learning team plus team members who were new to each other and the Disciplined Collaboration process.

Silverton deployed a student survey, a parent survey and a staff survey to capture the impact of the Disciplined Collaboration process. This data informed the team's final presentations and subsequent plans of action for each team.

**“We interviewed the students and asked questions like, “What’s important to learn?” and they’d say “Reading, writing”. There was no focus on skills. So we talked about how important transferable skills were and we’ve been working with the kids in class trying to make these skills more explicit. We will interview the kids again later in the year and see if their answers are changing. If not, then we need to think about what we need to do differently to make that change.”**

#### 4.5 Sandon Public School

At Sandon Public School, the principal and a group of senior staff commenced their Disciplined Collaboration work by looking at a range of literacy and numeracy data. This data highlighted a major issue with the quality of assessment *for* learning and identified the need for whole-school assessment practices to be refined and improved.

The entire staff worked on producing samples of student assessment tasks with clear formative criteria. The common question – ‘What do I want the children to know and do by the end of the lesson?’ – was used to develop clear and shared assessment criteria against which teachers could evaluate their own assessment practices.

The principal acknowledged that until the introduction of Disciplined Collaboration there was not a ‘rigorous evaluation of professional learning’ and little real consideration of the impact of changes in professional practice on student learning. This was a school where there was little professional collaboration or evaluation.

The school now uses learning walks as a collaborative strategy. Engagement with the Disciplined Collaboration process and the use of learning walks has allowed teachers to engage in a professional learning process where they feel there are clear benefits for the students they teach.

**“Using learning walks has allowed us to start to develop systems where we can actually see the outcome of our collaborative learning in classrooms. We now carefully analyse what we see in classrooms and this informs changes in our practice. This Disciplined Collaboration cycle is helping us reflect, be more critical and most importantly to refine our teaching so that learning is more fruitful.”**

#### 4.6 Holy Rosary Catholic Primary School

At Holy Rosary, the Disciplined Collaboration focus is on improving collaborative leadership practices. Only the leadership team has been involved in this work and the focus has been exploring the extent of their collaboration and looking at the potential relationship with student outcomes.

Their enquiry question was “Does an effective learning and teaching leadership group have an impact on student engagement and the development of effective classroom practice?” In establishing this question, the senior leadership team used student and teacher survey data and looked at trends using performance data over the past four years.

Within the Disciplined Collaboration work, the senior leadership team focused its efforts on creating a common language, established rubrics about effective feedback and has collected a range of relevant data that assisted with the process of establishing a more collaborative culture.

In addition, the senior leadership team has led professional learning in a number of whole school priorities. The aim of this professional learning was to show their staff that they are a cohesive and functional leadership team.

During their Disciplined Collaboration work, the senior leadership team used evidence from staff, stakeholders and drew upon their own reflections to establish the short term effectiveness and impact of the work. The leadership team collected student survey data to



help them inform the next stages of their Disciplined Collaboration work and have plans to extend this work to other school teams in 2014.

#### 4.7 Eynesbury Senior College

At Eynesbury Senior College, the Disciplined Collaboration work was pre-empted by the introduction of a formal, mandated system of peer review. This peer review system is aimed at improving student learning outcomes and has subsequently become the overall focus of the Disciplined Collaboration work.

Four separate projects were undertaken which were interlinked through a common focus on improving independent student learning. The aim of the Disciplined Collaboration work was to test the assumptions that extended periods of time spent working intensively with individual students will (a) lead to better outcomes for student learning, and (b) contribute to the development of students as independent learners.

The school has undertaken the following:

- the design of a survey to discover the views of teachers about their experiences with the peer review system in its pilot year
- development of the Disciplined Collaboration Compass to assist the mapping of teachers views as revealed by their responses to the survey.
- trialling of both the survey and Compass to allow the project group to collaborate about appropriate refinements.

#### 4.8 Rossmoyne Senior High School

Rossmoyne Senior High School has used Disciplined Collaboration to further encourage cross-department dialogue in teachers' professional learning. The focus of the collaborative work was to gather students' perceptions of aspects of their learning environment and to use these perceptions to inform changes to the classroom environment in an effort to improve students' cognitive and affective outcomes.

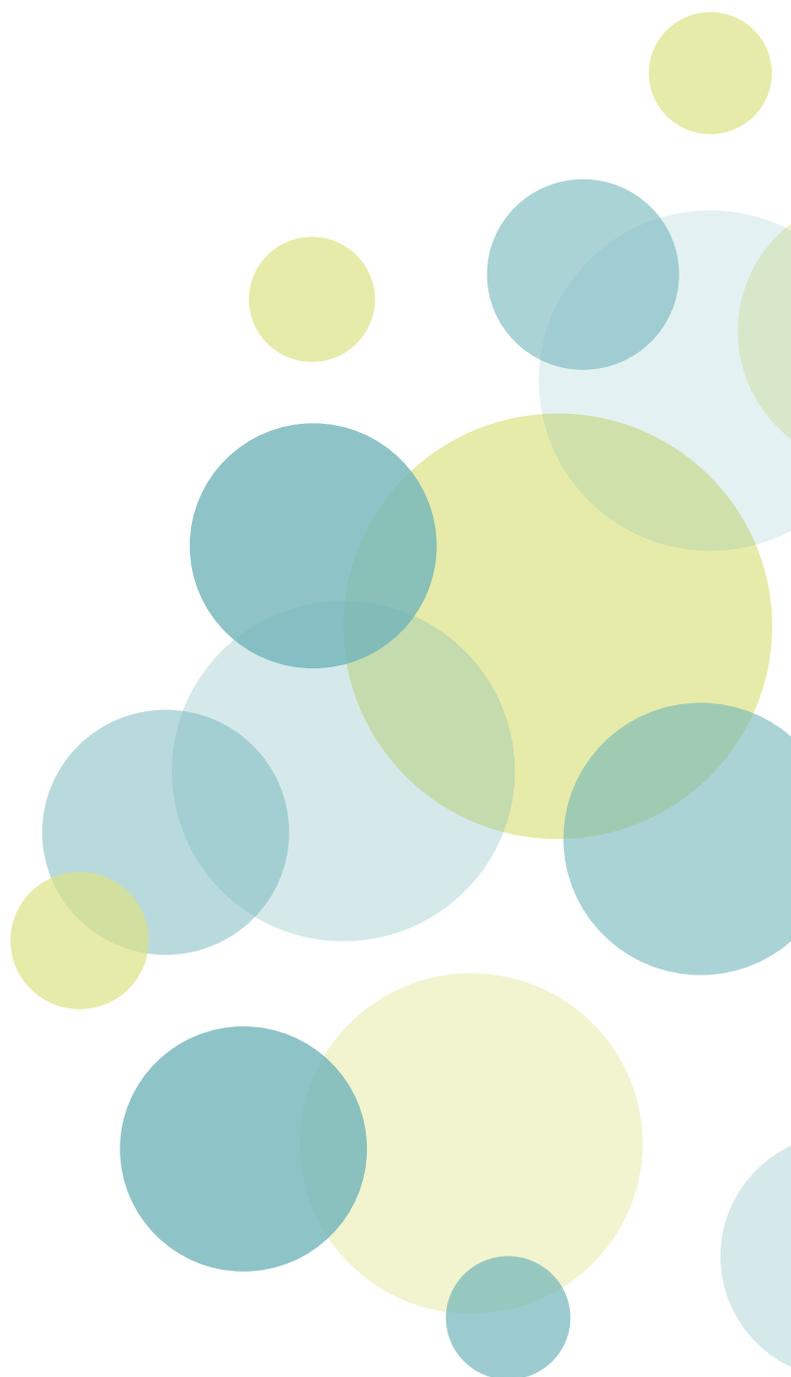
The school used the Constructive-Oriented Learning Environment Survey (COLES) to assist them in collective work. The COLES pre-test data was used to inform changes to classroom practice aimed at reducing the discrepancy between students' actual and preferred perceptions of one of eleven aspects of the classroom environment measured by the instrument. The success of intervention strategies was measured by the implementation of the COLES post-test questionnaire after a 4-6 week intervention period.

A series of meetings were scheduled to enable teachers to collaborate and share their ideas and experiences of the intervention strategies used with their class. By facilitating dialogue between teachers in departments

across the school, the aim was to provide a richer source of knowledge and ideas for teachers wishing to improve their classroom-learning environment. Teachers worked in groups of three to look at the data and to identify new teaching strategies.

So far data collected has shown:

- evidence of the success of teachers' intervention strategies in post-test reports
- a positive contribution of the Disciplined Collaboration approach in promoting a more positive learning environment for staff and students





## 5.0 Conclusions

To conclude, Disciplined Collaboration is deliberately focused on improving learning outcomes. It is purposefully constructed so that impact is thought about at the outset and not left to chance or retro-fitted at the end.

The prime aim of Disciplined Collaboration is to ensure that professional collaboration has impact and that the collaborative or innovative effort of teachers is not simply reduced to sharing ideas or swapping stories. In short, it is disciplined.

Disciplined Collaboration presupposes that in order to 'connect to learn', teachers need to 'learn to connect' and that skills of collaboration are not necessarily automatic or natural but need to be practiced and refined.

Disciplined Collaboration is also predicated upon the fact that in order to have 'impact', professional collaboration needs to be systematic or 'disciplined'.

All eight schools involved with the DCPL project are at different points in measuring or gauging impact. In a relatively short space of time, they have all made progress and now have a good understanding of Disciplined Collaboration.

A maturity model was developed as part of the DCPL project and is based upon the conditions (5d's). The maturity model can be used by schools to self-assess how far they are actively building the capacity to support collaborative learning.

**“It has been an enormous privilege to work with all the schools in the past 13 months and we thank AITSL for this wonderful opportunity. We hope this work not only contributes to a better understanding of how to secure professional learning with impact but also enables teachers to engage with the PL Charter in a productive and positive way.”**

**Professor Alma Harris and Dr Michelle Jones**

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