Joint principalship: a potential support for democratic practice in schools

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The aim of this paper is to discuss the apparent loss of potential for enhancing democratic practice in schools. The findings of previous research about joint principalship stand in contrast to recent changes to the law that regulates the work of principals. Three examples of successful joint principalship were used as illustrations to illuminate how joint principals may support democratic practice by influencing teachers and pupils. In these examples, several qualities of the ways of working and their consequent achievements emerged: the coordinating process between the principals, productive sharing, role models, the importance of relationships and the focus on pedagogic issues. In each of the three examples, joint principalship was found to promote democratic practice by serving as a model of democratic cooperation. The conclusion is that the current Education Act weakens the possibility of achieving one of its own main goals – the ‘democracy assignment’ – by hindering the practice of joint principalship.

Keywords: co-principalship; democratic practice; Education Act; school; shared leadership

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Introduction

The motivation for writing this paper is the loss of a possibility for principals to legally lead a school in a formally unified and equal co-principalship that we call joint principalship. An important aspect of joint principalship concerns its likely benefit to the democratic assignment of schools in Sweden, which is to develop basic democratic values in pupils (the Education Act, 2010:800). In this paper, we will discuss this situation using three successful examples of joint leadership from three schools for children aged between 6 and 16 years. The democratic assignment is vital for all schools, and joint principalship may help in the practising of democracy in everyday school activity.

The concept of leadership in the research literature is increasingly being described as collective (Bolden, 2011; Denis, Langley, & Sergi, 2012; Döös, 2015; Ulhøi & Müller, 2014). Shared leadership between managers is part of this emerging trend, even in school settings (Eckman & Kelber, 2009; Gronn, 2008), and the idea of singularity in the managerial position has been called into question (Denis et al., 2012). The terminology concerning various forms of collective leadership is a tricky terrain. This paper focuses on the most equal form of shared leadership in managerial positions – conceptualised here as joint leadership – which we situate in the stream of research that Denis et al. (2012) label ‘pooling leadership capacities at the top to direct others’ (p. 213). In other words, we are not here discussing shared leadership in the sense of distributed leadership to staff (e.g., Bolden, 2011); neither do we take a stand against singular leadership or compare joint leadership with singular leadership. What we are doing here is shedding light on the potential of joint principalship (now prohibited under the terms of the Education Act, 2010) to contribute to the democracy assignment through influencing the lived democratic practice of schools through the principals’ way of acting together.

The aim of this paper is to discuss the apparent loss of potential for enhancing democratic practice in schools. Using three successful examples of joint principalship in Swedish schools, we describe how joint principalship can be supportive of democratic practice in the school environment. We then argue that joint principalship, when working well, may support democratic practice and values in the everyday life of schools by influencing teachers and pupils. The examples focus on how the joint principals worked, what they thought they achieved and how this way of working can contribute to schools’ democracy assignment and democratic practice.

In the background section, joint leadership is briefly defined and some background is given about the current Education Act. Then, there is a brief review of the co-principalship literature that displays different aspects of co-principalship and situates this paper in the context of previous studies. The three examples are then presented and discussed.
Background

Joint leadership between managers is, in the research literature, understood as a complete collaboration, where formal hierarchical equality is in place and work tasks are merged (Doös, 2015). It is defined as ‘situations where two persons in both formal and practical terms share work tasks, responsibility and authority, as well as sharing the same managerial position’ (Wilhelmson, 2006, p. 495). A formal joint leadership with its merged work tasks is, in practice, built on mainly similar work processes as an informal joint leadership (Doös, 2015). The latter has been conceptualised as shadow leadership or invited leadership (De Voogt & Hommes, 2007; Doös, 2015) and is similar to Heenan and Bennis (1999) concept of co-leadership.

The current Education Act (2010:800) took effect in July 2011, and it includes new legal requirements that appear to disregard the findings of previous research about the benefits of joint leadership between managers, including school principals (e.g., Doös, 2015; Rosengren & Bondas, 2010; Wilhelmson, 2006). The changes to the law reduce the legal opportunities for shared principalship in Sweden (Örnberg, 2016) by introducing the concept of the ‘school unit’ and stipulating that each school unit shall have only one (1) principal. By the time the law was finally passed, a number of debates had taken place concerning the Swedish school system and the quality of the schools’ results. However, it is interesting to note that none of these debates concerned the sharing of principalship. Instead, the law was motivated mainly by a wish to achieve clarity and to lessen the influence of the responsible local authority, thereby increasing the degree of national governance. Thus, the legal prohibition against joint principalship was rather a side effect when it was created. We see this prohibition as problematic because empirical studies provide evidence that such sharing can be successful (e.g., Doös, Wilhelmson, & Hemborg, 2003b; Rosengren & Bondas, 2010; Wilhelmson, Doös, Backström, Bellaghe, & Hanson, 2006) and even assist the democratic organisation of schools (Thomson & Blackmore, 2006).

Swedish schools have long had a dual assignment to further knowledge and democratic values, which is mainly regulated by a specific Education Act. A vital point of departure for this paper lies in the legal requirement for all Swedish schools, according to the Education Act (2010:800) to develop basic democratic values in pupils. The principal is specifically responsible for the achievement of this goal:

The purpose of education within the school system is for children and students to acquire and develop knowledge and values. [...] Education shall also confer and establish respect for those human rights and fundamental democratic values that form the bedrock of Swedish society. (The Education Act, 2010:800, Chapter 1, 4§, our translation)

This is the democratic assignment of schools – an assignment that must not only be spoken about or read about but also lived and practised in the everyday life of schools. What is important to democracy is not only individual agency but also collective and cooperative agency, and not only instrumental but also communicative rationalities (Rönnström, 2015). It seems, then, that what is central to the successful carrying out of joint principalship is also central to democratic practice (e.g., collective agency, cooperation, shared power with active participation in common concerns and communication between equals). Joint principalship promotes and exemplifies democratic practice, and this is an essential argument for why joint principalship should be allowed in law.

Previous research on co-principals

Within the research describing the sharing between managers in a variety of sectors and positions, there is a special line of research on co-principalship (e.g., Court, 2003b; Eckman, 2006) that is detailed below. This research stream includes examples where the co-principals share as equals in relation to organisational hierarchy, either in the form of joint principalship with merged work tasks (e.g., Thomson & Blackmore, 2006; Wilhelmson, 2006) or in a functional arrangement where work tasks are divided (e.g., West, 1978). Some studies also refer to examples where a formally appointed principal invites a subordinate to share the principal’s work and responsibilities (e.g., Court, 2003b), although the use of precisely defined concepts relating to the different sub-forms of sharing is rare.

The main term used for close collaboration between principals is co-principalship. As a concept, it was first identified by West (1978), who proposed that two principals could divide the administrative and instructional tasks between them to create a sustainable work situation for themselves:

Reorganization involves the establishment of a ‘co-principalship’ where each administrator is equal in authority and pay. One principal becomes the ‘principal for instruction’ while the other becomes the ‘principal for administration’. Each principal has specific job objectives and well defined roles and responsibilities. (West, 1978, p. 242)

Research on co-principalship has, through the years, mainly focused on a variety of positive aspects that we have thematised in the following way: sustainable working conditions for the principals (Eckman & Kelber, 2010; MacBeath, 2006), principal recruitment (Brooking, Collins, Court, & O’Neill, 2003), school development (Møller et al., 2007), democracy (Thomson & Blackmore, 2006), challenging the ideals of heroic leadership and New Public Management (NPM) (Court, 2004a), description of work models (Bunnell, 2008; Gronn & Hamilton, 2004) and work processes (Paynter, 2003). These themes are
presented one-by-one to highlight the potential benefits of co-principalship, including its democracy-enhancing qualities.

Co-principalship as sustainability support and as recruitment advantage

Eckman (2006, 2007) claims that the task of principalship is too burdensome and stressful for a single person and points to co-principalship as an alternative that has the potential to facilitate a high level of job satisfaction and less stress. A high degree of communication skills and an ability to put the ego aside are stressed as essential qualities for co-principalship (Eckman, 2006, 2007). According to Eckman and Kelber (2009, 2010), co-principals experience lower levels of role-conflict and higher levels of job satisfaction than traditional principals. MacBeath (2006, referring to Gronn, 2003) states that the task of leading a school can no longer be carried out by the ‘heroic’ individual leader. Also, Court (2002) points out that co-principals experience less isolation and stress, but to achieve that, open and honest communication is crucial.

Then, there is the issue of a shortage of people applying for principal positions (Brooking et al., 2003; Bunnell, 2008; Paynter, 2003). According to Upsall (2004), a ‘managerialist construct of leadership’ is at odds with the practice of primary school principals in New Zealand, where ‘collaborative management structures’ may be more effective and also attract a wider variety of applicants into school leadership (p. 158). The possibility of working in alternative leadership models like co-principalship might make the job more attractive to potential applicants, as better methods of decision-making may be promoted, as well as the benefits of increased job satisfaction and reduced stress (Upsall, 2004).

Co-principalship and successful school development

In a research project exploring successful schools, Møller and Eggen (2005) and Møller et al. (2005, 2007) used the concept of team-centred leadership to point to informal co-principalship. They found that successful leadership practice was grounded in activity, interaction and collaboration in team efforts for teachers as well as for principals. In a learning-centred approach, democratic principles of equity and social justice came into play; collaboration in team efforts was an organisational quality and distributed leadership was practised widely, encompassing the work of leaders, teachers and pupils/students. Learning as the focal point was key in creating an environment of mutual respect. Emotional commitment was regarded as important, as were democratic values when dealing with tensions and dilemmas. Thus, the successful schools were not dominated by instrumental rationality and managerial accountability, despite the NPM discourse of the municipal governance. Successful leadership proved to be an interactive process involving many people in handling conflicting values, using critique in an open dialogue to create learning environments. In this way: ‘school principals and leadership teams develop trust through the trustworthy use of power’ (Møller & Eggen, 2005, p. 345).

Co-principalship as democracy support

Bunnell (2008) claims that co-principalship enhances the participation and empowerment of teachers and, according to Paynter (2003), it supports the development of collaborative norms. In the same vein, Court (2004b) points to the difference between NPM’s technical, economic rationalist versions of accountability versus co-principalship’s collectivist form of mutual responsibility, which is regarded as more democratic. A flat management structure built on open and honest communication, the sharing of information and effective decision-making changes the conditions for dealing with dilemmas and difficulties in a positive direction (Court, 2004b). Court (2003a) also states ‘that shared school leaderships can enhance understandings about both democracy and gender equity’ (p. 32) and be a model for democratic practices such as involving children in decision-making. When two people share a principal position and develop their principalship through negotiation, this democratic and shared approach has a symbolic meaning for a democratic way of life (Thomson & Blackmore, 2006). Gronn and Hamilton (2004) find that ‘the range of potential justifications for dual authority roles is large’, especially so in relation to democracy in that ‘schools are learning environments for children in their formative years’ (p. 13).

Co-principalship as challenging the heroic and NPM approaches

Legal requirements and agencies of the state are considered to be part of the NPM genre as, for example, described by Brooking et al. (2003) in the New Zealand context. The re-conceptualisation of leadership as practiced in schools is described as challenging the conventional orthodoxy of the single, individualistic, heroic leadership approach, which is at odds with the reality of modern practice in schools (Bunnell, 2008). Also, since in co-principalship the leaders’ actions are visible to each other, this may be a deterrent for abuse of authority (Bunnell, 2008).

Work models and processes of co-principalship

Different models for organising co-principalship are reported, such as sharing and rotating the principalship (Brooking et al., 2003), two people sharing a role and exercising joint managerial authority (Gronn & Hamilton, 2004; Wilhelmson, 2006; Wilhelmson et al., 2006) and a cross-cultural model in an international school in China (Bunnell, 2008), which was found to create harmony between Chinese law and Western tradition (Bunnell, 2015). In another model, in Chile, the leadership of
schools is shared between a principal and a pedagogical head, with each having a distinct set of responsibilities; the principal is the managerial head and externally accountable, while the pedagogical head is internally accountable to his or her teacher colleagues (Flessa, 2014). Court (2004a) points to the importance of open, ongoing communication for the shared meanings and understandings that serve as a foundation for successful collaboration in schools – something that she found in co-principals’ way of working. Also, Paynter (2003) describes a need to develop participative management strategies and leadership skills with a commitment to collaborative practice that creates an atmosphere of trust. Co-principalship is thought to make the principal’s role more manageable by spreading the burdens and risks of the office wider (Gronn & Hamilton, 2004). Gronn and Hamilton (2004) found that the dynamics of the shared-role space are: interdependence, trust, complementarity, overlap and duplication.

The downsides of co-principalship

In our search of the literature on co-principalship, little was found about its downsides. Yet, Eckman (2006) points to difficulties in sharing power and ‘problems in communicating, defining responsibilities, developing trust, presenting a unified front, and being “played against each other” by parents, teachers and community members’ (p. 102). Also, Court (2003a,b, 2004b) gives an example of when a co-principal partnership failed, partly due to the rule that there should only be a single person in the position, but mainly because of a heavy workload and difficulties of cooperating within the co-principal partnership: ‘The partnership was dis-established and the school returned to a sole principality’ (Court, 2003b, p. 180).

In our own research about shared leadership between managers in a variety of organisational contexts, we have showed that downsides do exist (Döös, Wilhelmson, & Backström, 2013). Severe cases of mistrust, conflicts and consequent sick leave have been documented. When sharing managers run into serious difficulties in sharing responsibility, there is either a problem in their ‘internal bedrock’ for successful sharing (non-prestige, trust and shared values) or an organisational context that does not recognise and provide the necessary conditions for this collective way of organising leadership (Döös et al., 2013).

The co-principalship research field has grown considerably, and all over the Western world, since West (1978) – himself a superintendent of principals – identified the growing demands and pressures upon principals and tried to handle the burden by dividing the task between two people. Knowledge about co-principalship has since then been developed by scholars to include close collaboration between (mostly) two people who are both formally appointed as the principals of one school. While the main reason for co-principalship is the sharing of an overly demanding work task, the democracy-enhancing benefits seem to have come as an unintended consequence, according to previous research. Nonetheless, this way of working has the potential to be a model for democratic practice in schools.

Three examples of joint principalship

To discuss the question of a lost potential for enhancing the democracy assignment in schools, three examples of successful joint principalship were chosen. The examples are three schools in Sweden for children aged between 6 and 16 years:1 the town school, the city school and the suburb school (see Appendix 1).2 The principals of these schools had many years of experience as school leaders, both as singular principals and as joint principals. The information was collected through interviews, mostly with the principals themselves. In the suburb school, five teachers (who were also development leaders) and the principals’ superintendent were also interviewed. Both principals were interviewed several times. This school’s principals were taking part in a larger research project identifying work processes and qualities of shared leadership (Wilhelmson et al., 2006). Since the information was retrieved from different projects, there are major differences in the depth and scope of the data for each of the three examples (see Appendix 1). The first two examples are from a pre-study that explored the consequences of the Education Act (Wilhelmson & Döös, 2012). They are based upon the opinions of the joint principals themselves, while the third example is more comprehensive since it also contains the opinions of five development leaders and one superintendent. The principals of both the city and the suburb schools formed their collaboration when working together in pairs with formal subordination, that is, one in each pair was the appointed principal and invited the other to share. In practice, they worked as equals and struggled to have this recognised by the administration. They ultimately gained official recognition, however, and a number of years of joint principalship followed.

We searched our own data from previous studies for successful joint principals who had been forbidden to continue due to the new law, and selected the three examples used here. The selection was made to illustrate the problem of this new legal obstacle to joint principalship, especially in relation to the democracy assignment. The three examples also met with our requirement that there was relevant information that could be discussed in relation to the democracy assignment of the Education

1The schools belong to the compulsory part of the Swedish school system, that is, the 10 years of schooling that children have to attend between the ages of 6 and 16.

2We gave the schools names (town-city-suburb) to reflect their situation. As the schools were located in different socio-economic areas, we found it relevant to have this reflected in the names.
Example | The town school | The city school | The suburb school
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Start of joint principalship | Joint principalship starts in 2004. | Sharing starts in 1993 with two vice-principals. Since 2005 as a joint principalship. | Sharing starts in 1994 between principal and vice-principal. Since 2007 as a joint principalship.
Years of joint principalship | 7 years | 6 years | 6.5 years
New Education Act comes into force | | 1 July 2011 | |
The city school

The city school was situated in central Stockholm, the capital of Sweden, which is a socio-economically wealthy area with a relatively low degree of problems in its schools. This example is a story of stamina in the ambition to share power and develop democratic ways of working. For almost 20 years, different forms of collective leadership and influence had been developed at the school, for example, both the parent board and joint leadership had long been part of the management structure – those experiences would prove to be valuable when the new legislation made new demands.

After the introduction of the new law, there began an invited co-principalship consisting of one principal and two vice-principals. Each of the three had different tasks and formal hierarchical differences but took joint responsibility for the whole school in practice. The school had a tradition of joint principalship and a history of invited co-principalships. Originally, one principal invited two others to share the leadership of the school as joint vice-principals. When that principal retired, the vice-principals took over in a joint principalship, which was formally approved by the local school authority after representations from parents. Around 6 years later, and due to the new regulations in the Education Act (2010:800), one of the principals decided to leave for a principal position at another school, where, even though she lacked the advantages of formal equal sharing, she continued to use her experiences of collaborative leadership. The principal who remained concluded that her partner’s departure seemed more difficult for people around them to deal with than for the principals themselves. She looked upon the situation as an opportunity for development and invited the two vice-principals to share her principalship. Despite their formal hierarchical difference, they regarded each other as equals and used the terms school leaders and school leadership team when referring to themselves. Thus, the two co-principals had learned that the benefits of their former joint principalship could be applied under new circumstances.

All three leaders in this school described their way of working in a team as discussing back and forth in a way that was grounded in mutual trust. They claimed to be interdependent, yet acted self-confidently on their own – not competitively, but openly taking and giving in a climate of mutual support. They described themselves as being ‘three-legged’ in a way that produced safety, trust and confidence – ‘a highly well-functioning three-leaf clover’. Being equals, they believed themselves to be an example of how to communicate in a dialogic way in meetings, thus showing teachers how they could act in the classroom: ‘When we show how we can change and be brave, this also demands of the teachers to do the same in their classrooms’.

The school leaders argued that, in general, teachers are afraid of failure and that they usually think they reveal their ignorance if they admit failure. The leaders said they purposely showed the teachers that they themselves lacked certain knowledge and relied on each other within the leadership team. There is a pervasive myth that the principal knows everything and has all the answers, which is also how it is for the teacher. When the principals dared to show that they asked each other for help, the hope was that the teachers would also dare to ask each other for advice.

The school leaders wanted to educate the teachers in how to co-operate and communicate, with the aim of keeping the focus on pedagogical issues in the teachers’ meetings. They wanted to develop a leadership that was close to the teachers, using the following principles: a never-closed door, listening, dialogue, exchange of experience, diversity and pro-active confrontation. The principal said that, ‘In a conversation, something new often emerges, even if the first reaction is “No.” Then you meet again and something good comes out of it eventually’. This school’s leaders stated that, for them, leadership was about relating to each other in the everyday interactions, in the dining hall and in the corridors with teachers and pupils alike.

The suburb school

The suburb school had worked its way up from miserable to good results since the two principals took it on as a restoration project, where they purposely wanted to use their combined strength – a strength that they had developed when leading another school together. The suburb school was situated in a socio-economically deprived suburban area, with a high proportion of immigrants with a limited knowledge of the Swedish language and culture.

The principals themselves said that their way of working was characterised by close communication and teamwork. They also said that their ethos of team work had spread to the development leaders and on to the rest of the teachers – that everyone was working as a team, and that the principals had become role models. They stated that being two principals, working as a team, means talking more, being better prepared and taking the time to analyse and understand, for example, before difficult staff meetings. They also stated that it was good to have two experiences of the same meeting and ‘a collective memory’. Being two gave them more time to listen to the staff and to be available generally. Having a collective responsibility was productive for the school in both good times and bad, as it brought mutual safety and support to a demanding managerial position. Compared with before they began their joint principalship, the school’s results were better, and they had achieved a larger influx of pupils who stayed on. As a result, they
said that the whole school had attained ‘a very good collective self-confidence’. They also said that their way of working had created space for development and enabled concentration on the content and the core task, which in turn supported the teachers in becoming skilful pedagogues. During this period, the principals shared equally and took responsibility jointly, albeit on an informal basis. Later, in 2007, they were formally acknowledged as joint principals in an equal co-principalship.

Already in 2005, the five interviewed teachers/development leaders said that the principals acted as role models and that they had learned from them as to how to make better use of each other and communicate by ‘thinking aloud’ together when facing difficulties. As teachers and development leaders, they got more responsibility and authority than they would normally have expected to get from a sole principal. The teachers/development leaders also said that they shared their experiences and problems with each other. The principals diffused a feeling of safety in the organisation – a safety for teachers and pupils that was grounded in unanimity. The distribution of tasks and responsibility, as well as the principals’ ways of working together, opened up for democratic processes and open communication that spread to the teachers and pupils. Also, the teachers/development leaders claimed that it was an advantage that the principals couldn’t blame each other when problems appeared; since they made the decisions together, they had to share the responsibility when things went wrong too. A quote from a teacher/development leader at the school demonstrates how co-principalship influenced teachers and pupils to participate in a distributed leadership activity:

The consequence [of their co-principalship], how it influences us, it just means that far more democratic processes are going on simultaneously, where more people feel they take part. Because, as we participate and influence what happens here, which direction we are taking in this school and when we meet our colleagues in workplace meetings, everyone is allowed to think aloud, everyone is listened to. And, in the same way, we do this with the pupils, and the pupils’ council gets a more open climate. […] We together find a way to make it work and meet the pupils in a democratic way. We talk a lot about pupil-influence. […] And when you think about it, it is going on all the time, a lot of influencing processes. I think many feel that they are participating.

The principals’ superintendent said that, by cooperating, the principals developed an amazing organisation around them, and that all the staff were positive to their ideas. The superintendent also said that the two principals had succeeded in turning around the school and its results by being strong, using democratic methods and stubbornly continuing to struggle. Those experiences of collective and democratic ways of working were a legacy that was built upon later, even after joint principalship was forbidden.

When the new Education Act came into force, the principals had been working in joint principalship for a number of years. They argued with both the national and local school authorities in order to safeguard the principle of joint school leadership, but they lost their case. Their last chance to preserve their joint ambition was to suggest that their school be divided into two school units, which would have made it possible for them to continue in cooperation, albeit across the unit boundaries. In any case, this proposal was not approved by the local school authority, despite it being in accordance with the new Education Act. So, the new Education Act effectively ended the joint principalship in 2012. As a result, one of the principals retired, while the other continues in post to this day, aiming to develop a distributed delegation of leadership to continue the power-sharing ethos at the school. In this way, the experience of joint leadership and the ambition to disperse power and responsibility have become part of the organisational culture of the school. Currently, four vice-principals work as two leadership pairs, and some decision-making power is delegated to teacher teams. The power to make decisions has thus been distributed to a principalship team of five, and the teacher teams have become self-organised to a high degree. The principal has lost her closest companion and is now in many ways on her own in terms of decision-making and responsibility for the school as a whole. Looking back, she says: ‘It was a shared burden, it was not only me standing as responsible, as it is now’. She seems to be the only one who has no close partner of her own in her own work tasks, and people around her are worried for her health; one of the vice-principals says: ‘She is the one who is ultimately responsible, which means that she feels the worst of the pressure and feels that, “Everything depends on me. If something happens it is my fault”’. The two principals in this example fought to be able to work in a formally equal arrangement, since this was important to them. At first, they shared the principalship informally and later they were permitted to be formally equal; ultimately, this was overturned, and one of them ended up as single principal with a much heavier burden to carry.

Discussion

As can be seen in the examples of joint principalship above, they all ended because of the new regulation in the Education Act (2010:800), which states explicitly that one school unit can have only one principal. Former joint principalships in successful schools – as in our three examples – therefore no longer exist. Co-principalship within a single school unit is still possible, albeit in other forms, if one stays within the legal restrictions (Örnberg, 2016). Within a single school unit, the principal may still invite one or more vice-principals to collaborate closely,
although with formal subordination (Wilhelmson & Döös, acc.). Also, a school can be divided into two or more separate school units that are each led by one principal – and the principals may collaborate across school-unit boundaries in informal ways. However, inspections by the Swedish Schools Inspectorate seem to favour the upholding of a division of work tasks and responsibilities, and be less interested in identifying the strengths and potential created through close collaboration.

The three examples of joint principalship describe the principals’ ways of working and what they achieved. Drawing on the above interpretation of the three examples, a couple of qualities concerning the ways of working, and the achievements that followed, have emerged. Of course, some of these can also be achieved through less complete forms than joint principalship. However, there is strength and symbolic value when hierarchical equality is formally installed. As a basis for discussing the potential of joint principalship for the fulfilment of the democracy assignment of the Education Act (2010:800), the following five qualities are highlighted:

- the coordinating process between the joint principals,
- the productive sharing of power and responsibility between the joint principals is spread to teachers and pupils,
- the joint principals act as role models,
- the importance of relationships, and
- the focus on pedagogic issues.

The joint principals’ descriptions of their coordinating process show that when they did not agree with one another, a process of each forcing the other to think further took place, which led to a stable and well-understood outcome; this process required a lot of talking. Being a pair means talking more, being better prepared and taking sufficient time to analyze situations. Discussions are grounded in mutual trust in a strengthening climate that bestows interdependence and self-confidence on the principals. This implies that strength can be developed and weakness can be handled. The role of the principal requires strength but, in private, the principals were allowed to show each other their personal weaknesses. In such a climate, mutual honesty and shared values brought about strength.

Also, the collective responsibility of joint principals seems to be productive for the schools in both good and hard times. It brought about a sense of mutual safety and support in a challenging leadership position. The teachers said the principals diffused a feeling of safety throughout the organisation that was grounded in unanimity.

Being equals, the principals were able to show how to communicate in a dialogic way and illustrate to the teachers how to act in relation to each other and to the pupils. The joint principals thus functioned as role models, for example, when they intentionally showed the teachers that they themselves sometimes lacked knowledge and had to rely on input from each other and from the teachers. The teachers testified that they had learned from the joint principals how to make use of each other and how to communicate and influence by ‘thinking aloud’ together when facing difficulties.

Also, the principals pointed to the importance of relationships. They stated that leadership is all about relating to other people and building relationships in everyday interactions, wherever people meet. The joint principals’ mutual way of working also created space and time for them to concentrate on the core educational task and support the teachers in becoming skilful pedagogues. In the three examples, we see how the habit and skill of sharing leadership over the years have continued in new forms, which we see as a maturing process that occurs both in leaders and schools. The examples show that the principals wanted to teach the teachers ways to co-operate and communicate that also protected the core task, that is, keeping the focus on pedagogic issues in the teachers’ meetings in a process of mutual learning. Good communicative habits may strengthen the capability for productive dialogue, instead of the fear of not being seen as a competent teacher if one openly shares both one’s good and bad experiences.

In this way, the joint principals developed a learning-oriented leadership (Döös, Johansson, & Wilhelmson, 2015b), focusing on development and learning. They all emphasised that their joint principalship created a learning environment for the principals themselves, as well as for the teachers and pupils, with a strong emphasis on school development activities and democratic ways of acting. Learning-oriented leadership is here defined as leadership that is enacted through managers’ daily work as they exert influence on the learning outcome from work carried out in the organisation: ‘Managers take on development and learning as main collective work tasks because they want to influence knowledge creation and are aware of the learning dimension of their work tasks’ (Wilhelmson, Johansson, & Döös, 2013, p. 278).

Co-principalship and democratic practice?

We interpret the above qualities in the principals’ ways of working as development and maintenance of democratic work processes in their schools. A joint leadership model, where two individuals serve as equals in one managerial position, may also be considered a special case of distributed leadership: ‘This is a formal role where two or more incumbents comprise a concerted working
unit in which they exercise joint managerial authority and accountability . . . ’ (Gronn & Hamilton, 2004, p. 5). The distribution of tasks and responsibility between the principals support open communication and possibilities for influencing activities that spread from the joint principals to teachers and pupils in an everyday learning experience. Being ‘two at the top’ also means extended possibilities to take part in and influence ongoing everyday work interactions in the school, which is of importance to the quality of the school’s competence networks, that is, its relatonics (see Dobos, Johansson, & Backstrom, 2015a).

When managers are allowed to practice formal equality in joint leadership, they have the potential to become a hub of developmental democracy in practice, and their ways of working may spread to others (Dobos, Wilhelmson, & Hemborg, 2003a). When principals are no longer allowed to work in formal equality, it may send a confusing message to teachers and pupils indicating hierarchy is the main organising principle. Our point of departure lies, as stated in the Introduction, in the dual purpose of all Swedish schools: the imparting of both knowledge and democratic values – with the latter as this paper’s focus. The previous research on co-principalship detailed above, and our three empirical examples, point in the same direction. There is potential for joint principalship to bring into schools a quality of communication and rapport that enhances the possibility of achieving key goals. This is also in accordance with the overall conclusions from the research, which identifies the necessary bedrock of shared leadership between managers, which is non-prestige, mutual trust and common values concerning the activity and how to lead people (Dobos, Wilhelmson, & Backstrom, 2013). In the examples presented in this paper, the principals themselves sensed a common responsibility for work tasks, which forced them to foster in each other shared values, mutual trust, courage and communication skills. They developed a democratic practice that, by role modelling, spread throughout the school organisation. Decision-making power did not remain solely with the principal, instead it also seemed to empower teachers who, in turn, wanted to involve their pupils in the process. As Bligh, Pearce, and Kohles (2006) state, the interdependence in the complexity of tasks makes shared leadership the nexus of the knowledge-creation process through interpersonal influence.

Our conclusion is that the current Education Act (2010:800) weakens the possibility of achieving one of its own most important overall goals by hindering the practice of joint principalship, as seen in our three examples. This well-functioning collective form of principalship is a wasted potential that could otherwise have been spread and used in other schools. Furthermore, the overall conclusion of a new official government report (SOU, 2015:22) is that there is a great need to reinforce principals’ ‘pedagogical leadership capacity’ (p. 17), and that one important element in this capacity ‘is building and managing a well-functioning school organisation’ (pp. 17–18). The pedagogical leadership of principals is claimed to be ‘vital to the quality and development of school operations’ (p. 17), while many principals have insufficient time to properly fulfil their tasks. Yet, the countermeasures suggested in the report (SOU, 2015:22) are, strangely enough, only focused on training and education. We argue that there are too few voices that acknowledge the usefulness of principals’ learning-oriented leadership skills and their expertise in organising collaborative leadership in their schools. Joint principalship certainly has the potential to support democratic practice in schools by role modelling and through its ways of working that spread throughout the organisation.

New ways of sharing are continually being invented by principals who don’t want to be solitary at the top, but it would be easier for them to be able to continue to develop democratic and well-developed joint principalships as a way of sharing difficult tasks. Of course, principals may also develop democratic practices in solo leadership, as well as in various forms of collective and plural leadership, but our argument is that joint principalship, with its democratic ways of working, may enable this to happen on a more regular and stable basis. One way forward for future research is to further investigate how principals organise and develop their leadership functions in new collective ways that both adapt to the legal framework and also covertly test the boundaries of what is legally accepted – and how the democracy assignment is affected by this. Another way forward is to investigate the possibilities of changing the current Education Act in order to re-establish the potential benefits of joint principalship in the Swedish school system.

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### Appendix 1. Data collection overview.

| Empirical sources | Town school | City school | Suburb school |
|-------------------|-------------|-------------|---------------|
| **Example**       | a) Two co-principals in joint leadership. | a) Two co-principals in joint leadership. | a) Two co-principals in joint leadership. |
|                   | b) Two former co-principals, each responsible for one school unit at the same school. | b) One former co-principal and two vice-principals. | b) One former co-principal and four vice-principals. |
| **Interviews and face-to-face meetings** | a) Joint interview with both principals. | a) Individual meeting with one co-principal. | a) Individual interviews with both principals. |
|                   | b) Field visit, attending a meeting with all the staff, as a lecturer. | b) Focus group interview with the other co-principal and the two vice-principals. | b) Joint interview with both principals. |
| **Mediated conversations** | a) Telephone conversations with both principals. | a) Telephone interviews with one co-principal. | a) Telephone interviews with both principals. |
|                   | b) Email conversations with both principals. | | b) Email conversations with both principals. |
| **Documents**     | a) Examination reports from the two principals on pedagogic leadership, written for a principal training programme. | – | a) Documentation of quality-development efforts. |
|                   | | | b) Letter from principals to the Swedish Schools Inspectorate. |
|                   | | | c) Decisions from the Swedish Schools Inspectorate. |
| **Data collected** | In 2012, 2014 and 2015. | 2012 | Sporadically, between 2005 and 2015. |