Strangers when we meet: Can Students and Teachers Really Build ‘Trust’ and Capacity for Distributing Leadership?

David Morris

Paper presented at the British Educational Research Association Annual Conference, University of Manchester, 4-6 September 2012

Abstract

This paper seeks to define what is meant by distributed leadership and aims to determine the characteristics which enable distributed leadership to become functional in the daily practice of running a school. It also considers the factors which help oil the cogs and wheels which drive current models of distributed practice into place within educational settings in the 21st Century. Using Bourdieu’s notions of habitus, field, capital and symbolic power, the concept of extending distributed leadership to include students as leaders is also explored. Although “trust” emerges as a key element in the distribution of leadership, evidence from the research findings presented here, however, suggests that whatever measures are put into place, distributed leadership cannot be a truly democratic process. Finally, this paper questions the extent to which distributed leadership is driven by political agendas, and how current education systems may, in fact, be merely a vehicle for re-enforcing and perpetuating Bourdieu’s notion of social reproduction.

Introduction

This study not only attempts to define Distributed Leadership [DL] but also considers the conditions needed for DL to take place. More significantly, the complexity of DL will be explored within the context of Bourdieu’s notions of habitus, field and capital, as well as entertaining his concept of how the education system facilitates social reproduction. Bourdieu’s theoretical frameworks will also serve to underpin the debate presented here, as well as providing a diagnosis for some of the more “problematic” features of the current political playing field, including contesting Michael Gove’s belief that we are currently entering into a ‘post-bureaucratic age’ (Gove, 2010a, p.14). The complexity and dynamics of DL will then be scrutinised with a particular focus on the implications for building capacity for DL from the perspective of other key stake holders in the field of education – in this case, the student body.
Defining Distributed Leadership

The concept of DL would appear to be in vogue (Leithwood et al., 2007) and ‘is a term that is increasingly being used to describe approaches to school leadership’ which are considered to be ‘conducive to school improvement’ in a climate where the nature of the context in which schools operate has become increasingly ‘complex’ (Ritchie and Woods, 2007, p.363). Although there is a significant level of interest in the notion of “distributing leadership” there is a degree of uncertainty as to ‘what distributed leadership actually means’ (Leithwood et al., 2007, p. 38). Ritchie and Woods (2007) recognise that DL ‘is not a single phenomenon’ and that this in itself ‘problematises’ the process of trying to define it, and that rather it may be better to consider DL in terms of its ‘agental and structural dimensions’ (p. 378). To begin with, there seems to be consensus in the literature that ‘it is becoming less and less helpful to equate leadership solely with individuals’ (National College for School Leadership [NCSL – now known as the National College], 2005, p.7) and that increasingly the single “heroic” leader has been replaced by ‘activities and interactions’ which are perpetuated and distributed by a number of people across a range of situations (Timperley, 2005, p.395). As Brookes and Grint (2010) point out, ‘if we are faced in the public sector with complex (Wicked) problems that require a collective response then we argue that public leadership should reflect a collective leadership style in which the responsibility for leaders is distributed throughout each organisation’ (p. 7).

The ways in which leadership may be distributed within an organisation, however, also seems to be unclear, given that the term distributed leadership ‘means different things to different people’ (Timperley, 2005, p. 396). MacBeath (2005), acknowledges that the notion of school leadership is traditionally associated with ‘one person’ and therefore inherently implies ‘lone leadership’ (p. 349) although the National College [NC], according to Wallace et al. (2011), openly promote ‘distributed’ and ‘collaborative’ leadership in order to facilitate ‘a shared systematic culture that underpins the collective endeavour to achieve transformational goals’ (p. 275). Gronn (2003) argues that in today’s complex educational setting, the traditional heroic leader will struggle because the organisational culture of schools has become increasingly complex and that this has led to ‘a web of leadership activities’ which are spanned ‘across people and situations’ (Leithwood et al., 2006, p.46). It is helpful here to consider Woods et al. (2004) and their notion of DL being grounded in a culture of trust and knowledge rather than being based on hierarchical position. Timperley (2005) suggests that ‘leadership in schools is almost inevitably distributed’ and that the fundamental question which remains is ‘how leadership activities are distributed’ (p. 397). Hatcher (2005) supports this approach in the sense that he recognises that ‘the knowledge required to solve complex problems is dispersed throughout organisations’ and that all members of staff ‘can contribute to the exercise of influence’ (p. 254).
Although the above analysis may appear straightforward, this paper argues that the conditions for enabling DL are more complex than they seem and that culture and cultural capital, along with Bourdieu’s notions of habitus and field play a key part in determining how DL may or may not evolve in schools.

**Conditions for Enabling Distributed Leadership**

Throughout the literature on DL, the word *trust* crops up with a high degree of regularity. The NC (2010) consider trust to be ‘a crucial element’ in forming professional relationships between headteachers and staff and that mistrust leads to suspicion and the eroding of relationships (p. 12). According to MacBeath (2005), however, ‘trust presents the most acute of dilemmas’ for headteachers in the sense that ‘trusting others to deliver implies a risk’ because ultimately they hold responsibility for others’ actions (p. 353). Trust, according to Ritchie and Woods (2007), on the other hand, is a critical condition because staff need to ‘feel trusted and well supported’ by their headteacher (p. 371) although as far as heads are concerned, their priority is to ensure that ‘the “right” team [is] in place’ and that ‘the right people [are] on the bus’ (ibid. p. 375). Woods *et al.* (2004) also concur with this notion of trust in the sense that they see it as being central to a team working towards a shared set of goals. As far as Leithwood *et al.* (2007) are concerned, trust also needs to be founded on ‘gut feelings’ when trusting ‘the motives of one’s leadership colleagues’ (p. 41) although there is a danger of trust being ‘misplaced or betrayed’ (MacBeath, 2005, p. 353) and therefore, in the policy-driven environment of schools, ‘trust comes with a cautious caveat’ (ibid. p.353). Trust, however, ‘is a pre-condition for risk-taking and change’ and ultimately ‘successful distributed leadership relies on the willingness of headteachers to relinquish power’ (NCSL, 2010a, p.12).

Following from this springboard of *trust* there is a leap of faith into the territory of the me-too-you-too principle (Leeuw, 2001). Such an approach is not new, and MacBeath (2005) cites Rogers (1969) who neatly encapsulates this idea as a form of ‘symbiosis . . . in which there exists an implicit give and take and a level of mutual respect’ that ‘has a more organic quality than delegation alone’ (MacBeath p. 354). Hallinger and Heck (2003) suggest that taking such an approach when it comes to *trusting* others is essential because ‘achieving results through others is the essence of leadership’ (p. 229) and requires ‘an ability to relinquish one’s role as ultimate decision maker’ (MacBeath, 2005, p. 355). Furthermore, Penlington *et al.* (2008), argue that for DL to be effective, ‘clarity of roles and responsibilities’ are vital in order to ensure that staff know ‘who to approach for support and guidance’ (p. 71).
In addition to trust, the notion of culture is also important in the sense that the history of a school determines the views, attitudes and approaches of those working within it (MacBeath, 2005). In this context, DL does not stand alone but ‘represents a complex mix of structural, cultural, social and individual characteristics and actions’ (Ritchie and Woods, 2007, p. 365). It is also complex because the trust involved in this process needs to work on different levels – not just on an interpersonal level, but also on organisational and communal levels (MacBeath, 2005). Leithwood et al. (2007) point out ‘that the extent to which teachers take up organisational leadership functions depends on features of the school’s structure and culture’ (p. 49). Considering that DL has the potential to fulfil ‘the achievement of complex tasks and organisational goals’ (ibid. p.46), it is, at this point, pertinent to consider Bourdieu’s (1990a) notion that it is ‘habitus’ which is instrumental in enabling ‘the institution to attain [its] full realisation’ (p.57).

Bourdieu (1990a) describes habitus as ‘embodied history internalised as a second nature’ or, to present it conversely, the conscious reinforcement of mastering ‘a common code’ (ibid. p59). Habitus is engrained in our cultural upbringing – not just in terms of the way we walk and talk, but as Thompson (1991) puts it, our habitus also gives us ‘a sense of how to act and respond’ to situations in our day to day lives (p. 13). This premise rests on the notion that ‘since individuals are the products of particular histories which endure in the habitus, their actions can never be analysed adequately as the outcome of conscious calculation’ (ibid. p.17). To this degree, it therefore follows that habitus is an ‘immanent law’ because it is firmly etched within the culture of those who share ‘identical histories’ (Bourdieu, 1990a, p. 59). Habitus, therefore, is relevant in the context of schools because it is ‘the precondition not only for the coordination of practices but also for practices of coordination’ (ibid. p.59) which, arguably, lie at the very heart of DL.

Habitus is also powerful because it resides in the bedrock of agential relations and, to a large extent, is responsible for the ‘harmonisation’ of collective enterprises and experiences (ibid. p.58). Given that habitus constitutes both identity and experience it subsequently incorporates what Leithwood et al. (2007) describe as ‘idiosyncratic attributes such as abilities and interests’ (p. 47) which translate in to what Bourdieu (1998) classifies as ‘capital’ which, in turn, helps to define ‘the structure of social space’ (p. 19). Capital can take any form whether it be ‘physical, economic, cultural or social’ (ibid. p.47) although ‘capital does not exist and function except in relation to a field’ (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992, p. 101). A field, according to Bourdieu and Wacquant, can ‘be defined as a network, or a configuration, of objective relations between positions’ and it is within this structure where the distribution of capital (or power) takes place.
Bourdieu and Wacquant (1992) are cautious when they make the analogy between a field and a game, although they do suggest that any given ‘player’s’ strategies within the game are linked to the type and amount of capital that they may carry and that this, along with their habitus, ‘is the state of relations of force between players that defines the structure of the field’ (ibid. p. 99). According to Spillane et al., (2004) ‘structure constitutes agency, providing the rules and resources upon which it is based’ and not only is such ‘structure . . . created’ and ‘reproduced’ it can, however, also potentially be transformed ‘by the actions of human agents’ (p. 10). This, in turn, relates to the levels of investment players may have in the game. As Bourdieu and Wacquant (1992) observe, ‘players can play to conserve their capital’ and thereby conform ‘with the tacit rules of the game’ or they can also play in order ‘to transform, partially or completely, the immanent rules of the game’ (p.99). In other words, the extent to which staff interact with initiatives, or embrace or initiate change themselves are pivotal to the function and nature of DL in schools – a theme which is returned to later on.

The Complexity of Distributed Leadership

In order to pursue Bourdieu’s concept of the link between game and field, MacBeath (2005) presents us with the analogy of how DL within a school can be compared to a football team where there is ‘such [a] strength of initiative' that staff ‘willingly extend their roles to school-wide leadership’. Or to put it another way, ‘when the ball goes out of play the nearest player runs to retrieve the ball and gets it back into play’ (ibid. pp. 361-362).

On a deeper level, however, Bourdieu and Wacquant (1992) note that the investment in the game and what is at stake ‘are for the most part the product of the competition between players’ (p.98). This, in turn, conflates two rationales: the level of the player’s interest or disinterest in the game, and whether participation in the game is ‘worth pursuing’. Ultimately, as Lizzio et al. (2011) recognise, this translates itself into ‘the extent to which a person identifies with a group or organisation’ which then determines ‘the level of their engagement and contribution’ and subsequently, their level of participation in the game (p.89).

To move the metaphors presented here forward, it is, important to consider how both game and field manifest themselves in terms of capital. A player’s capital, whether it be economic, cultural or social is important because ‘the strategies of a “player” and everything that defines his “game” are a function . . . of the volume and structure of his capital’ (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992, p. 101). Capital, habitus and field are all inter-related and according to Bourdieu and
Wacquant, a player’s habitus is crucial because it ‘contributes to constituting the field as a meaningful world . . . endowed with sense and value, in which it is worth investing one’s energy’ (ibid. p. 127). This directly relates to whether stakeholders want to, choose to, or are even able to participate in aspects of DL, which, in turn, demands an examination and exploration of both the cultural and political aspects which may prevail within a setting.

According to Wallace et al., (2011) trust within an institution can be ‘punctured’ by a failure to successfully mediate ‘acculturation efforts’ because beliefs and values which may surround policies and practices in the workplace are considered to be ‘relatively unmanipuable’ (p. 265). Transforming practice is therefore difficult, not only because ‘the habitus tends to favour experiences likely to reinforce it . . . rather than transform it’ but also because the players in the field invariably consider their aspirations in terms ‘of what is and is not for us’ (Bourdieu, 1990, pp.61–64). As Harris (2004) points out ‘it would be naive to ignore the major structural, cultural and micro-political barriers operating in schools that make distributed forms of leadership difficult to implement’ (p.19) and based upon this premise, I believe it is important to question, on a political level, how democratic distributing leadership may really be.

Ritchie and Woods (2007) consider that one of the challenges facing DL is that not only can it fail ‘to share or democratise access to power’ but that it increases levels of responsibility which effectively tether those subordinates ‘to [the] aims and values’ of those at a higher hierarchical level (p. 365). In this sense, DL, as a structure, also ensures that the educational system contributes to ‘legitimising the established order’ and therefore reproduces both ‘the class distribution of cultural capital’ as well as ‘the process of selection’ (Bourdieu and Passeron, 1977, p. 199). Despite the DfE’s (2010) pledge to allow schools to determine their own ‘character’ which is ‘free of either central or local bureaucratic constraint’, Cremin et al., (2011) contest, and in my opinion, rightly so, that the current ‘educational climate’ is still one ‘where the degree of central control over what happens in schools on a day-to-day basis has reached unprecedented levels’ (p. 586). And, perhaps, more worrying still, is the ‘orchestrated’ response of schools who ‘tend to reproduce this order without either knowing they are doing so or wanting to do so’ (Bourdieu, 1998. p.26).

Hatcher (2005) elevates this further when he suggests that ‘the seductive ideological character’ of DL rather than promoting democracy, actually ‘disguises the reality of the ultimately coercive power of management’ (p. 259) or what Bourdieu (1990b) defines as ‘symbolic power’. Symbolic power is dependent upon ‘the possession of symbolic capital’ or ‘the power to impose upon other minds a vision’ or, in other words, a consecration of ‘power granted to those who
have obtained sufficient recognition’ in order to have the authority to impose ‘the power of constitution’ (p. 138).

Building Capacity for Student Leadership
The current Government (DfE, 2010) would appear to deny such intractability when they suggest that ‘our pupils, teachers and head teachers are capable of achieving more than the current structures allow them to’ (p. 18). This, however, pertains to the curriculum, standardised testing, qualifications and student outcomes and precludes any discussion about pupils being involved in decision making. In order to transform the dynamics of an institution, Mullis (2011) calls for ‘democratic and participatory practices’ which are ‘informed by the views, experiences, understandings and aspirations’ of the students themselves (p. 223). Harris (2008), in the foreword to the NC’s Everyone one a Leader, supports this notion by identifying DL as a characteristic of ‘successful schools’ whereby ‘students [are involved] in decision making’ (p.3).

Although there is a great deal of commentary in the literature on the link between models of DL and student outcomes, there is far less on how to build capacity for students to actually become leaders themselves (Ritchie et al., 2007). Even though student outcomes are important and may relate to pupils’ engagement with school or their academic achievement, Leithwood et al. (2007) observe that ‘there is little or no evidence concerning the factors that might encourage members of the school community other than teachers to assume leadership functions’ (p. 51). Like Mullis (2011), Woods (2004) believes that if DL is to be truly democratic then it needs to involve all stakeholders, including pupils, although Hatcher (2005) contests that this ‘conception’ of democracy is flawed because it does not ‘translate’ itself into the institutional structures that would ensure everyone could in fact exercise democratic agency by right rather than as a licensed delegation of power’ (p. 258).

According to Cremin et al. (2011), a potential barrier to promoting student leadership is ‘that there is neither the time nor the capacity to engage meaningfully with what young people have to say’ (p. 598). Problems may also occur if teachers do not have faith in, or have negative attitudes towards, ‘distributed leadership practices’ which involve, or encourage, students ‘to exercise leadership’ (MacBeath, 2005, p. 360). Frost, R. (2008), however, emphasises that if leadership is ‘to be truly distributed’ then developing student leadership needs to be ‘a central part’ of the process (p. 353). Involving other stakeholders, including students as part of the decision making process is, according to Harris (2008), one of the factors instrumental in determining a school’s success and, as Mitra (2006) observes, by ‘adding students to the “who” of school decision making’ ultimately ‘broadens the scope of distributing leadership’ (p. 315).
The capacity to build and sustain relationships between students and teachers, would, according to Waterhouse (2011, p. 304), boil down to ensuring that the opinions of students are ‘valued’ and ‘trusted’ which in turn equates itself with what Lizzio et al. (2011) describe as ‘interpersonal trust’ between teachers and pupils which constitutes ‘a fundamental form of social capital’ that leads ‘to . . . activating the leadership potential of a whole student body’ (p. 87). Along with increased responsibility and leadership roles, students, according to Mullis (2011) ‘repeatedly recite’ the need for ‘mutual respect and trust’ (p. 216) – a theme which emerges in the research findings presented later.

The Political Reality of Student Leadership within the Educational System

This paper argues that despite any good intention there may be to reform the education system, the recent White Paper (DfE, 2010) needs to be viewed with caution, because on the surface it fails, at every level, to even pay lip-service towards recognising the student as a stakeholder in the educational system. The fact that the Government choose to attribute pupils’ poor behaviour as a reason for why teachers are driven out of the profession would indicate that the education system is failing to engage young people (Robinson, 2010). The DfE (2010) claim that ‘the most frequent factor cited as a cause of classroom stress is pupils’ lack of respect towards teaching staff’ (p.32). Smyth (2006) considers this landscape to be endemic, and that for many young people, ‘schooling is an alienating, bewildering, unsatisfying, unrewarding and damaging process,’ to the extent that ‘many make an active decision to give up, drift off, or drop out altogether’ (p. 31).

The White Paper (2010) also does little to provide an alternative to an education system which dates back to the nineteenth century and a style of schooling which is, according to (Islas, 2010), not only archaic but one in dire need of change. Back in the 1950s, Bailey (1954) recognised that ‘modern education has been primarily competitive, nationalistic and, therefore separative’ (p.38) and nothing seems to have changed because the DfE’s (2010) current educational agenda remains one which is driven by targets, statistics, results and our world ranking as an education system, rather than listening to, or fulfilling, the needs, desires and wishes of its stakeholders.

The DfE (2010), in its White Paper, refers to the need to distribute leadership, for example, in order ‘to devolve as much day-to-day decision making to the front line’ although there is no mention whatsoever of pupils being involved in this process (p. 10). And even though the Government recognise that ‘our pupils, teachers and head teachers are capable of achieving more than the current structures allow them to’ this pertains to the curriculum, qualifications and student outcomes and precludes any discussion or notion about pupils being involved in the
leadership process, or indeed how such restrictive ‘structures’ can be broken down (ibid. p.18). Having said this, Michael Gove (2010b), in a letter to Vanni Treves (Chairman of the National College) would appear to be committed to supporting their ‘role in supporting the Government’s education reforms’.

Nonetheless, perhaps there is still reason to be suspicious of the motives behind policies and practices which promote student leadership and to ask questions such as: Where have these initiatives have come from, and why? And do they seek to serve the political interests of those leaders who have chosen to implement them, or are they genuinely implemented to capitalise on learning from the student body who, according to Flutter and Ruddock (2004), are our ‘expert witnesses’ (p. 105). Mullis (2011) succeeds in allaying some of these fears when she concludes that the reasons for teacher and pupil collaboration on student voice initiatives would ‘appear to remain independent of changes in official educational policy’ (p. 223). Wisby (2011), however, suggests that it is actually policy makers’ ‘interest in student voice’ which has led to it becoming ‘almost a routine consideration for schools’ (p. 32). An example which illustrates this is the Department for Schools Children and Families [DCSF] document Working Together: Listening to the Voices of Children and Young People. Jim Knight, the then minister for education, states that ‘improving outcomes for every child means encouraging young people to engage in decision-making’ and that ‘ensuring their views are heard and valued . . . has a positive impact on the school environment’ (DCSF, 2008, p.1), although this is, historically, a Labour policy stance.

Even though the DFE’s White Paper (2010) makes no reference to student leadership, there would appear to be NC initiatives operating under the radar. According to Higham et al. (2010) the NC has, since 2001, ‘commissioned a course for developing leadership in students’ in tandem with the University of the First Age and Community Service Volunteers . . . which both organisations continue to deliver independently to date’ although they acknowledge that such initiatives ‘have yet to receive sustained Government funding’ (p. 419). Whatever the commitment or levels of interest the Government, their agencies or schools show in student leadership, Wallace et al. (2011) argue that any intervention to ‘acculturate’ stake holders into ‘distributed leadership’ remains ‘a politically driven intervention’ (p. 261). Cremin et al. (2011) appear to support this belief in the sense that in terms of both teacher and student voice initiatives they consider school policy pertaining to these matters serves the purpose of the institution ‘articulating its acceptable public face’ as well as determining not just what stakeholders can do ‘but also the things they can and cannot say’ (p. 592).
To conclude, Bourdieu and Passeron (1977) take this ‘unspoken truth’ to a deeper level when they contest that ‘the most hidden and most specific function of the educational system consists in hiding its objective function, that is masking the truth of its relationship to the structure of class relation’ (p.208) which is a theme, in terms of Hatcher’s (2005) notion of democracy, that will be considered later on.

**Research Approach**

Following an analysis of the literature it becomes clear that the implementation of student leadership is a complex issue dependent upon many factors. It was, therefore, considered pertinent to investigate the situation through carrying out fieldwork in a school where the leadership team is actively developing and implementing their Student Leadership Policy.

The small-scale case study reported here is, admittedly, limited to four participants, although those people who were interviewed are representative of two key stakeholders – the Senior Leadership Team [SLT] and pupils who are involved in student leadership activity at a London secondary school, referred to here as School X. Individual interviews were carried out with a member of the SLT, and a focus group involving one Year 8 pupil and two Year 10 pupils [ST1 – ST3]. In line with the British Educational Research Association [BERA] (2004) Revised Ethical Guidelines, all participants were given information sheets prior to being interviewed (see appendices A and B) and signed a consent form (see appendices C and D) allowing their voice to be recorded. In the case of the students, parental permission was required in accordance with school policy and the information was presented to them in a letter.

Although the questions were piloted before hand to ensure validity and reliability of question wording (Denscombe, 2010), it was considered preferable to deliver the questions ‘live’ in order to get an immediate reaction, rather than a rehearsed response. Kvale (2008, p. 8) acknowledges that interviewing is still ‘a little-standardised craft . . . for which there are few standard rules or methodological conventions’ and adapting this approach was therefore considered to be epistemologically and ontologically permissible.

The nature of both the interviews and the focus group were semi-structured in order to allow for any additional questions or discussion. Adopting a semi-structured approach is also advantageous as it enables the interviewer to ‘develop a relationship with the participants’ (Borg, p. 203) and provides a level of informality which helps to ‘create a stage where the subject is free and safe to talk’ (Kvale, 2008, p.8). Carrying out a focus group with the pupils, rather than individual interviews provided a forum where participants could offer responses they otherwise might not in a one to one situation. As Cohen et al. (2007) point out, the dynamics of
a focus group facilitates participant interaction as opposed to the interviewer controlling the discussion. The data collection methods favoured here avoid the use of surveys which employ closed “yes/no” questions and instead, allow face-to-face meetings to facilitate discussion as to how the participants ‘organise their everyday lives’ as well as ‘talking to them at length about how they see the world and themselves’ (Deacon et al., 1999, p. 7).

**Students as Leaders: Perceptions and Roles within the Dynamics of Distributed Leadership**

When asked to explain how leadership was distributed in School X, SL said that not only did the school consider itself a place ‘that develops leaders’ but she also spoke of the school’s ‘ethos’ whereby teachers as well as students ‘have opportunities to lead’. SL also spoke of how the school has put into place ‘a student leadership working group’ which involved staff and students drawing up a student leadership policy. Such an approach, whereby DL involves students in decision making would, according to Harris (2008) demonstrate characteristics of a successful school although Cremin et al. (2011) consider that the ratification of such policy can be restrictive as to what students and staff can and cannot do or say.

Involving students in leadership activity, however, is seen as a positive initiative by SL who commented that ‘the majority of staff . . . want to give [pupils] opportunities to lead’ not just in the classroom ‘but in the school as a whole’ because they believe the student body has ‘loads to offer.’ These leadership initiatives would appear to be buoyant with ‘a waiting list of teachers who want to work with students’. Such a vote of confidence not only echoes the value of engaging with the unique perspectives students have (Flutter and Ruddock, 2004) but also demonstrates the democratisation of the process of DL (Woods, 2004).

In terms of building capacity for student leadership there was an interesting discussion around the notion of trust. Although this word was not mentioned by myself during the interview or focus group, it did emerge during my conversation with SL. According to Woods et al. (2004) the very process of DL needs to be grounded in a culture of trust and the NC (2010b) consider such trust to be a pre-requisite for leaders to take risks in order to bring about change. The students at School X are clear about their role in student voice initiatives to the extent that they felt their belief and involvement in leadership activity did not warrant signing a contract ‘because they felt it undermined real, genuine trust [between themselves and the teachers]’ and they decided that such ratification was unwelcome and unnecessary.

The degree to which the process of engaging students in leadership activity is truly democratic, however, is open to debate. Woods (2004) considers DL to be democratic when stakeholders,
including students, are able to participate, although SL admits that even when pupils are involved she is ‘not entirely sure [that] it is truly democratic.’ The reason SL gives for this is because Heads of Year are usually asked ‘to recommend students’ and that ‘it has to be students staff trust [and] not someone they feel . . . is out to get their own back on the teaching profession.’ It would also appear that students at School X are selected according to the role they will fulfil which would align with Hatcher’s (2005) notion of a flawed democracy whereby there exists a process of delegating power. This involves selecting the more academically able to take on ‘the more challenging projects like co-planning lessons’ where as those that ‘don’t have the intellectual capacity’ are able to build leadership skills by ‘working at reception, meeting and greeting visitors’ and ‘representing the school [at] open evenings.’ The ‘ensemble’ of social characteristics presented here would appear to echo Bourdieu and Passeron’s (1977) notion of considering the class of students in terms of ‘the different probabilities’ that ‘various educational destinies have for them’ (p. 89) and SL would appear to maintain this when she admits that ‘it would be very true to say that our more articulate middle class students find it easiest’ to support student leadership activity.

Although SL admits that she is not certain ‘that schools could ever be quite egalitarian’ she insists that the student leadership initiatives in School X are about ‘working towards shared goals and a genuine partnership . . . where both students and teachers feel they can talk in confidence and be respected’ which supports the view of Penlington et al. (2008) whereby leadership from below is negotiated, delegated and licensed. According to Ritchie and Woods (2007), ensuring that the stakeholders involved are trusted is a crucial condition in terms of ensuring that the right people are on the bus which aligns with Gronn’s (2002) rationale of the need to work collaboratively in order to promote a symbiotic culture – or as MacBeath (2005) puts it – a culturally agreed distribution of leadership. SL believes this involves ‘thinking it through before you do it’ and avoids ticking ‘a box’ just ‘because it sounds like a great idea without the understanding of how to build trust and make sure it’s worth doing.’

Students at School X are positive about the student leadership initiatives they are involved in and S1 talks about their role as ‘Departmental Ambassadors’ which involves ‘having particular students attached to a department from Year 10 and 11 who attend departmental meetings.’ Although the Student Leadership Policy (School X, 2011) does not include the term ‘Departmental Ambassadors’, it does explicitly refer to both ‘Student’ and ‘Subject’ ‘Ambassadors’ and outlines these roles under the section Determining the Student Leadership Projects, Paragraphs 4 and 16 (see Appendix E).
The students in the focus group talk enthusiastically and clearly relish their roles. S1 mentions how she ‘enjoyed’ being on a particular panel ‘because I felt like I was contributing’ and how this involvement ‘make[s] us enjoy school more.’ S2 comments on how their formal role equates with ‘good representation’ and ‘that if everyone knows you’re a Student Ambassador, you can’t be messing around.’ Such clarification of their involvement and purpose supports Bourdieu’s (1990b) belief that ‘the effect of officialisation can be seen as an effect of ratification’ because ‘it transforms a practical pattern into a linguistic code of the juridical type’ which, in this case, translates into policy which is ratified by school Governors (p. 82). And what also seems to appeal to the students, and possibly the senior leaders as well, is the process by which such ratification of their policy allows students ‘to have a name or a profession’ which is ‘authenticated’ whereby they are seen to appear or ‘exist officially’ (ibid. p. 82).

In the context of their leadership role, the students were asked the question: *Doing what you do, do you think your mates think about you differently?* This provoked a significant response from S2. She felt that although her peers were ‘interested’ in what they were doing, some had commented that: “Oh, yeah, it’s the smart people who are in the awe . . . how comes?” This would suggest that some pupils feel that there is a divide between those students who are academic or ‘smart’ and those who are non-academic and perceived as ‘not smart’ and who therefore have less opportunity to engage with, or benefit, from the current education system (Robinson, 2010). This in turn supports Bourdieu and Passeron’s (1977) notion that ‘students equipped with [the] linguistic and cultural capital’ are in the best position to support the function of the educational system which Bourdieu (1998) insists ‘contributes to the reproduction of the distribution of cultural capital and, consequently, of the structure of social space’ (p. 19). These mechanisms therefore ensure that the process of student leadership is not democratic after all, but facilitates social reproduction which ‘ensures that capital finds its way to capital and that [the] social structure’ has the tendency to ‘perpetuate itself’ (ibid. p.19).

Further parallels with the literature emerge when S1 discusses their involvement in ‘learning walks’ which involves ‘teachers from other schools’, evaluating the learning taking place in School X and assessing the extent to which pupils are ‘engaged’ in their lessons, ‘what they’re doing well’ and ‘what they could be doing better’. Fielding and McGregor (2005, p.8) suggest that such initiatives are positive in the sense that they promote ‘overt student leadership’ that constitutes ‘active citizenship’ and although such activity may be ‘mediated’ to support student agency there is no indication as to how this process is truly ‘democratic’.

There were, however, many positive comments which support the students’ perception of leadership activity as being fulfilling. S1 comments that she enjoyed ‘being on the [leadership]
panel because [she] felt like [she] was contributing’. S2 also recognises that as far as the school goes, they [the students] recognise that school leaders know that they ‘possess unique knowledge and perspectives’ (Mitra, 2006, p. 315).

Conclusion

Defining DL is problematic in the sense that it ‘is not a single phenomenon’ and due to its ‘agental and structural dimensions’ (Ritchie and Woods, 2007, p. 378) there needs to be a culture of trust in order for DL to operate effectively. Trust is not only central in terms of working as a team towards a shared vision (Woods et al., 2004) but is also a prerequisite to taking risks in order to bring about change (NC, 2010). At the very heart of these agental relationships is habitus which is significant because it is pivotal to the harmonisation of both experience and practice and therefore the success of any DL enterprises (Bourdieu, 1990a). This is because each player’s habitus, and the capital they bring with them, is instrumental in shaping the field, in which they are players, into a meaningful world which has both purpose and value (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992), a notion which is supported by the research presented here. As pupils at School X point out, in order to facilitate change ‘it’s better if you ask the children for their opinions’ because they’re ‘the ones who can tell them [the teachers] how to make it happen’.

DL can be difficult to implement, however, because of the cultural, structural and political barriers which exist in schools (Harris, 2004) and this in turn brings about the problem of how to democratise power (Ritchie and Woods, 2007). It also begs the question as to whether DL can ever be truly democratic. Although the notion of democracy may involve extending leadership opportunities to all stakeholders and in this case the student body, there is evidence from the small-scale study reported here that the process of DL can never be egalitarian. The concept of DL also suffers from political stigma in the sense that policy makers exercise what Bourdieu (1990b) describes as symbolic power and that their interest in, for example, student voice initiatives, can create a band-wagon mentality whereby schools are inclined to adopt and ratify such policies simply because they are in vogue (Wisby, 2011).

The current Government does not overtly suggest that students should be involved in leadership activity although it has promoted the role of the NC which recognises the need for pupils to be involved in decision making processes in school. How this can become a democratic process is open to debate. What sticks in my mind are the words of a fifteen-year old girl who is a student leader at School X, who when asked about what her peers thought of her role, said: “They do go, ‘Oh yeah, it’s the smart people who are in the awe,’ sometimes, ‘how comes?’” Student leadership policy in School X is based around what individuals are capable of doing and this echoes Plato’s notion of social order which arguably contributes
‘towards persuading each social subject to stay in the place which falls to him by nature, to know his place and hold to it, ta heatou prattein, as Plato put it’ (Bourdieu and Passeron, 1977, p. 210) although whether this is desirable is open to debate.

References


Department for Children Schools and Families [DCSF](2008) Working together: listening to the voices of children and young people. London: DCSF.


Harris, A. (2008) NC Foreword. In NC Everyone a leader: Identifying the core principles and practices that enable everyone to be a leader and play their part in distributed leadership. Nottingham: NCSL.


School X (2011) Student Leadership Policy. Camden Local Authority.


*This document was added to the Education-line collection on 6 November 2012*
Appendices

Appendix A

The Sir John Cass School of Education

Doctoral Research Project

Information Sheet

Field Study – Leadership and Student Voice (May 2011)

Conducted by
XXX, Senior Lecturer, UEL

Supervisor: Dr X, The Sir John Cass School of Education, University of East London

Ethics and the Conduct of this Doctoral Research

As part of one of their Doctoral Option Modules – xxx (ETM xxx) XXX (the researcher) is investigating building capacity for student leadership in schools.

An important element of this research is consultation with both students and staff involved in student voice initiatives. As part of this process, the researcher, XXX, will be inviting people to be interviewed.

Dr X (Supervisor)
During these interviews, X will be asking people about their views concerning building capacity for student leadership at School X. This may potentially be a sensitive matter for some individuals, and they will need to know just how and where information they provide is likely to be used. In particular, people need to know whether they, as individuals, will be identified alongside certain views. What follows is a set of principles to which I, the researcher, will work and be held to.

1. The aims, methods, and anticipated benefits of this research can be explained by the researcher and/or supervisor upon request.
2. All participation in this research is voluntary and consent to participate is freely given.
3. All forms of communication will be respected. In particular electronic recordings and transcripts of interviews will be securely stored and anonymised unless otherwise agreed.
4. Any information that is provided and that could be detrimental or damaging to individuals will not be made public in any form that could reveal their identity to a party beyond the researcher.
5. The outcomes of this project may be used for research purposes and may possibly, at some point in the future, form part of a Doctoral thesis or may be reported in academic journals.
6. Individuals are free to withdraw from this research at any time, in which event their participation will immediately cease.

All the data held by the researcher will be kept in a secure filing system, accessible only to the researcher himself. On completion of the researcher’s Doctoral studies, all data from individuals and groups will be destroyed.

In accordance with the British Educational Research Association [BERA], and as an educational researcher, I am open to appeal and complaint regarding my conduct or methods of carrying out this research at any time, and by any party, and accordingly offer my contact details below:

xxx
Senior Lecturer
University of East London
Cass School of Education
Water Lane
Stratford
London
E15 4LZ
Email: xxx@uel.ac.uk
Phone: +44 (0) 208 xxxxxx
Dear X

This letter is to briefly outline my present research module that I am doing for my Doctorate in Education. The focus for this paper concerns investigating building capacity for student leadership in schools in order to investigate further the vision of the school and the way in which this builds capacity for student leadership. My Ed D supervisor, Dr. X, has suggested that I interview both staff and pupils in order to gain the different perspectives. This will involve asking students a small number of questions which should take about 20 minutes and no more than half an hour of their time. In order to capture the interviews I would like to use a voice recorder so that I will be able to produce a written transcript of the conversations later on. Once the paper is complete I will provide you with copies of the finished research article.

I am aware that the parents or carers of any children will need to provide their consent for their children to take part, and this letter will hopefully provide a way of introduction. In line with the British Educational Association’s [BERA] guidance on conducting research I have enclosed a consent form for the parents of those pupils taking part in advance of the interviews.

If there is any further information you need, then please do not hesitate to contact me.

Kind regards

xxx
Senior Lecturer
University of East London
Cass School of Education

Email: xxx
Phone: +44 (0) 20 8xxxxx
Fax:+44 (0) 20 8xxxx
www.uel.ac.uk/education
Appendix C

The Sir John Cass School of Education

Doctoral Research Project – Student Voice

Consent Form

1. I consent to my child taking part in this research project
   Yes [ ] No [ ]

2. I consent to my child being interviewed
   Yes [ ] No [ ]

3. I consent to my child’s interview being recorded
   Yes [ ] No [ ]

4. Contact Details .................................................................
   ...........................................................................
   ...........................................................................
   ...........................................................................

Name of person under 18 ......................................................

Signature of Parent / Guardian ..............................................
Appendix D

The Sir John Cass School of Education

Doctoral Research Project - 2011

Consent Form

1. Name...........................................................................................................

2. I consent to taking part in this Doctoral research project

   Yes ☐     No ☐

3. I consent to being interviewed

   Yes ☐     No ☐

4. I consent to my interview being recorded

   Yes ☐     No ☐

5. Contact Details ...............................................................

   ..................................................................................................

   ..................................................................................................

   ..................................................................................................

   ..................................................................................................

Strangers when we meet: Can Students and Teachers Really Build ‘Trust’ and Capacity for Distributing Leadership?