

A Nested View of Democratic Leadership and Community

Guest Editors

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The idea that leadership needs to be distributed or shared for it to be most effective in enhancing learning in schools continues to have powerful momentum. For example, a major 5-year study of leadership and learning in the United States concluded in 2010 that “teachers and principals can play a role in increasing student learning by creating a culture of shared leadership and responsibility—not merely among school staff members, but collectively within the wider community” (Louis, Leithwood, Wahlstrom, & Anderson, 2010, p. 10). This followed England’s largest and most extensive study of school leadership, which found “positive associations between the increased distribution of leadership roles and responsibilities and the continuing improvement of pupil outcomes” (Day et al., 2009, p. 4). In conceiving this special issue, we wanted to emphasize that distributing or sharing leadership is not—indeed, should not be—just a management technique but, at its best, is an expression of a much deeper educational purpose concerning students and adults’ development as human beings and as active participants in the creation of their lives and environments (Kensler, 2010; Woods, 2011). This larger purpose is encapsulated in the concept of democratic leadership and community. Specifically, we wanted this special issue to contribute to the development of conceptual tools and provide empirically grounded insights that would help practitioners and policymakers advance more democratic approaches to education in classrooms, schools, and districts, thereby deepening and expanding our understanding of leadership as democratic practice and as a means of promoting education for democratic society and citizenship.

The five articles in the special issue address aspects of democratic community and leadership in schools at the student, teacher, school, and district levels. The three qualitative studies (by Hope, Bradley-Levine, and Katz) illustrate, in rich detail, how teachers and administrators have

intentionally embraced opportunities for redesigning school and district systems and processes for increased inclusiveness and participation. Two, more theoretically focused articles present new frameworks for understanding the practice of democracy in schools: Woods and Woods draw on data from three schools to illustrate differing degrees of internal school democracy, and Kensler explores new whole school approaches to sustainability (green schools) and presents a theoretical framework that integrates ecological and democratic principles. Both articles challenge readers to explore less discussed aspects of school leadership and democratic community.

We have organized the five articles in this special issue according to a nested view of democratic leadership and community. The issue begins with Woods and Woods's degrees of democracy analytical framework, which is grounded in a holistic conception of democracy and extends their work on developmental democracy. Holistic democracy, as an ideal, provides a healthy context for "individuals to grow as whole people (who are spiritually, socially, and ecologically connected; who create meaning in their lives; and who seek to develop their full capabilities and aspire to truth in an open-hearted, open-minded way)" and for their creative participation in decision-making processes concerning matters that affect them. The analytical framework provides researchers and practitioners with a new tool for analyzing differing degrees of internal democracy within schools. Woods and Woods clearly assume and demonstrate that schools will not fall neatly in a single category between bureaucratic and democratic organizations but will express differing degrees of democratic practice across 13 variables that constitute the four aspects of holistic democracy: holistic meaning, power sharing, transforming dialogue, and holistic well-being. The analytical framework provides researchers and practitioners with a new tool for analyzing differing degrees of internal democracy within schools. It also provides a helpful overview for considering the three empirical articles, which reflect the nested nature of schools and illustrate how the practice of democracy is relevant to all levels of educational systems (Figure 1).

The empirical articles begin with Hope's qualitative study of a democratic school. Here, he reports on an unforeseen finding from his larger grounded theory study that investigated student experience in small schools (Hope, 2010). Feelings of belongingness emerged as a core aspect of students and teachers' experience in the school under study, and this sense of belongingness seemed closely tied to the school's democratic systems and processes. In his detailed description of the school, one clearly sees illustrations of all four areas of Woods and Woods's holistic democracy framework: holistic

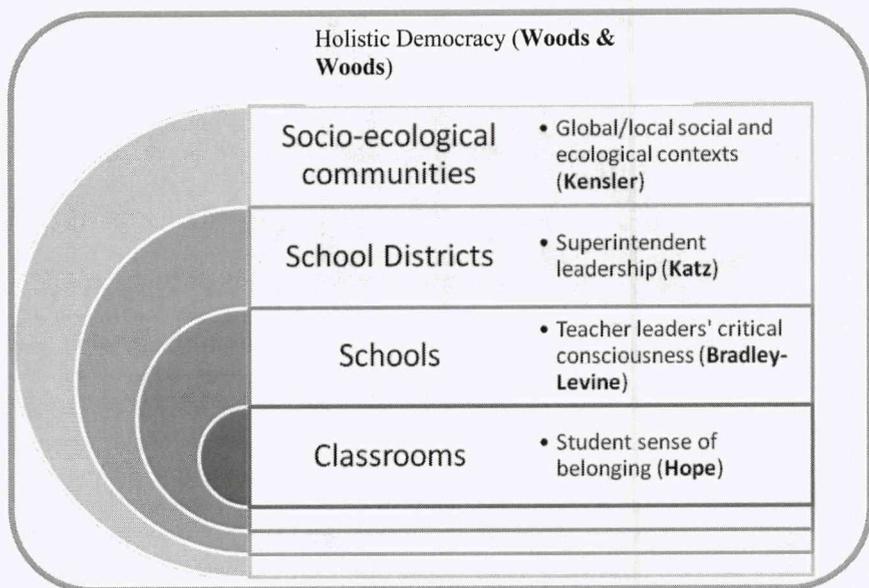


Figure 1. Nested organization of the articles in this special issue.

meaning, power sharing, transforming dialogue, and holistic well-being. Students engage with their learning as unique individuals; teachers trust their students to lead their own learning, and they empower students with the power of choice. In turn, students feel deeply connected to the school community. In terms of power sharing, teachers and students engage in leading the school; systems and processes are in place for broad-based participation in decision making (e.g., school meeting and school council). Students have a voice in their school and engage in regular conversations with adults; this transforming dialogue seems to bond students and teachers tightly. The holistic well-being experienced by students through deep connection and belonging resulted in two primary outcomes: (1) Students had a high-quality school experience, and (2) students engaged more fully in their learning. Hope sets these findings in a thorough review of related literature.

In the next article, Bradley-Levine reports on her critical ethnography of teacher leadership development. Relying on classroom observations, online discussion boards, written assignments, and in-depth interviews with four participants, she documents the development of teachers' critical consciousness in a university-based teacher leadership preparation program. This preparation program encouraged the development of

critical consciousness and finding a balance between reflection and action. Bradley-Levine found that successful development of teacher critical consciousness was not a straightforward process arising from the course of study, and she organized her findings around three themes. First, the development by university professors of their role as facilitators to guide the process is an essential component. Second, the development of critical consciousness is, at the same time, a personal and communal journey. And, finally, translating new understandings gained through conversation and reflection into action/practice was most challenging, with the implication that opportunities to become activists need to be built into programs that aim to develop critical teacher leaders. In this article, one finds elements of holistic democracy at work in the university classroom as well as the teachers' schools. For example, university classrooms provided the opportunity for developing teacher leaders to engage in transforming dialogue about their readings and professional experience, which allowed some of the teacher leaders to see opportunities for making their schools more socially just environments.

The third empirical article, by Katz, provides a rich case study of a superintendent (Delia) who was the first African American woman to lead a small suburban school district with a small African American population. Katz found Delia to be an example of a leader who crossed borders to promote social justice and democratic community. The author details the intentional efforts of this superintendent to identify and redesign school district systems and processes that had excluded Korean students and families. For Katz, feminist standpoint theory provided an important framework to help in understanding how a woman of color in the superintendency could "see" the excluded and marginalized voices in the school community. Delia's story clearly illustrates Woods and Woods's holistic democracy features at the district level—specifically, cocreation across boundaries, inclusive participation, and transformation of understanding. The superintendent's story provides an insight into the transformation that can take place within a district when the positional leader makes leading for democratic community and social justice a priority.

The final article in the special issue, by Kensler, presents a theoretical framework that captures the emerging international trend of green schools. These schools incorporate both democratic and ecological principles into their design and operation. After introducing the concept of sustainability and green schools, she discusses two worldviews—anthropocentrism and ecocentrism—and their relevance to school leadership. Anthropocentrism leaves the focus of school leadership primarily on the human community. More ecocentric worldviews recognize and understand the importance of

considering our social systems as nested within ecological communities. Designing, leading, and managing schools that better align with ecological principles both reduces the environmental impact of the school building activities and models for students and community members a more sustainable way of living in the world. The new framework proposed by Kensler integrates ecological concerns into the conception of democracy. This original way of envisioning democracy aims to capture and inform new ecocentric models of school; to assist in describing, explaining, and predicting the practice of democratic and ecological principles within more sustainable organizations; and to facilitate new research and practice opportunities.

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