

# Keynote Introduction

## Anchoring Leadership

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Introduction: Democracy, Competition and Co-operative Schools

Parallel Session C1

### **Mainstreaming Co-operation: An Alternative for the 21st Century?**

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In this Introduction<sup>1</sup>, I examine what accumulating research evidence appears to be telling us about leadership and about flatter organisational structures and the restructuring of leadership into more distributed patterns. Whilst positive associations have been found with learning, challenging questions are also raised about the educational values underlying ideas of 'effective' leadership and the increased controls and enduring power and cultural disparities that accompany forms of distributed leadership. As an alternative, restructuring anchored in ideals of democratic leadership is compared and contrasted with distributed leadership. The paper concludes with brief observations on the role of co-operativism in providing a form of democratic anchoring.

#### **Research on leadership**

Several themes emerge from the major studies and reviews on school leadership in recent years (such as Day et al 2009, Louis et al 2010, Robinson et al 2008). The following is a distillation of factors found to be associated with effective leadership (see Appendix):

recognising leadership as interactive and emergent, not linear.

strategic direction.

focus on central 'business'.

contextual sensitivity.

relational and ethical qualities.

distributed leadership.

#### **Distributed leadership**

Turning to distributed leadership in more detail, for the purposes of this paper I take the term to refer to:

- 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; and recognises that this view of leadership can be deployed in order to improve organisational effectiveness; accompanied by
- structural changes that spread leadership opportunities beyond formal senior roles; facilitate flexible, collaborative working relationships across traditional boundaries and hierarchies; and tends towards the creation of flatter hierarchies.

This makes distributed leadership a broad term that overlaps with, and is often also referred to as, concepts such as shared, collaborative and democratic styles of leadership. I would argue

that this broad conception is sufficient for it to be of use as an orientating concept to a set of approaches and practices that have an impetus behind them in the drive to improve organisational effectiveness. (As will be seen below this lends itself to functional approaches to leadership and is not coterminous with more radical and substantive ideas such as democratic leadership and leadership for social justice.)

It is important to be cautious about evidence of any effects of distributed leadership on learning, as linkages are complex and the research on distributed leadership is diverse and comes from differing positions and paradigms (Hartley 2010). It is also important to note that research relevant to understanding distributed leadership does not necessarily focus exclusively on the concept of distributed leadership<sup>2</sup>. As Timperley and Robertson (2011: 6) observe, many investigations of leadership ‘implicitly, if not explicitly, take a distributed perspective on leadership’<sup>3</sup>.

With these cautions in mind, it is possible to acknowledge that there are accumulating data suggesting positive associations of distributed forms of leadership with learning - in particular, that teacher leadership and collaborative enquiry by teachers promote professional development and new knowledge, with benefits for teachers’ and students’ learning (Cameron et al 2011, Frost 2008, Holden 2008); that student leadership and active participation are associated with enhanced, deeper learning (Frost and Roberts 2011); and that schools’ enacting democratic principles - such as shared intentional direction (developed collaboratively) and a participative approach to leadership - are more likely to foster greater professional learning amongst teachers (Kensler 2008).

Any benefits of distributed (or democratic) leadership are not automatic. Co-operative organisation and distributed leadership do not necessarily generate beneficial effects: effects may be neutral or negative (Leithwood and Mascall 2008, Louis et al 2010: 21). Research to date suggests that positive effects of distributed leadership on learning are associated with factors that include:

- a **strong degree of co-ordination and planning** concerning roles, expectations and modes of working together, which Leithwood et al (2006: 61) refer to as ‘planful alignment’ and has been labelled as ‘firm framing’ in relation to democratic leadership (Woods 2005: 87).
- a **cohesive culture** that exhibits shared goals and values (Louis et al 2010, Slavin 2010, Woods and Woods 2008)<sup>4</sup>
- **trust**, found both to be an important mediating variable between democratic organisation and professional learning (Kensler 2008, pcvi) and ‘a pre-requisite for the progressive and effective distribution of leadership’ (Day et al 2009: 189).
- **preparation**, in order to develop capabilities, shared culture and appropriate structures (Woods 2005), including training for student leadership (Frost and Macbeath 2010).
- **focus on students’ learning** (keeping central the organisation’s central ‘business’ referred to above). A ‘focus of distributed leadership on the core work of the organization’ creates ‘strong links between leadership and learning’ (Timperley and Robertson 2011: 6), and leadership which gives priority to ‘thinking about how particular leadership tasks and activities might impact on student achievement and well-being’<sup>5</sup> are likely to be most effective (p7); concerning another form of less hierarchical and more fluid relationships - learning communities - their *raison d’être* depends on their being able to ‘sharpen’ their ‘focus on improving or transforming mutually agreed-on areas of student learning’ (Stoll 2011: 108) (See also Robinson 2006, Robinson et al 2008.)

It is not sufficient, however, to identify and further refine a set of factors that enable distributed leadership to be effective, as if fine tuning a motor. There are deep challenges to the concept

and its deployment in understanding school leadership. One challenge is the difficulty in agreeing meaning, which means that the term can be used in various ways and, as noted above, associated with differing paradigms and philosophical positions (Hartley 2010, Mayrowetz 2008, Woods et al 2004). The two challenges I highlight here concern impoverishment of educational purpose and the impact on agency, relationships and power.

#### *impoverishment of educational purpose*

The recognition (above) of the importance of 'focus on students' learning' - in other words, the key and integral part of the *educational* in educational leadership - opens the question of what learning is, a question that is about values and philosophy, and not reducible to technical questions (Frost and Roberts 2011, Woods 2004)<sup>6</sup>. The contested nature of education - the fact that it entails fundamental issues concerning what it is to live and develop as a human being - has implications for research and analysis of educational leadership and the nature of such matters as authentic leadership (Woods, P A 2007). What constitutes 'effective' leadership cannot be taken for granted, but emerges from the philosophy of personhood (implicit or explicit) that underlies it, which should be examined and justified.

A particular concern is that distributed leadership may act to promote imposed, narrow managerialist priorities and a functionalist approach to education. In a study of distributed leadership in a US school, Maxcy and Nguyen (2006) showed how a mandatory state-wide student assessment system acted as a leadership tool that powerfully limited the leadership agency within the school. They concluded that 'although a substantive redistribution of leadership occurred within the school through collective and deliberative efforts, these appeared largely prompted and guided by the [externally imposed] assessment system' (p182). The rise of a policy discourse privileging the economic role of education and favouring more entrepreneurialism in leadership creates tensions with humanistic ideals that view education as an intrinsic good fostering rounded development as democratic citizens (Woods forthcoming {b}).

#### *impact on agency, relationships and power*

There is evidence that in the business world firms have been flattening structures and 'delaying'. Yet this can lead (paradoxically) to more control and decision-making at the top (Wulf 2012). A recent study concluded that 'flattened firms exhibited *more* control and decision-making at the top' because CEOs (chief executive officers) were 'closer to the business' and more involved in internal operations and interactions - though at the same time the findings suggested that the style or process of leadership had changed from a command-and-control approach to a 'team-based collaborative model' (op cit: 2, 14).

In schools too, distributed leadership may be a means of enforcing policy agendas and management priorities (as shown by Maxcy and Nguyen's {2006} study, above) and reinforcing unjust power disparities and cultural privileges. Teacher leadership (a form of distributed leadership) can develop in such a way that it perpetuates certain power relationships and cultural assumptions - such as favouring masculine 'archetypes' of knowledge, authority and discipline and taking a controlling rather than a participative approach towards students (Scribner and Bradley-Levine 2010).

Hartley (2010: 282) concludes that whilst distributed leadership fits with a number of trends in the organisation and culture of schooling, 'the "grammar" of schooling (that is, the code which regulates curriculum, pedagogy and assessment) remains bureaucratic, pushed as it is

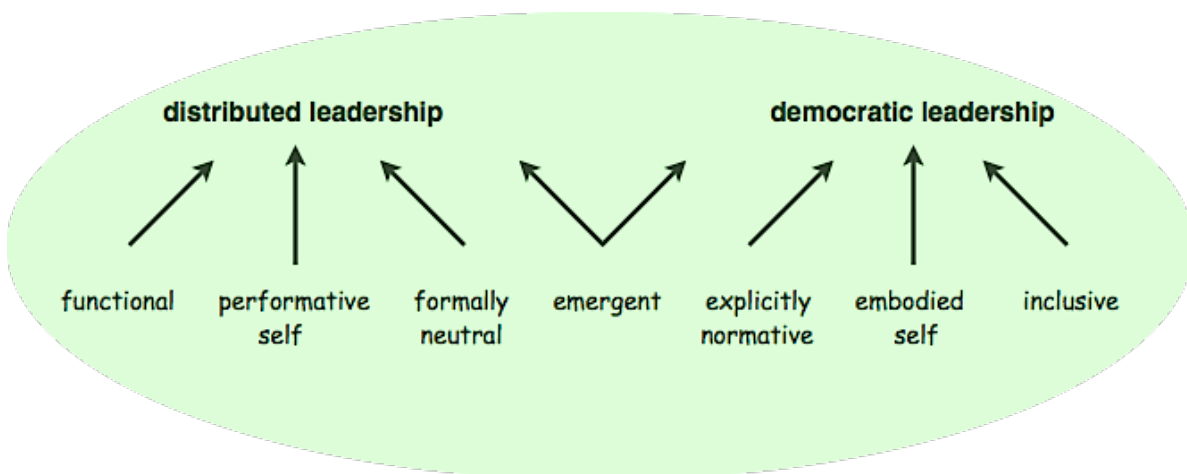
towards standardized practices and outcomes which can be audited easily and made public for the discerning consumer'. In many schools, it may be that changes in leadership structure and culture are generating a kind of 'corporate hybrid leadership' which combines strong central direction with distribution of a controlled degree of discretion and responsibility-taking to staff and encouragement of team-working (Woods and Woods 2012). Given the complexity of the changes in schools, arguably elements of both the 'intensification of performative culture' and moves towards greater 'democratic professional participation' can be seen simultaneously, resulting in structures and cultures characterised by varying 'degrees of democracy' (Woods 2011: 107-109).

## Anchoring leadership

The challenging issues concerning distributed leadership highlight the importance, as noted, of the philosophy in which leadership is based - that is, the degree to which it is anchored in some deeper understanding of human growth and values. The notion of democratic leadership, grounded in a model of holistic democracy, offers an anchored understanding of leadership that throws into sharper relief key features of distributed leadership (Woods 2005, 2011, forthcoming {a}; Woods, G.J. 2007; Woods and Woods 2012).

A critical perspective of distributed leadership can be summarily sketched by making a comparison with democratic leadership (Figure 1):

- Both have a basis in the idea of systems, organisations and leadership being emergent, complex and self-organising phenomena.
- Distributed leadership tends to be projected as formally neutral (a product of universally accepted objective knowledge), but in practice tends also to be harnessed to the goals of an instrumental and marketising culture, hence is used as a functional instrument in the construction of performative selves with a narrow focus on targets, testing and the skills and attitudes which serve the needs of the competitive economy.
- Democratic leadership is explicitly normative, with a commitment to nurturing communities that are inclusive and participative (valuing shared identity, difference and independent-mindedness) and people's holistic growth as embodied selves (developing not only cognitive and analytical, but also spiritual, emotional, physical, aesthetic and ethical capabilities).



**Figure 1: Distributed and democratic leadership compared**

The point about democratic leadership is not that it automatically solves the limitations and issues raised by distributed leadership. For example, findings that show any benefits of distributed leadership do not arise automatically apply also to democratic leadership. Rather, democratic leadership encourages engagement in practice and reflection with the deep challenges that arise with current policy trends impacting on schools and their leadership.

Co-operativism offers a specific kind of democratic anchoring and grounding in education and leadership. Hence co-operativism in education - with its substantial social, cultural and financial capital - is a significant player *challenging convergence* around an instrumentally driven business model of schooling and an impoverished, performative view of education (Woods 2012). It plays this role by:

- aspiring to a set of clearly articulated and sustained principles: the values of self-help, self-responsibility, democracy, equality, equity and solidarity, as well as those of honesty, openness, social responsibility and caring for others
- contributing to a discourse and frameworks for thinking which are alternative to the competitive, neo-liberal agenda: diverse initiatives and innovations need to be linked up through an integrating meta-discourse or language (Woods forthcoming {a}), and co-operativism contributes to this
- strategically using the spaces created by the contemporary policy context for agency and entrepreneurial action to grow alternatives wherever spaces for agency can be found - thus developing 'adaptive strategies' for progressive change (Woods forthcoming {a})
- providing practical examples of specific and strategic innovation (Glatter et al 2005) that offer inspiration and lessons to learn from.

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## Appendix

Distillation of factors found to be associated with effective leadership:

**recognising leadership as interactive and emergent, not linear.** Day et al (2009: 1, 2), for example, conclude that there are 'robust associations between heads' educational values, qualities and their strategic actions and improvement in school conditions leading to improvements in pupil outcomes', that 'Creating Vision and Setting Directions, Restructuring the Organisation and Redesigning Roles and Responsibilities, Developing People and Managing Teaching and Learning... affect and are affected by school internal conditions, culture and trust', and that it is 'the particular combinations of strategies based upon the heads' diagnoses of individuals, the needs of schools at different phases of performance development and national policy imperatives which are influential in promoting improved student outcomes'. Louis et al (2010: 9) highlight the need for educators to 'create synergy' across an array of variables. Recognition of educational leadership as interactive rather than linear is consistent with seeing systems, organisations and leadership as emergent, complex and self-organising phenomena, a perspective that has developed in different fields (Woods forthcoming {a}).

**strategic direction.** This refers to the importance of leadership promoting a vision, clear direction and goals, and high expectations; and also resourcing strategically in light of these.

**focus on central 'business'.** Research highlights the importance of leadership that seeks to bring about change that impacts on students' learning - sometimes referred to as instructional leadership (Robinson 2008) - by 'improving the conditions for teaching and learning' (Day et al: 113). It also draws attention to the importance of professional learning and to leadership that 'not only promotes but directly participates with teachers in formal or informal professional learning' (Robinson 2008: 656).

**contextual sensitivity.** There is no single model of good leadership practice - though, as Day et al (2009) put it, there are common repertoires (Setting Directions, Developing People, Redesigning the Organization and Managing the Teaching and Learning Programme, plus sub-sets of these). Deploying these involves understanding and diagnosing the local context, which mediates leadership. In fact, leadership can only be properly understood if we also take an organisational perspective which captures 'the dynamics of the complex human and adaptive systems which we know as educational organizations' (Glatter 2006: 79), as well as the wider community, social and policy contexts of schools.

**relational and ethical qualities.** Research on leadership highlights the importance of valuing people and relationships, developing leadership capacity in others and promoting a culture which has the characteristics of a learning community and high trust. Values such as a commitment to improvement, equity and inclusion are also found to be important.

**distributed leadership.** The understanding of leadership as emergent and shared, characterised by many active contributors throughout the levels of an organisation, has come to the fore in recent years (Woods et al 2004). 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' (Louis et al 2010: 13). This understanding links with the first of the factors above - recognising leadership as interactive and emergent.

<sup>1</sup> This Introduction is based on Woods (2012).

<sup>2</sup> For example, research by Robertson and Timperley (2011), Robinson (2006) and Robinson et al (2008).

<sup>3</sup> They are referring to the various contributions to their edited book.

<sup>4</sup> The effectiveness of a culture of shared leadership is related to, inter alia, a sense of collective responsibility for student learning (Loius et al 2010, p51). Slavin (2010, p173) concludes in a review of co-operative learning that 'most use of co-operative learning is informal, and does not incorporate the group goals and individual accountability that research has identified to be essential'. Woods and Woods (2008) found in their study of collegial leadership in a Steiner school that key aspects of the culture (shared philosophy, language and positive valuations of freedom of interpretation and the importance of bringing spiritual awareness into everyday actions and decision-making) provided important substantive resources for staff to work with as co-leaders.

<sup>5</sup> Such leadership is variously called instructional leadership, learning-centred leadership, pedagogical leadership and educational leadership.

<sup>6</sup> The rise of the idea of the 'learning organisation' also raises question of what learning means. Pring and Pollard (2011) in their examination of recent reviews of education highlight how an emphasis on target setting, tests and achievement, regulated through outcome-based assessment and inspections leads to an impoverished curriculum and learning.