Co-Creating Leadership:
Issues and challenges in understanding leadership as a distributed phenomenon

Professor Philip A. Woods
University of Hertfordshire, UK
p.a.woods@herts.ac.uk

University of Graz, Austria
11th November 2013
Professor of Educational Policy, Democracy and Leadership, University of Hertfordshire, UK

Chair of British Educational Leadership Management and Administration Society
INTRODUCTION

Distributed leadership is integral to improving schools and developing teachers’ professionalism.

As John MacBeath (2012) argues, teacher professionalism involves teachers
- exercising leadership through individual and collaborative agency within and beyond the classroom
- acting not as passive recipients of policy but as active participants in shaping education
- advancing and mobilising knowledge about teaching and learning
- working with others to innovate and achieve shared goals.
INTRODUCTION

The argument:

- distributed leadership (DL) can help to enhance teachers’ professionalism and broaden the horizons of school development, but the meaning and potential of DL need to be carefully and critically considered.
- it is helpful to distinguish between DL as an analytical concept and DL as a normative, applied concept.
- DL needs to be deepened in order to serve the fullest aims of human development and social justice.
- the idea of degrees of democracy, based on the concept of holistic democracy, provides a framework to extend and deepen DL.
DISTRIBUTED LEADERSHIP: ATTRACTIONS

- **analytical**: It recognises the reality of life in organisations - namely, that senior leadership power is mediated by people across the organisation.

- **instrumental**: It increases capacity, motivation and commitment - more people being involved means more knowledge, more innovation, more learning, a better spread of workload, and better ability to respond to external expectations.

- **ethical**: It promises to be more fair, more democratic and to give people more meaningful working lives.
DISTRIBUTED LEADERSHIP
DEFINITION

We define applied DL as development of a culture that
- views leadership as emerging from ongoing flows of interactions across the organisation and its hierarchy, not simply the actions of the single leader or small leadership elite
- values participative styles of leadership
- recognises that this view of leadership can be deployed in order to improve organisational effectiveness

institutional structures that
- spread leadership opportunities beyond formal senior roles
- facilitate flexible, collaborative working relationships across traditional boundaries and hierarchies
- tend towards the creation of flatter hierarchies
DISTRIBUTED LEADERSHIP: RESEARCH EVIDENCE

Accumulating research data suggest positive associations of distributed forms of leadership with learning - both teachers’ learning/professional development and students’ learning.

To understand leadership we need to recognise the ‘remarkable array of people who exercise formal or informal leadership in schools’ and outside, and the ‘web of interaction created by these sources... Distribution of leadership to include teachers, parents, and district staff is needed in order to improve student achievement’.

(Louis et al 2010: 13, 105)

‘... outstanding contemporary leaders... develop individual, relational and organizational capacity and trust, which lead to the progressive distribution of leadership and growth of confidence and achievement.’

(Day et al 2010: 194).
Factors associated with positive effects of distributed leadership:

- strong co-ordination and planning
- cohesive culture & trust
- focus on students’ learning
- capacity: capabilities of senior leadership to advance DL; capabilities of everyone involved in DL
There is also substantial critical research questioning the role of DL in education systems that are driven by market principles and performative culture.
DISTRIBUTED LEADERSHIP: TWO DIRECTIONS

instrumental  radical
DISTRIBUTED LEADERSHIP: CHALLENGES

What DL is being used for (purpose)

Whether DL creates relationships that are more fair and more equal (power)

What understanding of the person DL is rooted in (self)
DEEPENING DISTRIBUTED LEADERSHIP

The practical question for teachers and educational leaders is how far they can go in extending and deepening distributed leadership.

To help in addressing this question, we have developed a ‘degrees of democracy’ framework which can be used to facilitate reflection, dialogue and action, based on the concept of holistic democracy.
HOLISTIC DEMOCRACY

... is a way of working together which

❖ encourages individuals to grow and learn as whole people

❖ facilitates co-responsibility, mutual empowerment and fair participation
POWER SHARING

Co-leadership, shared responsibility and participation in decision-making, discretion to take initiatives and shape your own work

Examples include:

- shared authority for decision-making - e.g. participation in groups, committees and governing bodies that make decisions or represent views to decision-makers

- an ‘initiative culture’ in which school members can initiate change, lead projects and establish collaborative groups to develop learning and innovative approaches to pedagogy

TRANSFORMING DIALOGUE

A climate where exchange and exploration of views and open debate are possible, and people reach beyond individual narrow perspectives to find solutions that are best for all.

‘...in terms of teaching and learning we are aiming to develop dialogue – genuine listening and responding – between children and adults every step of the way. For teachers too it’s about building a culture of participation, about them feeling valued for who they are.’

Head of the Wroxham School (quoted in Woods 2011: 134)
Aspiring to as true an understanding as possible not only of technical and intellectual matters but also the ‘big’ questions of enduring values, meaning and purpose, through the development of all human capabilities - social, emotional, aesthetic, ethical, spiritual, intellectual and physical

‘We need to teach future leaders to reflect and critique... [which] requires a difficult balancing act between the intellectual, emotional and spiritual.’
(Starkey 2012)

Schooling that educates the whole child is an exploration of knowledge and meaning with the learner and aims to ‘draw out of the individual... the highest human potential... by which one can transcend the social, historical, and cultural conditions that constrain personality and consciousness development...’
(Mitchell 2005: 165)
HOLISTIC WELL-BEING

feeling empowered and confident as an organisational member, with high self-esteem and the capacity to think for oneself, and having a sense of belonging in an environment conducive to spiritual and ecological connectedness

If students, and staff, are to be cared for as people, rather than fodder for the economy, a fundamental concern is the experience of education… How do we want it… to feel like for students, for staff, and for families and communities? Democratic leadership creates a particular texture of relationships which is supportive of all of these members of the school community as creative agents with inherent potential… The human development that is integral to this texture of relationships – a sense of mutual identity and support, feelings of empowerment, social and interpersonal capabilities – is itself learning...

(Woods 2005: 72)
DEGREES OF DEMOCRACY
CONDENSED FRAMEWORK

PERFORMATIVE HIERARCHY

Instrumental focus
Learning is just about passing exams & tests, & achieving performative goals

Power hoarding
Staff & students are not involved in decision-making

Controlled communication
Communication is one-way & about passing on instructions; the culture encourages transactional motivation

‘Cheerful robots’
Relationships are functional; people rely on authority & don’t feel respected or treated as individuals

HOLISTIC DEMOCRACY

Holistic meaning
Learning is about peoples’ full potential & the meaning and values important to life, so people develop in a balanced way - intellectually, spiritually, intuitively, emotionally, etc

Power sharing
All staff & students share responsibility for decision-making

Transforming dialogue
Everyone shares views, respects difference & works to overcome divisions, using all their capabilities as a whole person

Holistic well-being
Everyone feels respected & treated as an individual, is independent-minded, & has a sense of unity & harmony

DEEPENING DISTRIBUTED LEADERSHIP

Teacher professionalism includes "the exercise of leadership and an active role in the creation and collective development of professional knowledge" to mobilise moral purpose. (Frost and Roberts 2013: 5)

In conclusion: The model of holistic democracy provides a framework that helps broaden the horizons of school development by:
- helping distributed leadership to be critically reflective and to contribute to education that develops the whole person and promotes democratic citizenship
- offering principles within which distributed leadership, teacher professionalism, student participation and the agency of support staff can be developed.
**BIBLIOGRAPHY**


