

## **Toward A Conceptualization of Democratic Leadership in a Professional Context**

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### **Abstract**

In this article, an argument is advanced with the intention of establishing the central principles and premises upon which democratic leadership in school contexts are based. These principles are derived from the findings of a study on the professional leadership culture of one school conducted by this author. The initial research was a qualitative case study that examined, through Schein's (2010) organizational culture and leadership model, the perceptions of school-level professionals regarding the nature of their professional leadership culture. Numerous findings with rich implications for democratic leadership in professional contexts emerged from the study. Based on these findings, I propose a conceptualization of democratic leadership and suggest ten strategies for its use in school contexts. Finally, I examine possibilities for the development of democratic leadership capacity in school contexts.

*Keywords: school, culture, professional leadership, democratic leadership*

### **Introduction and Overview**

This article is based upon a study of the professional leadership culture of one school identified through a reputational approach. System and school administrators identified schools based upon the levels of engagement of their professional staff in school leadership activities and processes related to student learning. The central research question guiding this study was: in a school with a reputation for change in instructional improvement, what was the role of the professional leadership culture of that school in its efforts to positively influence change and student learning. The school ultimately chosen for this study was an elementary school in a suburban neighbourhood within a Western Canadian urban jurisdiction. An examination of implications for the concept of democratic leadership was conducted, particularly with a view to explicating the underlying concepts upon which democratic leadership is based.

In the following sections, I examine the literature and research findings relating to the initial study, with a focus on the concepts of professional culture and leadership perspectives in the context of schools, and I describe the purpose, participants, system context, research design, methods, and key findings of the study. Based on the emergent themes, I propose a framework for democratic professional leadership and suggest ten strategies for democratic leadership in action. I conclude with a discussion of the implications of these ideas for building capacity for democratic leadership in schools.

### **The Concept of Professional Culture in School Contexts**

In the context of schools, researchers have pointed to the importance of school leaders recognizing that schools, as organizations, are no different from any other in the formation of their culture. Perhaps most relevant to the present discussion is the point made by Seashore Louis and Wahlstrom (2011) that school leaders from every level are key players in creating and shaping school culture. Numerous writers, such as Barth (1990, 2001), use the phrase "community of learners" to convey their approaches to culture-building. Barth (2006) put forth the premise that relationships among educators in a school define and shape

that school's culture, and he asserted that, over anything else, the nature of relationships among the adults within a school has a greater influence on the character of that school and on student accomplishment (p. 9). He found that if the relationships between administrators and teachers were trusting and cooperative, then the school would show evidence of teachers working collaboratively to create an interdependent or collegial culture. Barth (2006) defined this united culture as one that nurtures growth on the part of teachers as teachers talk about their instructional practices and share their expertise with one another.

Researchers have also provided insights into the relationship between leadership and culture in the context of schools. Chamberlain (2005) suggested that what we learn through our culture becomes our reality, and for us to see beyond that is often difficult. While culture may be a nebulous concept to apply to a reality where administrators need concrete results in student learning, linking culture and student learning may allow administrators to re-focus their energies and attention on more inclusive aspects of school leadership. Fullan (2014) affirmed the notion that principals need to move beyond the concept of instructional leadership and the image of the "principal as booster of achievement scores" (p. 41). Fullan also noted that principals as administrators need to build new cultures based on trusting relationships and a culture of disciplined inquiry and action (2014, p. 45).

Glickman, Gordon, and Ross-Gordon (2014) identified twelve norms that need to be present in school cultures of continuous improvement. These norms include: (1) distributed, supportive leadership; (2) professional dialogue; (3) trust and confidence; (4) critique; (5) reflective inquiry; (6) productive conflict; (7) unity of purpose; (8) incremental approach; (9) professional development; (10) collegiality and collaboration; (11) experimentation and risk taking; and, lastly, (12) recognition, sharing, and celebration. These proposed norms would seem to indicate that the success of leaders in influencing professional leadership culture depends on how these norms are established and practised. Hattie (2009), alongside Seashore Louis and Wahlstrom (2011), found that the culture of a school affects how adults behave in the hallways, in monitoring the lunchrooms, and when greeting students as they enter the school. These authors added that all these changes influence the student culture and that this, in turn, leads to higher levels of student learning while also contributing to higher levels of satisfaction among staff.

Demers (2007) suggested that the concept of culture can be simply defined as "the way we do things around here" (p. 76). This notion of culture is used to explain the existence of collective patterns of thinking and behaviour. Some writers have approached culture from a systems perspective. In the context of schools, Kaplan and Owings (2013) pointed out that schools are complicated places and multifaceted organisms in which each part is dependent upon the other. Changes in one-part cause cascading reactions in all parts. These authors suggested that school culture creates a psychosocial environment that strongly influences teachers, administrators, and students. Glatter (2009) observed that "a key requirement for leaders is to create and sustain a climate that is conducive to learning, both in the way that work is allocated and organized and also in the quality of the interpersonal relationships fostered" (p. 234). Additionally, Schein (2010) found that the nature of leadership and culture-building are intertwined.

## **Leadership Perspectives in the Context of Schools**

Research and opinion on leadership (Hackman & Johnson, 1996; Kuczarski, S. S., & Kuczarski, T. D., 1995) advanced a narrative that modes of school leadership have moved over time from a top-down to a shared approach. Perspectives on leadership have assumed a variety of forms in recent years, represented variously in the leadership lexicon as, for example, transformative, shared, collaborative, interdependent, instructional, and distributed. Perhaps the main consideration these leadership ideas have in common is that leadership culture is driven primarily by a democratic ideal, or a common commitment to building collaborative relationships. This consideration is particularly true in professional contexts. Doyle (2004) noted, "Leadership is no longer a process in which administrators lead from the apex of a hierarchical pyramid. Instead, they become part of a web of interpersonal relationships" (p. 197).

Walker (2011) suggested that leadership begins as a reciprocal arrangement between those who lead and those who follow. Simply put, if a follower loses confidence in a leader, or decides not to follow the leader, then there is no leadership. Walker added, "Studies over the years indicate – the nature of the relationship between leader and constituents – is at the center of what defines leader, follower and leadership" (pp. 12-13). In the context of school leadership, Glatter (2009) observed that "a key requirement for leaders is to create and sustain a climate that is conducive to learning, both in the way that work is allocated and organized and also in the quality of the interpersonal relationships fostered" (p. 234). Doyle

(2004) noted successful leaders can make the transition to utilizing more of a collaborative approach to decision-making.

The concepts of shared and distributed leadership have been given significant attention among researchers in recent years. Deal and Peterson (2009) noted, "Leadership is at its best is shared, with everyone pulling together in a common direction" (p. 199). Seashore Louis and Wahlstrom (2011) established similar conclusions with their observation that schools need to build strong cultures in which many tasks of transforming schools require many leaders. (p. 52). Perhaps tapping into the strengths of many individuals will increase the possibility of influencing change within a culture.

The concepts of "shared and distributive" have much to offer across organizational contexts, and a shared leadership approach is a valued perspective, particularly in the context of schools. DuFour (2004) acknowledged that when principals work with staff to build processes to monitor student learning (to develop systems of intervention) and to give students additional time and support, they create the structures that support the objective of learning for all.

The importance of establishing good communication and building good relationships amongst various stakeholders help to define what to pay attention to, what things mean, how to react emotionally to what is happening, and what actions to take in various situations. In a study conducted by Handford and Leithwood (2013), the authors investigated the connection between leadership and learning by focusing on specific leadership practices and trustworthiness on the part of principals.

Trust has been another area that has received considerable attention in recent research. In the context of schools. Trust is a crucial element in building positive relationships and is often deeply ingrained within the culture of an organization. In support, Handford and Leithwood (2013) stated, "Most available evidence indicates that trust is a core component of leadership" (p. 194). These authors found teacher trust in principals is most influenced by leadership practices, which teachers interpreted as indicators of competence, consistency and reliability, openness, respect and integrity. The authors also noted that "these practices are explicitly available to teachers when making judgments of trustworthiness and they provide practical guidance for school leaders in their efforts to build trusting relationships" (Handford & Leithwood., 2013, p. 208). The results of the Handford and Leithwood study reinforced the notion of leader trustworthiness in the context of in-school professional relationships. Significant attention has also been devoted to the relationship between school leadership and student learning. Various studies (Guskey & Sparks 2002; Hallinger & Heck, 1996; Hattie, 2009; Leithwood & Jantzi, 1999; Robinson & Timperely, 2007) have consistently pointed to an indirect effect of school leadership on student learning.

### **The Impacts of Shared and Collaborative Leadership**

O'Neill and Conzemius (2002) found schools showing continuous improvement in student results were those whose cultures are permeated by four key aspects: (1) a shared focus, (2) reflective practices, (3) collaboration, partnerships, and (4) an ever-increasing leadership capacity. Focus is achieved when everyone reflects and shares goals, which are centered on student learning and allow the staff to know what to concentrate on.

Harris and Chapman (2002) found distributive leadership does not start from the basis of power and control. Instead, this leadership comes from the ability to act with others and to enable others to act. These authors added that distributive leadership places importance upon allowing and empowering those who are not in positions of responsibility or authority to lead. Doyle (2004) states that "new thinking about leadership helps schools develop communities of learners where everyone puts aside hierarchical ideas and adapts to roles that foster collaboration and shared decision making" (p. 198). Kruse and Seashore Louis (2009) coined the term *intensified leadership*, which combines both the descriptive and prescriptive perspectives of leadership and unavoidably includes elements of shared and servant leadership. These authors noted this leadership style is based on the belief that there is no longer a single leader or even a small leadership team, and they found leadership is enhanced by the interaction and networking of many organizational members to include teachers, parents, and the wider community.

Deal and Peterson (2009) remarked, "Leadership is at its best is shared, with everyone pulling together in a common direction" (p. 199). Seashore Louis and Wahlstrom (2011) established similar conclusions with their observation, "Schools need to build strong cultures in which many tasks of transforming schools require many leaders" (p. 52). Kaplan and Owings (2013) affirmed that "school improvement changes are better accepted, used, and sustained as compared with schools without shared leadership"

(p. 131) while Bolman and Deal (2003) asserted that “one task of leadership is to help groups develop a shared sense of direction and commitment” (p. 178). It would appear logical that tapping into the strengths of many will increase the possibility of influencing change within a culture. Kaplan and Owings (2013) indicated strong cultures are characterized by networks in which members routinely connect around shared problems and goals.

Bolman and Deal (2003) pointed out that “leadership whether shared or individual, plays a critical role in group effectiveness and individual satisfaction” (p. 179). Intensified leadership proposes that members work together to address the teaching and learning needs of the school by adopting, and employing shared, communal goals, which are based on collective values and beliefs while utilizing mutually understood methods of problem finding and resolution. Kruse and Seashore Louis (2009) argued that, by incorporating this leadership approach, schools have the potential to meet the challenges they face. Doyle (2004) noted that successful leaders can make the transition to utilizing a more collaborative approach to decision making (pp. 196-197). DuFour and Eaker (1998) endorsed the concept of collaboration on the part of teachers as the most critical factor to ensure student learning in schools and found that, while teams of teachers are one of the most effective ways to promote collaboration, time for collaboration must be entrenched within the school day, week, and year. DuFour and Eaker (1998) argued that collaboration by invitation only is ineffective.

## **The Study**

The purpose of the study upon which the current discussion is based, is to investigate the nature of the professional leadership culture in one school and to examine its relationship to student learning. This study was premised upon two broad questions:

1. What patterns relating to professional leadership culture are perceived to exist by the school level professionals in a school with a reputation for gains in student academic achievement?
2. What was the perceived relationship between aspects of this culture and student learning by school level professionals in this context?

Schein’s (2010) organizational culture and leadership model provided the theoretical support for the collection, analysis, and interpretation of the data. Schein (2010) identified three basic levels of culture—(1)artifacts, (2)espoused beliefs and values, and (3)basic underlying assumptions—separated by how easily one can visualize them and their impact on action within an organization. At the first level, artifacts depict what groups and individuals do. Artifacts are things that can be seen and touched directly, and they can be found in school colours, trophies, mascots, or slogans. The second level, beliefs, represent thoughts and actions that one should think and do or ought to think and do. This level is less visible but can be found in mission statements, philosophies, and slogans. Lastly, assumptions are elements of a culture that are unseen and not identified in everyday interactions among organizational members. Assumptions include what to pay attention to, what things mean, how to react emotionally to what is happening, and what actions to take in various kinds of situations. Assumptions provide strong communal guidelines as they tell us who we are, how to behave towards each other, and how to feel good about ourselves. A qualitative case study approach was used.

## ***System Context and Participants***

The system used was one of the largest school systems in the province at the time of the study. This school system consisted of over 40 elementary schools, 12 secondary schools, and served approximately 21,000 students employing a professional and support staff of over 2000 individuals. The school, serving a suburban neighbourhood, was staffed with 29 full-time teachers, six educational associates, one half-time library technician, one vice-principal, and one principal. To qualify to participate in this study, prospective participants had to be willing to participate in the study, currently serving as a school administrator or teacher at the school, and to have served in a professional capacity at this school for at least one year.

## ***Data Collection Methods***

Face-to-face semi-structured interviews were held with the school administrators and five teachers, and

these were used to elicit information regarding the school's professional leadership culture based on the elements of culture identified by Schein (2010). In follow up interviews, an opportunity for elaboration and further explanation of the initial information was provided. Participants' right to modify or change their information applied until all data were pooled for analysis. In this process, I followed the techniques suggested by Lincoln and Guba (1985) and summarized by Denzin and Lincoln (2011) to build trustworthiness: credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. In light of these constructs, I addressed issues of trustworthiness through my prolonged engagement in the school and system through the combination of interview and observational methods, and through careful attention to member checking where all participants read through their transcripts, provided feedback and confirmation as to their authenticity.

Formal observations were also used. Merriam (2009) suggested that observations take place in the setting where the phenomenon of interest naturally occurs and that they represent a firsthand encounter with the phenomenon of interest. Over five days, I followed a process similar to that outlined by Creswell (2007) of observation as a series of steps:

- the selection of a site to be observed and obtaining permission to gain access to the site, at the site identifying who or what to observe, when, and for how long;
- determining the role to be assumed as an observer;
- designing an observation protocol as a method for recording notes in the field;
- and recording aspects such as descriptions of the informant, physical setting, specific events and activities, as well as your own reactions (pp.134-135).

My process included observations of teachers engaged in collaborative work with other professionals via staff room interactions, professional exchanges, assessment meetings, professional development workshops, and other school contexts.

### **Data Analysis Methods**

The information that was analyzed for this study was derived from categories and themes based upon an adaptation of Saldana's *Codes-to-Theory Framework* (2013), combined with the use of NVIVO version 11 analytic software, and researcher coding methods. Categories were determined by their frequency of identification within the interview transcripts and by their identification by all or by a majority of the participants. For the determination of a majority, at least three educators needed to have identified the same common category within their interviews.

The data organization and analysis procedures employed in this study were undertaken in five stages: (1) initial reading of transcripts; (2) generation of codes and categories through the use of NVIVO 11; (3) re-reading of the transcripts to facilitate refinement; (4) ordering and selection of the categories for the purposes of reporting; and (5) evaluation of the adequacy of the data and in-depth reporting of participant voices according to main categories.

### **Findings: Participant Voice**

Professionals recognized professional leadership culture as a group phenomenon rather than an individual one. Numerous representations of the leadership culture were provided in detail by the individual participants. By far, the most pronounced and frequent representations were a practice of collaboration among professionals, a foundation of trust, and a supportive environment that included a shared belief in reciprocal communication, flexibility, and attention to member voice. These qualities were emphasized in detail by all participating members of the professional group, and it was apparent that these qualities had, over time, become significantly embedded in the culture of the school.

Individuals involved in this study talked exclusively about leadership as a group rather than an individual phenomenon. The most pronounced and frequent representations of the professional leadership culture were: collaborative activity, a climate of trust, and priority given to the support of professional work that had prevailed in the school. These findings do not indicate that there were no tensions in this environment. On the contrary, there were complaints and disagreements, and most participants voiced their recognition of this phenomenon as a professional reality.

Several artifacts representing leadership as a shared value were referred to frequently by participants as common activities and mechanisms which facilitated the professional leadership culture, and which



created an environment in which leadership was a shared value among professionals in the school. The three cultural artifacts which seemed to serve as critical catalysts for shared leadership were: (1) team meetings and grade-alike groups, (2) transparent formal and informal collaborative structures, and (3) a collective focus on student learning. In addition, an emphasis on informality allowed authentic, collaborative relationships to flourish. Several participants noted that some of the most effective collaboration occurred after-school in the hallways and classrooms and that it was this that allowed for the acceptance and appreciation for the more formal collaborative activities.

The formal gatherings of teachers for discussing instructional approaches had become a natural and indispensable practice among the professionals; one such catalyst for collaboration was team meetings and grade-alike groups. Celia commented on the belief that it is in these grade-alike groups that building a shared culture of instruction occurred with the hope of having some common instructional practices which would benefit student learning. Gwen added that she enjoyed being part of a team: "So I think that one of the great benefits of being in this school is there are more grade-alike groups to share with. So, you can collaborate, you can be with that". Gwen further noted in reference to grade-alike groups:

I would say they are all similar. We all work very well together, we're similar. We do lots of the same things, we're focused on a goal of increasing our math, doing our reading scores so that's kind of where we're, where our culture has come to.

Karen shared a similar: "I feel trusted, I feel respected. I also feel that we're encouraged to learn from each other." Karen reflected the belief that they are encouraged as part of a team to build relationships.

Some saw even greater value in the culture of collaboration that had developed. Celia found that more meaningful collaboration occurred when someone was asking for help and advice on what to do in terms of planning for a specific subject. She added her own belief that some of the most effective collaboration existed outside of the times formally scheduled for it: "I feel like a lot of our collaborating, relevant collaborating happens from 3:30 to 4 o'clock rather than times that are designated to us to collaborate." Celia commented on her belief that collaboration was more authentic, relevant, and effective via connecting with grade-alike groups rather than being forced into collaborative groups and being concerned about getting the form filled out that accompanies each collaborative inquiry team meeting.

All participants discussed collaborative teams as a common element of the professional life of the school that had emerged over time. It was this collaborative structure and a collective focus on student learning that became apparent as Jill, Colleen, and Celia paid specific attention to grade-alike groupings. Colleen commented:

I think back to the grade-alike meetings and lots of it is informal. Every day there will be some kind of informal sharing between me and the grade eight teacher. So, [on] that alone I think her and I are very much aware of what's going on in each other's classrooms, whether it is exactly the same which isn't the case, but I know what her class is working on and she knows what is going on in my room.

In short, the valuing of team deliberation did not occur by accident; it was the product of groundwork for collaboration that had been established through the initiation of formal and informal opportunities at the school and school system levels. Jill contrasted that example with a successful case of collaboration at ValleyView school. She stated:

I'll be very honest in saying that I'm very lucky that my grade-share partner and I get along very well. And, because of our relationship, we have similar expectations of the kids. Although she is a lot younger than me, she doesn't have all the experience that I have, we have the same expectation and we both have the same goals in mind. We work hard when we're here, we collaborate. This year we're even, because we are able to make up parts of our own time-table. We do subject switches, but we are also co-teaching the grade sevens.

Jill noted her preference to be in a climate that fosters collaboration among professionals as she seemed to believe that this has a positive impact on learning

Many participants were committed to supporting student learning through multiple activities, which included sharing within professional collaborative committees, reviewing school data, and having conversations about instructional strategies to address student weaknesses and vulnerabilities to improve student learning.

There was a deeply rooted concern for building capacity among the professional staff in engaging with each other on matters relating to instructional improvement. Most commonly, the staff identified

intervisitation, critical friends, mentorship, sharing expertise, and shared leadership among professionals as opportunities for building leadership capacity.

From an administrative point of view, Mark mentioned that administrators demonstrated leadership in their active enhancement of teaching practice by affirming a collective belief in teacher development and a focus on instructional improvement. He explained:

There are specific skills that all teachers need in creating an environment: managing a classroom, establishing a culture of learning, communicating with students, all the things that we do around assessment, preparing lessons and all the pieces that go with that.

These participants appreciated having the opportunity to develop their expertise by working in an environment where everyone learns. Leadership among professionals was apparent in the mentorship of new staff members, mentorship of students in the school, and mentorship of students from the university. These examples of shared leadership were also evident in my observations of various activities of the professional staff recorded in my field notes. During the process of researcher observations, shared leadership was evident in team meetings on instructional issues, as well as teacher sharing of expertise, the assumption of mentorship responsibilities toward newer and less experienced colleagues, taking a leadership role in reporting new ideas and instructional strategies from professional development experiences, serving as critical friends in the context of intervisitation, collaborative improvement teams, and grade-alike groups. It seemed that over time, a professional culture had developed in which teachers were taking on different leadership roles in terms of the work they did with students outside of their classrooms. Nevertheless, formal administrative leadership played a significant role in the development of a culture of support within which professional leadership could flourish. Teachers were taking charge and leading others within their groups during collaborative inquiry team meetings and during staff meetings to add their input or voice their concerns. These actions reiterated the overall preference of teachers in this school for activities focused on building a team in which they shared leadership.

Participants in this study naturally had their viewpoints on the formal administrative leadership of this school, though they were, by no means, exclusively positive. For example, the occasional them-us reference in the staff room conversation about administration, expressions of frustration with occasional district initiatives, and occasional complaints about the impact of changes on professional workloads represented a reality that everything within their culture was not always perceived as positive. However, a culture of honesty and transparency prevailed, and they viewed these concerns as an integral part of their professional leadership culture. Karen appreciated the openness that existed between teachers and the administration in that they were transparent with their data and results:

He's [administration] transparent about those results and sometimes I don't feel that some administrators are very forthcoming with the data and you're left wondering 'Is it my class that's not working well? Is the school not doing well or [...]?' He's very transparent and he will show me the data at the division level, he will show me some of the CAT scores where some principals might summarize and not show you the data and not be able to work with you as much.

The formal administrative leadership of the school was considered a natural aspect of the professional leadership culture. Teachers viewed the most critical aspects of the work of their administrative team as centering around three key activities: (1) leadership role extension was evident in administrators who strategically extended their involvement beyond their day-to-day formal leadership role through such actions as helping to organize extra-curricular activities, (2) enabling collaboration by giving teachers time to observe other professionals, and (3) by finding out what resources teachers needed. Teachers seemed to be keenly aware of an administrative focus on instructional development by constantly bringing research on best practices to the staff to enhance their professional learning. The principal expressed his strong belief in support for teacher learning in formal and informal ways, as he noted that it was often demonstrated in collaborative inquiry team meetings and discussions of student data:

But we sort of have a culture in our school where we talk about our data a fair bit. Once a month we have what are called CIT meetings or collaborative inquiry team meetings. And that involves grade-alike teachers getting together and saying 'Here are the 3 or 4 students in my class struggling with comprehension, literary text, subtraction...' whatever the case may be, and then what are we doing to support him or her? It's a focused conversation about learning and I think our staff would say to have that time to collaborate with their colleagues

is good. We have a very strong staff here and we try to put some supports in place for them to learn from each other and that's one of them.

An important part of the presence and sustainability of the professional leadership culture of this school was the prevailing culture of induction for new members. This aspect came in the form of formal introductions to the culture of the school through discussions and separate meetings with the administration, and less formal means such as being paired up with a mentor who would guide them through the various artifacts, beliefs, values, and underlying assumptions that governed professional lives in the school.

The overwhelming theme from this research (albeit in a variety of forms and artifacts) was the strong interdependence evident across the professional team. This evidence was based upon a common belief that no one person can change a culture or improve student learning. Instead, the perceptions of the participants seemed to reflect the fairly long-standing belief that, through forming collaborative partnerships with a shared focus on improving student learning, the opportunities for student learning will be maximized. For example, the practice of shared leadership in the form of co-teaching was viewed as a major influence on student learning at this school, and teachers exerted their influence on student learning by modelling working together (thereby increasing students' capacity to learn together), and by nurturing a culture of experimentation and risk-taking in the instructional environment. This value was exhibited via team meetings and grade-alike groupings, transparent formal and informal collaborative structures, and a collective focus on student learning.

The professionals discussed the continued impact of cooperative, participative decision making, particularly around the use of data in terms of helping individual student needs, interpreting results, and deciding what needs to happen next. Teachers also agreed that administrative leadership built on the sharing of leadership between teachers and administration had an indirect influence on student learning, mainly through administrative collaboration and through the priority given to support for teachers.

In this school, collaboration was viewed as being one of the most significant pieces in the pattern of improving culture. All the participants commented on the belief in collaboration as a means of building a culture in which they relied on each other, which meant that the school's efforts at improving student learning were expanded rather than duplicated.

Study participants were also emphatic in their remarks about the part played by professionals in the sharing of leadership and the improvement of communication as factors that had an impact on student learning. These participants noted that by planning together, they were able to share ideas about what somebody else tried, what worked, and what did not work. Through this collaborative sharing, the participants hoped that they would have a positive impact on improving student learning.

These findings may well appear to describe an environment devoid of conflict, disagreement, or dissonance, and this is certainly not the case from the in-depth reporting of participant voices. Participants were not always happy with everything in this school. From these voices, three key findings emerged: (1) resentment of system-mandated collaboration, (2) a perceived rigid policy structure, and (3) implementation of system initiatives without consultation.

Participants acknowledged the importance of formal collaboration as a means of improving instruction, but some stressed that some of their best successes in improving student learning occurred through informal collaborations, such as hallway conversations. At times, there was evidence of tensions in relation to the forced nature of collaborative activity. Nonetheless, such activity was frequently viewed by participating professionals as a central factor in the development of shared leadership, which came in the form of sharing ideas, resources, and helping other professionals learn new key concepts related to instruction. However, participants acknowledged that collaborative activity was, at times, not always the preferred choice, but it was a choice that had to be respected.

Discussions with participants revealed dissent and differences of opinion which were evident with the policies and beliefs of the system, and, consequently, not everyone agreed that this process was beneficial. Some participants resented how the school system exerted its presence as a major influence on the professional leadership culture of the school by requiring its members to complete report forms after collaborative meetings. Some participants viewed these forms as an intrusive waste of time and a lack of trust by the system in their professional judgment.

Arguably, a good school is like a family, and, consequently, there are bound to be disagreements among various members as they grow and strive for independence. Some participants resented the notion



that they were coerced and felt obligated to follow the system-imposed regulations even if they did not agree with that particular system initiative. Some participants reported their annoyance with continued reference to educational research by school leaders in an attempt to provide validation for system initiatives, but with no further opportunities for discussion or debate being permitted among its professional members on the worthiness or applicability of the aforementioned research. Additionally, some participants expressed their belief that their dissenting voices were not being heard or acknowledged. I find this realization as ironic as effective cultures of interdependence relies on having independent voices. Consequently, the perceptions of the participants demonstrated their belief(s) in the need for occasional disagreement as a means of sharing their voice(s) and establishing their independence while still relying on support at the classroom, school, and system level.

### **Toward a Conceptualization of Democratic Leadership**

The results of the study indicate that the qualities described above—namely, distributive leadership, cooperative partnerships, shared expertise, interdependence, trust, reciprocal communication, and collaborative efforts—were representations of a broader phenomenon of democratic leadership. This finding was so prevalent throughout this study that it warranted deeper consideration as a broader and encompassing concept that demands explication. I will elaborate on democratic leadership as it has been represented via these qualities.

This study is a conceptualization of democratic leadership in a school, not a government, context, and while classic definitions of democratic leadership place it squarely in a government context, this study analyzes a broader interpretation of the term. While the major focus is on a specific group of professionals and formal leaders in a school, it should be noted that a school naturally has more than just teachers. There is a need for representation and participation from students, parents, and community groups as well. Therefore, the concept of democracy has been delimited in this study to the professional group within the school. For the purposes of this conceptualization, I define democratic leadership as a team-oriented, normative process in which members of the professional team take a substantive role in the decision-making process relating the vision of the school and the initiatives designed to achieve this vision. Everyone is given the opportunity to participate, ideas are exchanged freely, and discussion is encouraged. I define democratic leadership culture as the shared accomplishment of professional goals through the continuous engagement of voices among school professionals as a group, which is naturally integrated with formal administrative arrangements.

Doyle (2004) suggested that successful leaders could make the transition to utilizing a more collaborative approach concerning decision-making. I suggest that democratic leadership, at its best, operates alongside formal administrative leadership in a broader professional culture that taps the skills and expertise of individuals and groups within the school and reaches out to its stakeholders as sources of insight and vision.

Based upon a retrospective analysis of the findings of this study and ideas from related literature as discussed above, a conceptualization of the constituent concepts inherent in democratic leadership in professional contexts is proposed. To summarize, these core concepts are illustrated in Figure 1.

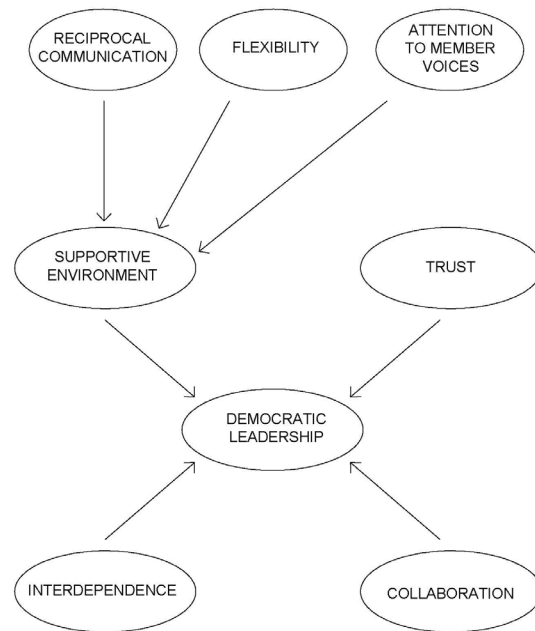


Figure 1. Democratic Leadership: A Conceptualization

As illustrated in Figure 1, encircling the central phenomena of democratic leadership are four core concepts, namely: (1) interdependence across the partnership team; (2) collaboration as a means of building a culture that nurtures collective reliance; (3) trust in building positive relationships among professionals, formal leaders, and groups; and (4) a pervasive supportive environment with a shared focus on the priority devoted to improving student learning. In turn, these core concepts are reinforced by the enabling qualities of reciprocal communication, flexibility, and attention to member voice(s) that figured so prominently as a supportive subculture. Within this environment, reciprocal communication between formal leaders and teachers is evident in their various interactions, as is their flexibility in adapting to new system initiatives, paying attention to partner voice(s), and to strategies and new initiatives that might have a positive impact on student learning.

In the following sections, I examine the implications of the discussion for democratic leadership in action and finally discuss issues related to the task of building leadership capacity for democratic leadership.

### Building Leadership Capacity for Democratic Professional Leadership

Many participants in the initial study commented on the common belief that they can exert their influence on student learning by modeling *working together*. The participants commented on the belief that they assumed a variety of leadership roles in terms of the work they did with students. All the participants reflected the belief that everyone should have a leadership voice within the school and also within a broader community context of mutual support. Kaplan and Owings (2013) argued it is naïve to think that principals can carry the burden of school leadership and school improvement by themselves. The authors further elaborated that such an approach is unsustainable and does not promote organizational improvement. The first and only standard for judging the success of schools and the education system should be how well every child learns. This finding, in turn, is directly related to leadership culture in a school.

Findings from this study suggested successful communication and shared leadership practices were, in themselves, support for further success as these practices deepened and extended knowledge and expertise amongst professionals. Shared leadership was perceived to impact student learning in three major

ways: by increasing the collective focus on student learning; by modelling working together, (thereby increasing students' capacity to learn together); and by nurturing a culture of experimentation and risk-taking in the instructional environment. The single, most frequently expressed impact of administrative leadership on student learning was, quite simply, its role in supporting teachers to focus more effectively on student learning.

Kaplan and Owings (2013) indicated strong cultures are characterized by networks in which members routinely connect around shared problems and goals. Study participants were emphatic in their remarks about the importance of sharing leadership and communication as factors that had an impact on student learning. They noted by planning together, they are able to share ideas about what somebody else tried, what worked, what does not work, and that you can try different things that will hopefully have a positive impact on improving student learning. This finding is relevant to leadership capacity building, as it points to literature that identified that school leadership is an interdependent phenomenon. O'Neill and Conzemius (2002) found schools showing continuous improvement in student results were those whose cultures are permeated by four key aspects: (1) a shared focus, (2) reflective practices, (3) collaborative partnerships, and (4) an ever-increasing leadership capacity.

*Focus* is achieved when everyone reflects and shares goals that are focused on student learning and allows the staff to know what to focus on. Findings from my study would support this notion of a culture permeated by the aforementioned four key aspects. *Reflective practice* was displayed through my observations of the communicative interactions amongst the professionals at staff meetings and continuous improvement team meetings, both of which focused on improving student learning. Teachers were engaged in reviewing student data, having discussions around possible strategies to improve their students' learning, and focusing on implementing an individualized plan unique for each teacher. They reflected the belief that shared leadership was based on recognizing that no single individual in government, school administration, or teaching possessed all the knowledge, skills, or talent to achieve meaningful and lasting change. Consequently, nurturing democratic leadership amongst stakeholders may well be a key vehicle for building capacity and, in turn, for improving school culture and student learning.

### **Implications of the Study for Practising Democratic Leadership**

Democratic leadership has been defined earlier as a team-oriented process in which the professional team has a role in the decision-making process relating to the vision of the school as they work towards improving student learning. But the question remains: How do school leaders operationalize the quality of democratic leadership? From my findings, and the related literature, numerous implications for in-school professional democratic leadership emerge:

1. Active and sustained attention to the creation and maintenance of a culture of professional collaboration.
2. Promotion of leadership as a shared value throughout the organization.
3. Structuring formal and informal opportunities for professional sharing and interaction.
4. Ongoing attention to building capacity for leadership among school groups.
5. The creation of a focus on mentorship as a school-wide norm.
6. An understanding of the relationship between formal administrative leadership and other forms of leadership as integral to the professional leadership culture.
7. An appreciation for the impacts of leadership in all its forms upon student learning.
8. Continued attention to the effectiveness and appropriateness of decision-making mechanisms within the professional group.
9. Continued appreciation for the critical value of the voices of all participants in the wider community of the school.
10. Appreciation and active attention to communication as a prerequisite for authentic democratic leadership.

While a central focus for democratic leadership is to adopt a shared vision, other foci include the development, support, and empowering of others. Enhancing a school's culture is a challenging task. Increased attention to what matters is important because teachers within the school take numerous leadership roles in terms of the work they do inside and outside of their classrooms. Democratic leaders share the belief that a collaborative culture is essential to engaging teachers in creating and maintaining a safe, healthy, and respectful workplace that builds trust and mutual respect. There is value in recognizing that

teachers are leaders within the school and not solely in their classroom. Accepting shared leadership as having a significant impact on student learning was evident from the study, and this thought is central to any practice centered on improving student learning.

## Conclusion

Democratic leadership is one of a multitude of leadership styles that exist. However, Beerbohm (2015) noted leadership is not an accordion concept. I am not indicating that democratic leadership has no caveats in its in-school leadership context. On the contrary, there are many situations where democratic leadership would not be the mode of choice. Contingency theory had much to say on that topic, but in a general school context, perhaps democratic leadership, in its various forms (shared, distributive, etc.), can improve participation, morale, and quality of life. It is for future research to provide insight into these questions. Leadership affects everything that goes on in a school, and the quality of that leadership is critical. There is much to be achieved when the conversation focuses on tapping the leadership potential in everybody involved in order to bring these possibilities to reality. Schools, as professional organizations, can accomplish these aims in an environment where the fundamental principles of democratic leadership are understood.

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