

## **<CT>Beyond the development of teachers' professional knowledge: Tapping into our practical wisdom**

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### **<A>Introduction**

Teachers' professional knowledge is an important aspect of effective practice. Indeed, teachers who are experts in their subjects and those who have an in-depth understanding of pedagogical strategies, behaviour management and students' needs are likely to have better outcomes (Barendsen and Henze, 2017). For this reason, it is important for teacher training programmes to emphasise professional development. Still, if applied without nuance, teachers' professional knowledge that does not account for our lived experiences, values, principles and purpose can be detrimental to our practice (Devis-Rozental and Clarke, 2020). Professional knowledge can lose its impact if applied only as a means with which to standardise teaching and evaluation or homogenise students' experiences and learning. In this article, I argue that professional knowledge must be practised with what Aristotle (ca 350BC; Schwartz and Sharpe, 2010) called practical wisdom, the intrinsic compass that urges most of us to act in the correct way, based on our ethics and values, to make a positive impact.

I will begin by defining professional knowledge and practical wisdom. I will then explore them within the context of teacher professional development and effective practice. I will provide examples of how to apply it within practice and ideas of how to hone it as a way in which to improve our practice and enrich our experience and that of our students.

Teachers are much more than a font of knowledge; we are not a 'faceless embodiment of a curricular requirement nor a sterile tube through which knowledge is passed from one generation to the next' (Rogers and Friedberg, 1994, p. 370). Becoming a teacher requires an integration of professional knowledge and practical experience, as practitioners navigate the complex demands of being an educator in the 21st century where technological advances, rise in mental health issues, post pandemic practice, lack of funding for schools and emotional burnout are all prevalent.

### **<A>Professional knowledge**

Professional knowledge is the type of knowledge gained through a period of formal study, where individuals rationalise what they learn and gain the specialist skills that they will need for their field of knowledge (what they teach) (Squires, 2005). In the teaching profession, this type of knowledge is key. Educators must have the pedagogical expertise to know how children learn, the ages and stages of development to develop scaffolded activities, and other key theoretical expertise related to the art of teaching and learning.

Educators must have expertise in the subjects that they teach. They must also be knowledgeable in managing behaviour, role-modelling prosocial behaviours, conflict resolution, boundary setting and even negotiating skills. Then there is the practical knowledge that teachers need to have regarding how to develop a curriculum, create a lesson

plan and communicate effectively with confidence, and even digital literacy skills. Clearly, being a teacher is complex.

All of these types of knowledge are needed to be an effective practitioner. Indeed, the Teachers' Standards (DfE, 2016, p. 3) focus on professional knowledge when setting out 'a number of expectations about professional development'. In it, they state that 'teachers should:

- Keep their knowledge and skills as teachers up-to-date and be self-critical;
- Take responsibility for improving teaching through appropriate professional development, responding to advice and feedback from colleagues;
- Demonstrate knowledge and understanding of how pupils learn and how this has an impact on teaching;
- Have a secure knowledge of the relevant subject(s) and curriculum areas;
- Reflect systematically on the effectiveness of lessons and approaches to teaching; and
- Know and understand how to assess the relevant subject and curriculum areas.'

(DfE, 2016, p. 3)

Applying Aristotle's (ca 350bc) ideas to the professional knowledge needed for the requirements of being an effective teacher, as stated above, would largely fall into two types of knowledge. The first would be what he called *episteme* or 'scientific universal, invariable context-independent knowledge' (Kinsella, 2012, p. 35); this would refer to subject and curriculum knowledge, for example. The second would be *techne*, 'characterised as context-dependent pragmatic craft knowledge... oriented towards practical rationality' (Kinsella, 2012, p. 35); this would be the know-how of how to teach and the techniques and tools needed for effective practice.

#### **<A>Practical wisdom**

There is a type of knowing that I would argue is just as important, if not more, and which has not been identified within the context of what is required to be a good teacher; it is practical wisdom, practising by 'doing, knowing, being and becoming' (Higgs, 1999, cited in Higgs, 2012, p. 3). Indeed, Yunus Eryaman (2007, p. 89) asserts that 'educators need to think of teaching practice as more like deliberative, performed, ethical and aesthetic experience and less like technical, scientific and controlled activity'.

Practical wisdom, or *phronesis* (Aristotle ca 350bc), is 'an intellectual virtue that implies ethics. It involves deliberation that is based on values, concerned with practical judgement and informed by reflection' (Kinsella and Pitman, 2012, p. 2). It is what Higgs (2019, p. 81) called 'the ineluctable nexus between practice, judgement and knowledge'. It is that

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combination of ‘will with skill’ (Schwartz and Sharpe, 2010, p. 8), where ‘what to do in a particular circumstance... for how long, in what way and for what purpose’ (Schwartz and Sharpe, 2010, p. 5) is based on our ability to perceive a situation, gauge the appropriate response in that particular moment, with that particular person/s in those particular circumstances, and act consequently (Devis-Rozental, 2018). It’s our ability to apply knowledge and experience in flexible and responsive ways to solve problems and make sound judgments.

Applying this type of knowing (practical wisdom) based on our previous experiences, flexibly and responsibly in order to resolve complex problems and manage situations, and making good judgements for a positive outcome, is not something that can be learned in a book. It is the type of wisdom that recognises patterns, draws conclusions based on ‘educated’ guesses and follows a ‘gut feeling’ of what feels appropriate at that moment (Devis-Rozental, 2018). Within the context of teaching, practical wisdom is about understanding that each child is different and has different needs. It is being able to switch activities if things are not working well; it’s pre-empting emotional outbursts based on previous experiences. It is also sometimes going against the prescriptive curricula to achieve better results but also, more importantly, to enrich children’s lives, as they learn important skills that will be useful throughout their life and ultimately help them to thrive and flourish.

#### **<A>Practical wisdom leads reflection into positive action**

Reflection is encouraged in teacher development, requiring a structured approach to critically examine and evaluate experiences and to think of ways in which to improve them (Devis-Rozental, 2018). Practical wisdom goes further. When we use our practical wisdom, we make judgements and decisions by applying what we know and our lived experiences through a lens informed by our ethics, to respond to situations intuitively with authenticity, with the aim of making good judgements. In this way, it is forward thinking.

#### **<A>Application of practical wisdom**

Think of an excited child bringing in a family recipe from her Jamaican parents the day on which the food technology class are cooking rice and being told, ‘We are only going to cook rice the English way.’ At that moment, the teacher negates all the incredible learning opportunities presented, such as learning from another culture, celebrating diversity or increasing the child’s sense of pride and self-esteem. Practical wisdom involves recognising patterns, drawing on resources and responding to unique circumstances to achieve positive outcomes. Specifically, in the context of teaching, it is about understanding that every student is unique, adapting to unexpected situations and making ethical decisions. In this instance, this teacher missed the opportunity. If, instead, this teacher had said, “How fantastic! Are there others that would like to share how to make rice in a different way? Let’s do that and then compare them all!”, the teacher would have used that opportunity to apply their practical wisdom by respecting the child’s cultural heritage and adapting to the situation by understanding its nuance in order to enrich everyone’s experience in the classroom. It may be that the teacher wouldn’t have advanced on their specific goal, but the learning that those

students would have had about inclusion, diversity, cultural identity and even chemistry and maths would have been great.

We have all used our practical wisdom in our practice, even if inadvertently. If you have ever spent hours planning an activity, but notice that the class is not engaged so you start an impromptu activity that you know the class will find more engaging, while still meeting your aims; if you have been lenient with a student turning up late because you know that their family circumstances are difficult; or if you have given yourself an extra minute to answer so that you don't snap, you have used your practical wisdom by doing the correct thing at the appropriate time and for the right reason, aligning with your values for a positive outcome.

### **<A>Developing practical wisdom**

Developing practical wisdom requires time to practice and a supportive environment. Stenberg and Maaranen (2020) state that many practices can help teachers to develop their practical wisdom. Some of these include:

- <BL>exploring problems or questions through a process of inquiry
- learning by doing through hands-on experience
- practising in the classroom the theories that we have learned
- getting to know the students well
- developing self-awareness
- practising being truthful to our values and ethics.<BL>

These could help teachers to make sense of their own teacher's identity and the type of teacher that they want to be. In their study, Stenberg and Maaranen (2020) found that practical wisdom is difficult to apply when there is a lack of time to prepare, a lack of knowledge of the students in the classroom and a lack of opportunities to practise the theory learned. Practical wisdom emerges when teachers feel safe in their practice, when they are allowed the time to get to know their students and to develop their self-awareness and when they are able to care for their own wellbeing.

### **<A>It isn't one or the other**

Practical wisdom and professional knowledge complement each other. Teachers with a strong knowledge foundation can apply it with practical wisdom to respond in unique ways, considering their environment and the situation and accounting for their students' needs at a particular time. By doing so, they are fine-tuning their practice, which in turn should translate to a better sense of wellbeing and improved outcomes for all.

Consequently, it is key that teacher training programmes and schools allow teachers the time and space to build their professional knowledge, not only through theory and training, but also by giving them the space in which to reflect on their values, caring for their wellbeing and providing opportunities to practice, thus supporting individuals to become the type of teacher that they aspire to be.

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