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Researching Holistic Democracy in Schools

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Abstract

Bradley-Levine reported in her article how she created an opportunity to explore research data with the aim of examining the degree to which New Tech schools were democratic in the sense conceptualized by the notion of holistic democracy. My response is in three parts. The first sets out my understanding of the significance of the model of holistic democracy and the purpose of the framework. The second is a review of Bradley-Levine's findings, with reflections that occurred to me as I worked through these. The third comprises my conclusions. The framework has been applied, in my judgement, in a diligent and systematic way, enabling the creation of a profile of schools showing where indicators of holistic democracy are present and where critical inquiry and further research and reflective dialogue would be worthwhile. My review of Bradley-Levine's account and analysis also suggests that further work on the conceptual clarity of the framework would be helpful in improving its usefulness.

This article is in response to

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The question of what constitutes a democratic life, and more specifically what a democratic approach to daily practice in schools may look like, is a persistently challenging one. The aspiration to translate democratic principles into practice is ambitious. Democracy, I would argue (Woods, 2016), seeks to enable people to be cocreators of their social environment and, through this, make the most of their innate capacity to learn and to develop their highest capabilities and ethical sensibilities. It is perpetually under pressure because it challenges assumptions about the purpose of education, such as the dominance of economistic priorities. It is vulnerable to opposition from those who have greater legitimacy, authority, and influence through less democratic ways of governance.

I have approached the question of democracy and education through a critical exploration of the notion of distributed leadership, which led to my articulating the idea of holistic democracy as I sought to clarify the distinction between distributed and democratic leadership. In "Examination of the New Tech Model as a Holistic Democracy," Bradley-Levine and Mosier (2017) have taken both the spirit and meaning of holistic democracy, and the related degrees of democracy framework, and examined the latter's usefulness in learning more about the extent to which democratic

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features are apparent in the schools where they were conducting research. They created an opportunity to use data, collected for the purpose of evaluating new tech (NT) schools, in order to examine the degree to which these NT schools were democratic in the sense conceptualized by holistic democracy. My response to the article is in three parts. The first sets out my understanding of the significance of the model of holistic democracy and the purpose of the framework. The second is a review of the findings, following the systematic approach used in the article, with reflections that occurred to me as I worked through the findings.

Finally, I summarize my conclusions concerning the work reported in the article. The conceptual intensity of the framework sets a challenging task for the researcher, which Bradley-Levine and Mosier (2017) rose to. The framework has been used and reported in a diligent and systematic way and has proved useful in creating a profile of schools showing in what ways indicators of holistic democracy are present and where critical enquiry and further research and reflective dialogue would be worthwhile. My review of Bradley-Levine and Mosier's account and analysis also suggests that further work on the conceptual clarity of the framework would be helpful in improving its usefulness.

The Significance and Purpose of Holistic Democracy and the Degrees of Democracy Framework

The notion of holistic democracy is rooted in a tradition that carries a rich conception of democracy. There are many contributions and strands of thinking in this tradition, exploring the individual aspect of goodness (an innate potential which the person may nurture and develop), the social aspect of goodness (an attribute that is forged and expressed in our relationships), and the interrelationship between these aspects (see, for example, Dallmayr, 2007, pp. 1–2). I have found it helpful to draw upon the strand of thinking that is expressed through a line of political and philosophical thought that passes through the work of T. H. Green, which influenced Dewey (Boucher & Vincent, 2000, p. 15), and includes among its sources ideas forged in the revolutionary times of the 17th century (Woods, 2003, 2006). Three facets are significant for understanding and creating this rich democracy. The first is the individual or subjective root of democracy. This is the personal potential for growth in self-consciousness and ethical sensibilities and the capacity to develop that potential. Freedom—in the sense of developing an ability to make one's own decisions with an awareness of oneself—is integral to this process (Woods, 2017). The second is the intersubjective aspect. The freeing of human potential is not solely a matter of individual effort. Personal growth involves interacting, connecting, and empathizing with fellow beings and the world around them, and learning with and from other people. The third concerns governance and how social living is regulated. The imposition of belief and direction is inconsistent with fostering personal growth and freedom. People should not be reducible to being dependent followers of requirements and ways of life forced upon them. Means of participating in the creation of the social environment in which we live and holding to account those who exercise power over that environment are essential to living a human life. These aspects underpin holistic democracy, which is theorized through the four dimensions of holistic learning, power sharing, transforming dialogue, and holistic well-being.

The intention behind my work on democratic leadership and holistic democracy has been not only to address the world of ideas but also to offer ways of working with these ideas so that they inform practitioners' and policymakers' research, enquiry, and self-evaluation of practice. Dominant policy pressures in countries such as the United States and England place the greatest priority on measures of attainment that reduce evaluation to simplistic, numerical gradings. The intensity of focus on such measures is criticized by many scholars who argue that "academic achievement is overemphasized to the detriment of other benefits of schooling . . . [and] that the perseveration on high-stakes achievement testing and resulting prescriptions for teacher practice not only undermine teacher professionalism, but they also impede social justice work" (Capper & Young, 2014, p. 16). The degrees of democracy framework was formulated with the aim of being an aid to a developmental and participative assessment of practice by professional educators, researchers and others, including students. It was designed both as an analytical framework and as a means of facilitating critical reflection, dialogue, and action planning. Accordingly, it provides an orientation to the different aspects of a democratic policy and practice informed by a rich view of what democracy means. It is designed to be adaptable, so it can be employed both as a research instrument and as a means for school stakeholders to generate assessments that stimulate constructive dialogue on possibilities and priorities for practical change. Full and condensed versions of the framework have been used with practitioners in professional and leadership development sessions in the United Kingdom, the United States, and Europe. An assessment of this experience was published in Woods and Woods (2013).

Review of Bradley-Levine and Mosier's Analysis and Findings

Bradley-Levine and Mosier's (2017) article adds to the experience in using the framework and its assessment as an instrument for analysis and critical reflection. The work reported in the article is an example of its use as a research instrument. Bradley-Levine and Mosier grasped well the spirit of holistic democracy, emphasizing it as "a collaborative process through which each person develops more fully when in spiritual and ecological communion with others" (Bradley-Levine & Mosier, 2017, pp. 3–4) and carefully outlining the constituent dimensions and variables of the framework. The analysis is structured in a systematic way, addressing each dimension and its variables in turn. Through this, a valuable profile of the schools is built up. In this section, I summarize that profile as I read it from Bradley-Levine and Mosier's analysis and draw attention to issues concerning the interpretation and clarity of the framework.

Regarding holistic learning, the data suggest that the *principal organizational purpose* of the schools is concerned with the attainment of state standards. Prominent among the *knowledge goals* appears to be the learning of skills—practical

accomplishments in activities such as collaborative working, communication, technology use, and problem solving. The discussion of engagement below adds to what the study says about knowledge goals. In relation to *methods of teaching and creating knowledge*, there is evidence of project-based pedagogy and crossing subject boundaries as ways of enhancing learning. Resistance by some teachers was also found, especially where they felt that the pressure to attain state standards was in tension with project-based approaches to teaching.

The discussion of *modes of learning* reinforces the crossing of boundaries—applying learning to real-life situations and to social and environmental challenges. It has more to say about the methods of teaching than the kind of learning taking place, however. The modes of learning variable is about the extent to which not only cognitive capabilities (reasoning, logical analysis, means-ends decision-making) are used in the process of learning but also aesthetic, ethical, spiritual, intuitive, and physical capabilities. The evidence discussed under modes of learning is slight concerning the extent to which students are encouraged to use all of these capabilities. This is doubtless due to the limitations of the data being collected for a different purpose. It also highlights a challenge in using the framework, concerning how data and reflections on students' modes of learning can best be generated.

Turning to the dimension of power sharing, the *authority structure* was found to have a marked distributed character. Everyday practice by teachers was reported not to be dominated by hierarchical authority but allowed high degrees of distributed leadership facilitated by trust. Lateral accountability—students holding each other to account—was also found. The teachers' accounts and the researchers' observations provide an interesting glimpse of the authority relationships in these schools. Concerning *spaces for participation*, an array of spaces was found for students and for teachers to participate, demonstrating the variety of ways in which voice might be expressed. The *scope of participation* was not necessarily limited to operational matters in the classroom. There was evidence of contributions to school policy-making and of collaborative ideas-sharing by teachers. At the same time, limitations to the scope of participation were apparent. In particular, teachers and community members were not involved in the major policy decision to adopt NT status, and this had negative consequences for some NT schools.

Power sharing, and its constituent aspects, is a dimension of the schools where it would be particularly valuable to have more in-depth and critically questioning insight into the day-to-day realities of school life. This would enable fuller probing of questions concerning, for example, who feels most included and able to exercise autonomy, who feels marginalized, what the limits of autonomy are, and how the spaces for participation work in practice.

In relation to transforming dialogue, there were relatively brief discussions of *communication flows* and *key purpose of dialogue*. This may be because the data threw less light on these variables. If power sharing is about how much and in what forms influence is exercised by different school members, the transforming dialogue variables concern the nature of the exchanges that take place between people. Under communication flows, experience of sharing ideas and feelings was reported by teachers—both among themselves and with their directors. What is not so clear is how extensive this was among teachers and how much one-way communication also occurred from senior leaders, especially directive communications requiring actions and setting agendas within which teachers worked. Very little insight is given to students in terms of communications flows. The second variable—the key purpose of dialogue—puts the spotlight on the degree to which exchanges are about the functional passing of information (such as giving information or feedback, issuing or clarifying instructions) or transforming dialogue (such as bringing different, sometimes conflicting views to the surface from which new understanding emerges). The discussion concentrates on opportunities given for student feedback. As a result, a specific form of dialogue is highlighted, offering an informative insight into the value placed on such feedback, but other kinds of dialogue are not addressed.

The discussion of *engagement* (referred to as "depth of participation" in Woods, 2011) focuses on ways on which students and teachers are celebrated for certain attributes or rewarded for their academic success and other achievements. Bradley-Levine and Mosier (2017) recognized that engagement concerns the kind of personal participation valued by the school—whether participation is transactional (driven by the expectation of personal gain) or more holistic (in which the person engages as a whole person who brings ethical, aesthetic and other capabilities into their school activity). The discussion seems to throw light as much on the knowledge goals under holistic learning as engagement. The examples cited show a concern to value students' development of characteristics such as trust, respect, compassion, and initiative, which contribute to a more holistic development of knowledge and learning. These, then, are some of the knowledge goals of the schools. Evidence of students and teachers participating as whole persons, not just as instrumentally motivated role holders, is less clear. That may point to an issue concerning the conceptual clarity of the engagement variable, or the challenges in its interpretation, as much as the limitations of the data available. The community and mindset variables, discussed below, also throw light on engagement.

An important critical point emerged from the analysis concerning a reward system that enabled students to earn privileges for academic success and other achievements. There was some frustration about this felt by some students and teachers where, for example, rewarding students by enabling them to choose their own group members led to the grouping of high-achieving students, which was seen as working to the detriment of others. This demonstrates the value of exploring critically from differing viewpoints the practice of schemes that appear to advance a more holistic and participative approach to schooling.

I turn now to the final dimension, holistic well-being. This refers to people's social and individual experience within the school environment. To what extent are they part of an environment where there is a sense of belonging, community, and connectedness—spiritually and ecologically, with nature—and where individuality, confidence, and the capacity to think and feel for oneself are promoted? The discussion of *community* highlights ways in which

the schools developed a sense of trust and respect for diversity and how more positive and relaxed interactions were possible between students and teachers. Difficulties in sustaining the desired community climate were found too, such as the effect that new, incoming teachers had because of their unfamiliarity with the community vision being aspired to. A contrast is made in the conceptual construction of community in the framework (Woods and Woods, 2012) between instrumental belonging (in which ego-centred and instrumental motives are dominant) and organic belonging (in which unity through diversity is expressed in rich caring relationships and strong affective bonds). The degree to which the NT school communities are more like one than the other is a challenging question to address as there many subtleties and variations in the complex relationships that occur across schools everyday. There is also a conceptual overlap with the engagement variable where transactional participation is characterised by an instrumental approach. This adds to the methodological challenge of exploring and distinguishing between the engagement and community variables.

The *personal* variable concerns the individual's sense of connection encouraged or facilitated by the organisation. The discussion of the data reports how most teachers engaged in interactions that 'float' between formal and informal interactions. This is an interesting characterization of relationships and how the fixedness of (at least) some boundaries was found to be significantly diminished in the NT schools. What the discussion does not address is the fuller connectedness that is posited as part of the personal variable. Connectedness refers to the sense of unity with the self, other people, the natural world and the senses and feelings, often referred to as spiritual, through which depths of meanings are explored. It is grounded in the conceptualisation of holistic democracy and the idea of the person as a being who is inherently part of all reality, though the awareness and practice of that inherent human condition may vary between people, contexts and periods of life. The community variable is specifically focused on the social aspect of that inherent connection. By comparison, the personal variable gives prominence to a wider sense of connectedness that may be nurtured to a greater or lesser extent by a school. The variables are useful, I would argue, as an analytical distinction. In practice, they are closely intertwined and involve taxing methodological challenges in undertaking research utilizing the framework.

The discussion of the *mindset* variable emphasizes first of all a commitment of NT teachers to students. While recognizing the value of this commitment, mindset is about the degree to which an ingrained habit of relying on or deferring to authority as a source of direction and purpose—a compliant mindset—is fostered, or a democratic consciousness that values critical, independent thinking and the enhancement of self-awareness as part of the pursuit of social justice. As Bradley-Levine and Mosier (2017) continued the mindset analysis, they pointed to features of the teachers' account that are indicative of this more democratic consciousness. Teachers consciously look to a "bigger picture" that includes critical reflection, reshaping their practice and engaging students in collaborative processes. The data give indicators of a changing mindset that helps to create and sustain the collaborative, boundary-crossing teaching methods and the more distributed authority referred to above. How firmly embedded and sustainable that more democratic mindset is, the data available cannot show.

The data discussed under mindset have a possible relevance to engagement. The commitment to students and the practice of giving extra time to them may be indicative of holistic participation, which is a feature of the engagement variable. Once again, the data do not necessarily fit neatly into the conceptual distinctions which the variables represent. To a degree, this is inevitable as the messiness of real-life does not neatly follow the boundaries of analytical conceptual distinctions.

Conclusion

The process of reading and reflecting on Bradley-Levine and Mosier's (2017) use of the framework and their analysis of data through its conceptual lens has been a valuable and testing process for me. It has presented a profile of the NT schools that I feel is a helpful prompt to dialogue and further enquiry about the democratic nature of these schools. I summarize below this profile and key questions that are prompted by my review for each dimension.

We see, regarding holistic learning, a focus on the attainment of state standards and on the learning of skills, but also evidence of project-based pedagogy and crossing subject boundaries which is consistent with holistic democracy—though these boundary-spanning methods are found sometimes to be in tension with the pressure to achieve standards, and there is less insight into modes of learning. What could be done to enhance aspirations toward holistic learning, including attention to facilitating use of all the modes of learning available to students and teachers (their cognitive, aesthetic, ethical and other capabilities)?

We see, regarding power sharing, perceptions of high degrees of distributed leadership facilitated by trust, but limitations in, for example, the scope of participation. How deep and inclusive is the distributed leadership culture and where can it be improved?

We see, regarding transforming dialogue, some indicators of a culture in which ideas and feelings can be shared and of consultation and feedback being facilitated, but there is limited insight into the depth of participation and how much top-down, functional communication surrounds the sharing and consultation. What more information and reflection would help in assessing the extent of transforming dialogue that characterises the everyday life of the NT schools?

We see, regarding holistic well-being, indications of a sense of trust and respect for diversity in the schools and instances where more positive and relaxed interactions were possible between students and teachers, as well indicators of changes towards a more democratic mindset, but the wider connectedness is not addressed. How strong and widely shared is the sense of community and a more democratic mindset, and how could insight be gained into the degree to which teachers and students feel ecologically and spiritually connected?

I have previously worked collaboratively on a systematic examination of the framework and the experience of its use, reported in Woods and Woods (2013). This report drew attention, among other things, to the challenge in conveying to people the multiple,

interconnecting concepts that make up the holistic democracy model. The framework is, in this sense, conceptually intense. Reviewing the systematic analysis by Bradley-Levine and Mosier (2017) has enabled me to come afresh to the dimensions and variables through the eyes of another researcher and an unfamiliar data set.

A theme that recurred as I read the account of the analysis concerned the conceptual robustness and interconnections of the elements that make up the framework. In the previous section, I highlighted some of the overlaps and fluid boundaries between the variables that suggested themselves to me. The engagement variable related in different ways to three other variables. Firstly, the discussion of engagement had something to say about knowledge goals. Secondly, there is a conceptual overlap between the engagement and community variables through the concept of instrumentality: Transactional participation as a form of engagement is characterized by an instrumental approach, and an instrumental motivation to being part of school community is distinguished from an organic sense of belonging in the community. This overlap is consistent with the challenge to democratic community of instrumental ways of living that privilege calculative assessments and the maximisation of individual gain as guides to how to behave. So it is not surprising that it occurs in more than one variable where relationships are key.

Thirdly, engagement was also related to mindset. I suggested that the commitment to students and the practice of giving extra time to students, discussed under mindset, may be indicative of holistic participation which is one way in which engagement may be approached. The engagement and mindset variables are both concerned with an aspect of people's inner life and outlook. The engagement variable is focusing on the depth of their participation in the school and its activities. That is, it is focused on the how far they bring an identity that is instrumentally driven and constrained by the perspective of a given organizational role and how far they bring a wider human or professional identity that informs the practice of participation. The mindset variable is focusing on the degree to which a compliant or democratic mindset tends to be encouraged by the school environment in which they are situated. The engagement and mindset variables bring to the fore different aspects of the person.

The conceptual overlaps of the variables add to the methodological challenges of using the framework. A similar challenge arises with the community and personal variables. They are both about being connected. As pointed out above, the community variable is focused on social belonging. The personal variable is concerned with a wider sense of connectedness (with the self, other people, the natural world, and the senses and feelings often referred to as spiritual) that may be nurtured to a greater or lesser extent by a school. The argument for having both variables in the framework is two-fold. Firstly, holistic connectedness (the personal variable) is essential as a component of the rich conception of democracy. Secondly, social belonging is of such compelling importance in people's everyday lives that it should in addition be separately recognised, since it would be underserved by being included only in the idea of holistic connectedness. It could be that the methodological challenge of these two variables is exacerbated by the label *personal*, which perhaps does not best represent the meaning of that variable. In other words, rather than *personal*, the variable might more appropriately be labelled *connectedness*, denoting the wider scope of this variable as compared with the community variable.

The conceptual intensity of the framework means that operationalising it in research and enquiry is a challenging exercise. Bradley-Levine and Mosier (2017) rose to this challenge by adopting a methodical approach to its application, diligently progressing through each variable. I conclude that, in the systematic way it has been used and reported in the article, the framework has proved useful in creating a profile of the democratic nature of the schools studied. There are limitations to the data, with the result that not all the aspects of each variable are addressed. The profile that has been generated nevertheless suggests in what ways indicators of holistic democracy are present and where critical enquiry and further research and reflective dialogue would be worthwhile in relation to those schools.

My reflections on the systematic analysis by Bradley-Levine and Mosier (2017) also suggest where further attention to the conceptual clarity of the elements of the framework would be helpful in improving its usefulness for practitioners, policymakers, and researchers. I would highlight from the above discussion the importance of recognizing that:

- data relevant to *engagement* (the kind of personal participation valued by the school) need to be carefully distinguished from data relevant to *knowledge goals* (the kinds of knowledge and development prioritised in learning);
- the *methods of teaching and creating knowledge* variable concerns the form that pedagogical activities take, which may include cocreation across boundaries in more democratic settings, while the *modes of learning* variable refers to the kinds of capabilities (cognitive, aesthetic, ethical, and so on) that learners are encouraged to use in those activities;
- instrumentality is a pervading theme that can affect how numerous variables, such as the *engagement* and *community* variables, are reflected in practice;
- the *engagement* and *mindset* variables bring to the fore different aspects of the person (the former concerns how far people bring an instrumental, role-governed identity and how far a wider human or professional identity to their participation, and the latter concerns the degree to which a compliant or democratic mindset tends to be encouraged by the school environment); and
- the *community* variable is specifically focused on social belonging, while the *personal* variable is concerned with a wider sense of connectedness (with the self, other people, the natural world, and the senses and feelings often referred to as spiritual): It may help to consider the latter as the "connectedness" variable, to make the distinction clearer.

Bradley-Levine and Mosier's (2017) research and the results of this review will aid future applications of the holistic democracy model.

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