Wood, trees and sight: a common sense vision for professional learning

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As Hargreaves (2003:160) clearly points out the confidence and competence of schoolteachers lies at the heart of the educational experience of their pupils and, in a knowledge economy, is critical for the future of society. Hargreaves places an emphasis on the value of ‘Professional Learning Communities’ (PLCs), a subject he develops further in his joint work with Fullan on professional capital (Hargreaves and Fullan, 2012). He distinguishes between more recent ‘contract regimes’ approach to professional development as compared to earlier models. Hargreaves commends ‘[t]he positive legacy of contract regimes...they have led schools and teachers to treat achievement data and other evidence seriously’ (Hargreaves, 2003:133) . Yet Sims and Penny (2014) in a recent review of a failing PLC have drawn attention to a ‘critical shortcoming of the PLC groups examined in the current study had to do with their narrow mission...and...a constricted focus on narrow metrics’ (Sims and Penny, 2015:39). We need to be sceptical of narrow metrics, achievement data or otherwise.

In this paper I draw on a tradition of ‘critical common sense’ developed by Perry (1965) and Pring (1975, 1977) as a ‘lost’ thread significant for both the development of teachers’ everyday knowledge about their pupils and environment, and for a model of judgement effective in supporting classroom practice.

Pring distinguishes between common sense knowledge and common sense judgement. the latter he asserts as a necessary good. We affirm the person with good common sense for their ability to act wisely in everyday situations. We ought to develop such common sense judgement in teachers. Perry (1965) sets out a broad framework of necessary condition for teachers to develop good judgement, and I use this to consider who we might develop good common sense judgement through PLCs. In terms of common sense knowledge, Pring distinguishes between the content of such knowledge and the manner in which it is held. He affirms the potential value of the former, where it stands up to critical scrutiny, whilst rejecting the latter as often lacking such scrutiny. The aim is to develop a critical common sense which is disciplined and yet reflects the common discourse of everyday experiences.

I conclude by arguing that this lack of concern with common sense over the value of knowledge of academic disciplines has been detrimental to education practice.