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# Distributed Leadership for Equity and Learning

Philip A. Woods

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## Abstract:

This paper explains the foundations and development of the concept of distributed leadership for equity and learning (DLE), undertaken as part of the work of the European Policy Network on School Leadership. It draws from research and reviews of research into distributed leadership and work on social justice, democratic leadership and a rich conception of democracy (holistic democracy). The importance of the concept of DLE is that, unlike most other approaches to distributed leadership, it integrates values of democracy, holistic learning and social justice into its definition. This has significant practical implications. For example, where DLE is adopted as a guiding definition, it helps to ensure that issues such as inequalities in participation, exclusion, the value of collaborative learning and factors important in creating the conditions for developing democratic citizenship are less likely to be marginalised when initiating or enhancing distributed leadership. The conceptualisation of DLE is offered as a resource and guide where there is a will to make education participative, collaborative and a more fulfilling and self-affirming experience for all.

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## Keywords:

school leadership; democracy; social justice

## Liderança distribuída para a equidade e a aprendizagem

**Resumo:** Este artigo apresenta os fundamentos e o desenvolvimento do conceito de liderança distribuída para a equidade e aprendizagem (DLE) que se trabalhou como parte dos trabalhos da Rede de Política Europeia sobre a Liderança nas Escolas. Inspira-se na investigação e na revisão de literatura científica sobre liderança distribuída, nos estudos sobre justiça social e da liderança democrática, bem como numa conceção alargada de democracia (democracia holística). A importância do conceito de DLE reside em, neste caso, ao contrário da maior parte de outras abordagens à liderança distribuída, integrar na sua própria definição os valores da democracia, da aprendizagem holística e da justiça social. Isto tem implicações práticas significativas. Por exemplo, onde a DLE tem sido adotada como linha orientadora, tem ajudado a garantir que questões como as da desigualdade na participação, as da exclusão, o valor da aprendizagem colaborativa, bem como outros fatores importantes para a criação de condições para o desenvolvimento da cidadania democrática, têm menos probabilidades de serem marginalizados, quando se inicia ou se reforça a liderança distribuída. Propõe-se a conceptualização de DLE como um recurso e uma linha de orientação sempre que exista uma vontade de fazer da educação uma experiência participativa, colaborativa que seja mais gratificante e de afirmação pessoal para todos.

**Palavras-chave:** liderança na escola; democracia; justiça social

## Leadership Distribué pour l'équité et l'apprentissage

**Resumé:** Cet article présente les fondements et le développement de la notion de leadership distribuée pour l'équité et l'apprentissage (DLE) des travaux entrepris dans le cadre du Réseau Européen sur le Leadership dans l'Établissement Scolaire (European Policy Network on School Leadership). Il s'inspire des recherches et revues de recherche en leadership distribué, des travaux dans le domaine de la justice sociale et du leadership démocratique ainsi que d'une conception large de la démocratie (la démocratie holistique). Contrairement à la plupart des autres approches en matière de leadership distribué, l'importance de la notion de DLE est qu'elle intègre dans sa définition les valeurs de la démocratie, de l'apprentissage holistique et de la justice sociale. Cela a des conséquences pratiques importantes. Par exemple, dans les établissements où DLE est adopté en tant que principe directeur, il contribue à faire en sorte que des questions telles que les inégalités dans la participation, l'exclusion, la valeur de l'apprentissage collaboratif et des facteurs importants dans la création des conditions pour développer la citoyenneté démocratique soient moins susceptibles d'être marginalisés lors de l'initiation ou le renforcement du leadership distribué. La conceptualisation de DLE est proposée comme une ressource et une orientation là où il y a une volonté de faire de l'éducation une expérience participative, collaborative qui est plus épanouissante et auto-affirmante pour tous.

**Mots clés:** leadership à l'école; démocratie; justice social

## Liderazgo Distribuido para la Equidad y el Aprendizaje

**Resumen:** Este artículo explica los fundamentos y el desarrollo del concepto de liderazgo distribuido para la equidad y el aprendizaje (DLE), que se llevó a cabo como parte de la Red Europea de Políticas sobre Liderazgo Escolar. Se basa en investigaciones y revisiones de la literatura científica sobre liderazgo distribuido y trabajo sobre justicia social, liderazgo democrático y una concepción amplia de democracia (democracia holística). La importancia del concepto de DLE reside en que, a diferencia de la mayoría del resto de enfoques de liderazgo distribuido, integra en su definición los valores de democracia, aprendizaje holístico y justicia social. Asimismo, esto tiene importantes consecuencias prácticas. Por ejemplo, adoptar DLE como definición de partida, ayuda a garantizar que aquellas cuestiones referentes a desigualdades en la participación, exclusión, valor del aprendizaje colaborativo así como otros factores importantes para crear las condiciones para el desarrollo ciudadanía democrática, sean tenidas en consideración al iniciar o promover liderazgo distribuido. La conceptualización de DLE se ofrece como un recurso y guía allá donde se pretende hacer una educación participativa y colaborativa, más satisfactoria y, en definitiva, una experiencia de reafirmación para todas las personas.

**Palabras clave:** liderazgo escolar; democracia; justicia social

## **Purpose**

The purpose of this paper is to set out a conceptualisation of distributed leadership for equity and learning (DLE). This conceptualisation provided a basis for the design of a toolset for the European Policy Network on School Leadership (EPNoSL<sup>1</sup>) published in 2015. The toolset is intended to be a resource for policy-makers and practitioners who want to learn about and develop distributed leadership in schools in ways that advance social justice and democratic values. The toolset can be accessed at <http://herts.academia.edu/PhilipWoods>. The paper makes explicit the research and reviews that provide the evidence base for the conceptualisation of DLE, including the work and conclusions of EPNoSL's first and second phases of work (2011-2014).

## **A working definition of distributed leadership**

The evidence base built up by EPNoSL included specific attention to distributed leadership (DL). The research on DL in Finland for EPNoSL concluded, for example, that DL 'should include the notion of seeing leadership as resource which exists and has to be used in all levels' (Risku and Tian 2013: 5). Recognising that leadership is emergent and that it arises through complex, interactive processes and is not the preserve of senior roles designated with leadership authority (Woods and Roberts 2013a: 2, 2013b: 148), the EPNoSL project adopted (Kollias and Hatzopoulos 2013) the following as a working definition:

DL comprises...

- 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 leadership contributions from across the organisation and its hierarchy
  - recognises that this view of leadership can be deployed in order to improve organisational effectiveness
- accompanied by an institutional structure that
  - spreads leadership opportunities beyond formal senior roles to enable different sources of expertise and perspectives to influence the organisation's work, development and innovative changes
  - facilitates flexible, collaborative working relationships across traditional boundaries and hierarchies
- tends towards the creation of flatter hierarchies. (Woods and Woods, 2013b: 4)

In itself, however, the above definition does not incorporate values such as equity as integral to DL. The work on DL within EPNoSL therefore sought to remedy this by taking up the theme of deepening DL in Woods and Woods (2013b).

### **Deepening distributed leadership**

The UK review of research on DL for EPNoSL concluded that 'it is important to deepen DL as the above [working] definition ... leaves a need to provide content to the kind of values and learning that guide the practice of DL' (Woods and Roberts 2013a: 11, 2013b: 149). It went on to propose that 'examining DL from a democratic perspective, using a degrees of democracy framework based on holistic democracy, offers a way of researching the possibilities and practice of deepening distributed leadership', citing Woods (2013) and Woods and Woods (2012, 2013a/b). The EPNoSL project suggested accordingly, in its Briefing Notes at the close of Phase 2, that policy-makers take into account the following recommendation:

DEEPENING DISTRIBUTED LEADERSHIP FOR ATTAINING BOTH EQUITY AND LEARNING GOALS SHOULD BECOME PART OF A WIDER POLICY STRATEGY based on the notion that participative and democratic decision-making can be more effective in identifying and meeting the local needs of disadvantaged groups of students as well as empowering staff and students in becoming active in the everyday operation of their school.

(Kollias and Hatzopoulos, 2013: 6, 27)

### **Key concepts of social justice and holistic democracy**

Social justice and democracy are key concepts in building up the definition of DLE. How these are defined is crucial to how DLE is understood.

A four-fold concept of social justice

Woods and Roberts (2013a) suggested that equity in relation to DL should be understood in a broader way than just closing gaps in attainment. This suggestion reinforced the conclusion of the critical review of literature on school leadership and equity undertaken for EPNoSL (Ward et al 2013: 76), that equity should go beyond 'the dominant concepts of equality of opportunity and equity of results... underpinned by neoliberal economic theory' and a 'standards agenda' that is 'arguably, incompatible with the account of equity as the reduction of social injustices that affect people's lives'.

One way of conceptualising social justice in a broader way is through a four-fold scheme comprising developmental, participative, cultural and distributive

justice (Woods 2012), which incorporates the three-fold typology set out by Cribb and Gewirtz (2003).

The areas of concern of each of these aspects of social justice are summarised as follows:

- developmental justice - inequalities in opportunities for and obstacles to learning and the development of people's full capabilities
- participative justice - patterns of association which prevent some people from participating fully in decisions which affect them
- cultural justice - cultural domination, non-recognition and disrespect
- distributive justice - unjustified socio-economic inequalities and deprivation

### **Holistic democracy**

Concepts of democracy and social justice interlink and enhance each other. The concept of holistic democracy (HD) offers a rich conception of democratic leadership (Woods, 2005, 2011) that augments the four-fold concept of social justice (Woods and Roberts, 2013b: 149). The concept of HD is about participation and meaning: it describes a way of working together which facilitates co-responsibility, mutual empowerment and fair participation of all in co-creating their social and organisational environment (participation), and facilitates the growth and learning of individuals as whole people combining intellectual, spiritual, ethical, emotional, aesthetic and physical development (meaning) (Woods, 2005, 2011). The four dimensions of HD are set out below and provide a way of reflecting on how to deepen DL (Woods and Woods, 2013b).

#### Participative dimensions of HD

- power sharing. Inclusive involvement and shared responsibility for decision-making, providing opportunities for co-leadership
- transforming dialogue. Respect, freedom to share views, increasing mutual understanding through people reaching beyond individual narrow perspectives and interests and working to overcome difference
- Meaning dimensions of HD
- holistic meaning. Learning collaboratively, by integrating all our human capabilities (spiritual, intuitive and ethical, as well as intellectual and emotional), and seeking purpose guided by higher values and inner knowing
- holistic well-being. Feeling empowered and confident as a member of an organisation, with high self-esteem and the capacity to think for oneself, in an environment where there is a sense of belonging and encouragement of connectedness - spiritually and ecologically (with nature)

Figure 1 shows the linkages between HD and social justice. Showing these linkages provides an overview of which aspects of social justice are particularly important to each of the dimensions in a rich notion of democratic leadership based in the HD model. Whilst all the aspects of social justice are interactive and have a diffuse influence, some are especially affected by and interlinked with certain dimensions of HD.

The participative dimensions (power sharing and transforming dialogue) are especially linked with participative and cultural justice. Inequalities in the latter affect who is able have their voice heard and to be respected as initiators of change and as co-leaders.

The meaning dimensions (holistic meaning and holistic well-being) are especially linked with developmental justice. This is because the latter is concerned with inequalities in access to learning and in opportunities for people to develop all of their capabilities in a supportive environment that nurtures collaborative learning and well-being.

Affecting all the HD dimensions is distributive justice as socio-economic inequalities have impacts upon matters, such as respect, capabilities to participate and engagement in learning, that affect all the dimensions. This highlights the importance of recognising inequalities and the 'structural constraints on social justice' (Ward et al, 2013: 77), and the need to tackle these in aspiring to holistic democracy as a model to deepen distributed leadership.

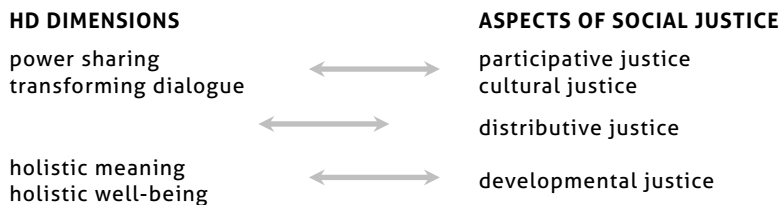


Figure 1: Linkages between HD and social justice

### Degrees of DL

Research on democratic leadership and the use of HD in professional development has emphasised the need to see it not as a characteristic which is either present or not, but as a feature of schools which in reality is characterised by 'degrees of democracy' (Woods and Woods 2012, 2013a). In educational and professional development sessions with practitioners, for example, numbers of the participants made clear that they value the benefits of hierarchy and want to see democratic approaches to leadership as a way of balancing hierarchical and democratic values (Woods and Woods 2013b).

The point applies to DL: it is an approach to leadership that has different forms and degrees of prominence. Gronn (2009) refers to hybrid leadership,

combining hierarchy and distributed features. Risku and Tian (2013: 5) conclude from their Finnish research for EPNoSL that schools 'are and will be very different from each other. School leadership must be developed so that it serves the different situations in the best possible way'.

### **Holarchic social environment**

In the UK case study of DL, carried out for EPNoSL and undertaken in a secondary school, it was noted that participants' accounts highlighted both hierarchy (traditional, top-down relationships) and what we termed 'holarchy' (open, fluid relationships) (Woods and Roberts 2013b). Hierarchy and holarchy appeared as inherent features of the leadership of the case study school which showed a strong distributed character. The findings highlighted the importance of the social dimension of organisational relationships, emphasised by work on leadership and innovation (e.g. Gratton 2007). School staff drew attention to

the availability of opportunities to take initiatives and exercise leadership that brings about changes in the school ... The emphasis given to respect by some participants suggested that we should explicitly recognise the significance of the distribution of respect (which links with the importance of trust and other relational factors identified in the research literature). Participants distinguished between these factors and the distribution of authority and accountability which were more centralised in the school. (Woods and Roberts, 2013b: 163)

What is termed 'holarchy' here is a particular kind of social environment where there is a shared, equal 'social authority' amongst organisational members to initiate and be involved in change, even though there may be distinctions in formal authority and other differences between people. A holarchic social environment is one in which people are valued for what they each individually bring to the work of the organisation; positive relationships between people across status and other organisational boundaries are readily established in order to initiate and develop change; and belonging, social equality, flexibility, fluidity, openness, respect, trust and mutually affirming relationships are distributed across the organisation.

David Spangler's definition of holarchy, highlighted in Woods (2011: 53) in relation to HD, captures the essence of a holarchic system 'in which different and unequal participants nevertheless enhance each other and co-creatively make a larger wholeness possible'. Holarchy honours

each participant and looks not to their relative ranking as in a hierarchy, but to what they can contribute by virtue of their differences. Thus in a hierarchy, participants can be compared and evaluated on the basis of position, rank, relative power, seniority and the like. But in a holarchy each person's value comes from his or her individuality and uniqueness and the capacity to engage and interact with others to make the fruits of that uniqueness available.<sup>2</sup>



It is essential to recognise the value of independent thinking if the sense of social belonging is not to be reduced to groupthink. The capability to think critically is essential to democratic principles and holistic well-being (Woods 2011: 19).

Work is continuing on delineating and exploring the concept of holarchic social environments (Woods, 2014).

**Factors conducive to DL**

strong degree of co-ordination and planning	Co-ordination and planning of roles, expectations and modes of working together are important, 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).
cohesive culture	The organisational or group culture should exhibit shared goals and values (Louis et al 2010, Slavin 2010, Woods and Woods 2008) and trust (Kensler 2008: cvi, Day et al, 2009: 189).
focus on core purpose (learning)	A "focus of DL on the core work of the organization" creates "strong links between leadership and learning" (Timperley and Robertson 2011: 6). Concerning another form of less hierarchical and more fluid relationships - learning communities - their <i>raison d'être</i> 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.)
capacity building	Opportunities to develop capabilities are important (Woods 2005), including training for student leadership (Frost and Macbeath 2010), raising educators' "consciousness of racial, sexual and cultural discrimination" and the value of students "own cultural manifestations" (Ward et al 2013: 75) and nurturing and strengthening democratic consciousness (Woods 2011: 64-66). Day et al (2009: 142) conclude that "there is a need to develop people before leadership can be effectively distributed". The key role of formal senior leaders and their capacity (their training, experience and capabilities in developing DL) are emphasised by Harris (2013: 550).
effective internal accountability	Day et al (2009: 117) draw attention to the importance of a strong internal accountability system, whilst Slavin (2010) identified the necessity of individual accountability for effective collaborative learning. In other words, accountability has to be felt individually as well as being shared. Senior leaders can be accountable to staff and students too, through for example "soft accountability" strategies, e.g., transparency about decisions and open access to reviews of senior leaders performance (Sorensen 2010: 9, Woods 2011: 161).

Figure 2: Factors associated with positive effects of DL (based on Woods and Woods, 2013b: Figure 1)

Openness and fluidity of relationships are characteristic of holarchic social environments, but they need to occur in a context of more formal institutional features that give a shared orientation and clear parameters. For example, insti-

tutional normative codes and incentives are important in supporting and setting the aims and limit of democratic culture (Sorensen 2010). They help to create the 'firm framing'<sup>3</sup> necessary to promote forms of DL that incorporate principles such as inclusive participation.

The accumulating research on DL is helpful in indicating the institutional changes and approaches that are needed to ensure it works and has positive effects. Successful DL is associated with a number of identifiable factors, some of which are summarised in Woods and Woods (2013b: Figure 1) and were noted in the UK national review (Woods and Roberts 2013a). These have relevance to DLE too. Figure 2 amends and expands the summary in Woods and Woods (2013b): the principal change is the addition of the importance of effective accountability within the school.

### **Distributed leadership for equity and learning**

There are three main implications from the above discussion for conceptualising DLE and augmenting the cultural and institutional features in the working definition of DL above.

Firstly, the conceptualisation of DLE needs to incorporate aims of enhancing social justice and participative and democratic processes and values. In order to achieve this, the dimensions of HD and the related forms of social justice are added. DLE, therefore, involves an explicit commitment to enacting the values of equity and democratic practice, as well as a shared understanding that leadership can come from all parts and levels of the organisation. In order to develop or enhance DLE, these key commitments and understandings need to be reflected in the ideas and values that make up a school's shared culture.

Secondly, DLE requires institutional structures that support and enable leadership from all parts of the organisation and do this in ways that are fair and inclusive. Examples of such institutional changes include widening membership of committees, teams and working groups (e.g. enabling ad hoc working groups to be set up easily by staff and/or students that bring together different people to work collaboratively on projects bringing about change), allocating resources in ways that support DLE (e.g. giving staff and students opportunities to develop capabilities in leadership, collaborative working and innovation), and supporting formal and informal teacher and student leadership roles.

Thirdly, DLE involves the nurturing of a particular kind of open (holarchic) social environment in which there is a shared, equal 'social authority' amongst organisational members to initiate and be involved in change, even though there may be distinctions in formal authority and other differences between people, and in

which belonging, social equality, flexibility, fluidity, openness, respect, trust and mutually affirming relationships are distributed across the organisation.

In Figure 3 a conceptualisation of DLE is set out that reflects the above discussion.

**A participatory culture that views leadership as emergent.** In such a culture:  
Leadership is viewed as emergent, arising from ongoing flows of interactions across the organisation and its hierarchy, not simply the actions of the single leader or small leadership elite.  
Participation is valued through leadership from all parts and levels of the organisation. As part of this, questioning is valued and encouraged; innovation is seen as central to personal and professional growth.  
The power of this view of leadership to effect school improvement is recognised.  
Aspirations to core values of equity and holistic democracy are explicit commitments and their importance is recognised and shared by all. This means a commitment to  
*inclusive participation*, so that the voice of all is heard and valued and critical questions are asked systematically and continually about who has fewer opportunities, whether based on racial, sexual, cultural or other forms of discrimination that work against equity  
*holistic growth* and well-being for all, anchoring distributed leadership in a deep and holistic understanding of human growth that frames learning.

**Enabling institutional structures.** This means:  
Leadership opportunities are spread beyond formal senior roles to enable different sources of expertise and perspectives to influence the organisation's work, development and innovative change  
Flexible, collaborative working relationships are facilitated across traditional boundaries and hierarchies.  
There is a tendency towards the creation of flatter hierarchies.  
Resources are allocated in ways that support leadership from across the school.

**An open (holarchic) social environment.** In such an environment:  
There are flexible and open ways of working that involve 'boundary spanning' across groups, functional divisions and departments.  
A sense of belonging and trust is developed.  
Co-creative and co-operative attitudes are fostered, as well as confidence, independent-mindedness, autonomy and openness within agreed principles and shared goals.  
Respect for all, as people and for what each person uniquely brings, and a sense of equal worth are fostered, and people support each other in their learning and professional development.

Figure 3: Conceptualisation of DLE

## Conclusion

To summarise, DLE is leadership which is enacted by everyone in the school, emerges from a supportive set of organisational features and works for inclusive, holistic learning. A school or other organisation which has DLE in its fullest form, is characterised by:

- a participatory culture: a culture that views leadership as emergent, values participation and has an explicit commitment to core equity and democratic values of inclusive participation and holistic growth and well-being
- enabling institutional structures: institutional structures that facilitate and support leadership from across all parts of the organisation
- an open (holarchic) social environment: a social environment in which people are valued as people and for what they each individually bring to the work of the organisation, and positive relationships between people across status and other organisational boundaries are readily established to initiate and develop change.

The significance of this conceptualisation of DLE is that it explicitly incorporates the values of democracy, holistic learning and social justice into the meaning of distributed leadership. How it is interpreted and translated into practice in schools and elsewhere will depend on local contexts and cultures. Hence, it makes sense to recognise that there are degrees of democracy and DLE. The conceptualisation of DLE is offered as a resource and guide where there is a will to make education participative, collaborative and a more fulfilling and self-affirming experience for all.

#### Notas:

- <sup>1</sup> The European Policy Network on School Leadership is a project that aims to improve school leadership in Europe through a collaborative network in which members co-create, manage and share knowledge. It involves partners (including universities, education ministries and other policymakers, and professional associations) in over 20 countries. The project was funded by the European Union from 2011 to 2015. For more information, go to <http://www.schoolleadership.eu>.
- <sup>2</sup> David Spangler, *A Vision of Holarchy*, 2008 ([http://www.sevenpillarhouse.org/index.php/article/a\\_vision\\_of\\_holarchy1](http://www.sevenpillarhouse.org/index.php/article/a_vision_of_holarchy1), accessed 14th september 2010). The concept of holarchy is also developed and used by writers such as Arthur Koestler and Ken Wilbur.
- <sup>3</sup> Discussed in Woods (2003: 153,154, 156; 2005; 2011: 104-6, 162).

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