

## **Professional Learning Community**

By Bambi Betts

As with so many human endeavors, international education is periodically strongly influenced by a powerful construct. Twenty or so years ago it was the notion of having a clear 'mission'. Ten years ago we began to seriously consider the notion of focusing on 'enduring' understanding (not sure what the alternative is – enduring 'misunderstanding?') Very recently we have begun to consider the notion of 'assessment FOR learning'.

Whether these emerge from our own practice and reflection and/or are a synergy with a broader notion from humanity's collective learning curve is a fascinating debate. The reality is, whatever the source, these notions either become the serious organizers for more effective practice OR they can simply become the next rhetoric - a fairly routine 'sin' amongst us educators.

Currently emerging is the notion of the 'professional learning community'. Actually, this is not such a new idea, rather one that pulls together three separate ideas, two of which have been around forever and a third which some would say is reasonably recent.

'Learning' of course is the core business of schools. What is new in the professional learning community notion is that learning embraces ALL members of the school – kids, teachers, parents, other stake-holders. We no longer view the school as a place of learning for kids only, rather organize it around an insistent that to be effective for kids, everyone else must also be learning.

The slightly new image in the professional learning community might be the notion of 'community'. Although we craftily avoid saying it, our schools have been organized around the notion of school as factory'. We have been saying the word community for a while, but continued to perpetuate organizational structures and practices which are actually more reflective of a 'factory' ( such as moving kids from grade to grade, curriculum based on linear accumulation of information and skills, with a few exceptions, on teaching approach for most kids, a 'standardization').

Education, at least in the minds of educators, has always been a 'profession', not just a 'job'. Although school leaders and teachers often have very different views of what it means to be 'professional', the world beyond schools has some pretty clear definitions. The parts of 'professional' which we have largely ignored are worthy of serious consideration in the bigger picture of this 'professional learning community'.

Notions only merit attention when they are translated into practice in our day to day work. Here is my contribution. A professional learning community:

All adult collaborative time is organized around five core sessions:

- Looking at student work
- Designing units of study

- Designing assessments
- Modeling teaching practice
- Particular learning of particular student

Systematic use of learning data to drive ALL decisions including professional development for teachers.

Teams composed of the 'right players' for the team's purpose. A much higher degree of accountability for student learning on the part of all individuals in the community (contract renewal based on learning?)

Hopefully, we in education are moving beyond the need to have a 'rhetoric' to justify our practice. If not, the rest of the world may very well remove the 'professional' from the rhetoric when we are not looking.